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“I Know It When I See It”: Intimacy, Obscenity and Female Sexuality in the Early
Work of Carolee Schneemann

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Emily Elizabeth Goodman

Committee in charge:

Professor Norman Bryson, Chair
Professor Grant Kester, Co-Chair
Professor Mariana Wardwell
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2013

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University of California, San Diego

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“I Know It When I See It”: Intimacy, Obscenity and Female Sexuality in the Early
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by

Emily Elizabeth Goodman

Master of Arts in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

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Professor Norman Bryson, Chair
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Between 1963 and 1965, Carolee Schneemann created a trio of works aimed at examining the nature of the female body and the experience of sexual expression in an unrestricted, uninhibited manner. This early series, *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses*, received a great deal of criticism both from within the

art world and the general public, including denunciations of the works as pornographic, narcissistic, or obscene. The public backlash to these works was surprising and unsettling to Schneemann, who felt very strongly at this time that sexual expression is a natural part of human experience – one that should be liberated from shameful constraints and social prohibitions. Yet this response was in many ways predictable, given the social and political climate of midcentury America.

In this thesis, I argue that Schneemann's works were met with a great deal of public scorn because of the repressive culture of the postwar period. Taking a Foucauldian approach to the notion of discursive sexuality, I examine the manners in which sexuality – particularly female sexuality – was conveyed in the literature and art of the post-war period, highlighting the ways in which these sources illustrate Foucault's "Victorian hypothesis." With this in mind, I examine the ways that Carolee Schneemann confronted and complicated the existent social mores and prescriptions about sexual behavior in her work. In so doing, I argue, Schneemann created works that were at odds with her society and that were thus the result of scrutiny, scorn and even censorship.

INTRODUCTION

“The use of my own body as integral to my work was confusing to many people. I WAS PERMITTED TO BE AN IMAGE/BUT NOT AN IMAGE-MAKER CREATING HER OWN SELF-IMAGE. If I had only been dancing, acting, I would have maintained forms of feminine expression acceptable to the culture: ‘be the image we want.’”- Carolee Schneemann¹

Since the early 1960s, Carolee Schneemann has continually employed her body as the subject of her art practice. Schneemann frequently features her own form within her work in an effort to critically examine and complicate the conventional position of women within the art world and American society. Central to Schneemann’s examinations of the status of women is a deep-seated interest in investigating the conditions and phenomena of human sexuality. In her early trio of works, *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses*, Carolee Schneemann experiments with the depiction of human sexuality – specifically female sexuality – in order to assert sexual expression as an integral part of the human experience, admonishing the restrictive mores and repressive discourse on sexuality prevalent in America in the early 1960s. Her artworks challenge the conventions of representation with regard to the female

¹ Carolee Schneemann and Bruce R. McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy : Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*, 1st ed. (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979). 194.

body and sexuality, seeking to establish a new role for women both in terms of the discourse of sexual activity and within the art world.

With this in mind, I will explicate the ways that Schneemann's works undermined many of the social and legal dictums surrounding human sexuality – particularly with regard to the behavior of women – at the time of their creation. Furthermore, I will highlight the controversies that formed around the original display of these works in order to illustrate how high the public stakes were for Schneemann's projects. Finally I will examine the consequences for Schneemann's use of her own body and her employment of (personal) sexual experiences in light of the existent artistic conventions and her position as a woman within the context of the New York art scene during the early 1960s. In so doing, I will argue that Schneemann's work constitutes an early effort by a woman artist to critically examine to examine the politics of daily life in order to facilitate a new discussion on the role and status of women in America in the early 1960s, both within and beyond the context of the art world.

Eye Body, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses* each constitute an experiment in the representation and documentation of human sexuality, within three distinct media: photography, performance, and film, respectively. As such, Schneemann utilizes particular aspects of these modes of production in order to effectively examine the issues and conditions of sexual behavior. In *Eye Body*, for example, Schneemann exploits the static nature of the photographic image in order to understand and to complicate the idea of the sexualized female subject. In the piece, the full title of

which is *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, Schneemann performs what she calls “actions for the camera,”² a series of gestures performed by the artist with the intent of being photographed. In so doing, she writes: “I explore the image values of flesh as material I choose to work with. The body may remain erotic, sexual, desired, desiring but it is as well votive: marked, written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will.”³ Schneemann utilizes the frame of the camera to examine the nature of the female body and the materiality of flesh. Using a technology that creates stagnant images, Schneemann is able to isolate an instance of the female sexual experience, specifically the performance of the sexualized body, in order to analyze the consequences and connotations of the female form within and beyond the artistic realm.

Similarly, in the film *Fuses* from 1965, Schneemann utilizes the mechanism of film in order to explore the dynamics of sexual behavior. While in *Eye Body* Schneemann stands alone before the camera, in *Fuses* she appears with her then lover James Tenney. The film consists of spliced together and overlain scenes of the pair engaging in sexual activities, creating what The Guardian has called: “The notorious masterpiece [...] a silent celebration in color of heterosexual love making.”⁴ The work – a composite of a series of vignettes from distinct sexual encounters – thereby utilizes the distinct qualities of the filmic medium in order to create a coherent analysis of the

² Anonymous, "Carolee Schneemann: Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions, 1963," <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/eyebody.html>.

³ Schneemann and McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy : Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*.52.

⁴ Anonymous, "Carolee Schneemann: Filmography/Videography," <http://www.caroleeschneemann.com/filmvideography.html>.

nature of sexual encounters. As The Guardian critic argues: “The film unifies erotic energies within a domestic environment through cutting, superimposition and layering of abstract impressions scratched into the celluloid itself.”⁵ Furthermore, the use of film allows for the capture of motion as opposed to the stagnancy affiliated with photography. As such, Schneemann is able to examine the kind of kinaesthetics associated with sexual encounters and analyze the movement and energy of the human body in moments of eroticism and intimacy.

The nature of the sexualized movement was also a the subject of Schneemann’s earlier performance work, *Meat Joy*, first performed at the Festival for Free Expression in Paris and then at the Judson Memorial Church in New York City in 1964. While Schneemann does not employ strategies of mechanical documentation (such as photography and film) in the exploration of sexuality in *Meat Joy*, the work is in and of itself an experiment in the representation and examination of the nature of human sexual behaviors. Performed in real space, the work does not involve any explicit or overt sex acts, but rather contains episodic enactments of the types of movements affiliated with sexuality. As such, Schneemann uses the conventions of performance as a medium to engage with the subject outside of the domestic context. She puts motions of carnality on display in the hope that her audience will analyze and engage with the nature (and naturalism) of human sexual behavior.

In all three works, Schneemann experiments with the representation of sexuality in an effort to examine the conditions of consensual, pleasurable sexual activity. She uses the conventions of the various media not to problematize or criticize

⁵ Ibid.

sexual behavior, but rather to champion and celebrate it, asserting the naturalness and enjoyment affiliated with the act itself. As such, her work was considered highly problematic and elicited much criticism from the public and the art world. While she intended for her audience to come away from her works appreciating the beauty of sexual expression, she ultimately failed to elicit such a response from her initial audience, inciting instead sharp criticism and admonishment from both the art world and the general public.

“WE OTHER VICTORIANS”: THE KINSEY REPORT, *SEX AND THE SINGLE GIRL*, AND DISCURSIVE SEXUALITY

Carolee Schneemann’s *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses* all challenged the existing discourse on sexuality in the early 1960s in myriad ways. According to the artist, these three works “form a trio of works whose shameless eroticism emerged from within a culture that has lost and denied its sensory connections to dream, myth and the female powers.”⁶ This denial, or rather disavowal of the sensual and erotic, particularly in relation to female sexuality is directly related to the overarching patriarchal, repressive views on sexual expression in the postwar era.⁷

⁶ Carolee Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic," *Art Journal* 50, no. No. 4, Censorship II (Winter 1991).31.

⁷ Gendered prescriptions on sexual behavior are not the product of, nor are they unique to, this particular point in history. Rather, these mores have existed in variable forms in all societies throughout history. I have limited the scope of this essay to the discourse of Cold War era sexual practices in America because, I argue that they are symptomatic of a repressive interest in limiting sexual practices to the conjugal realm that is congruent with a social discourse that promoted “family values” as integral to the “American way of life.” In so doing, I aim to unpack the

While a plethora of social and cultural movements of the latter half of the 1960s moved premarital and extramarital sexual activity into the mainstream, the earlier part of the decade was characterized by a more inhibited, conjugal notion of sexuality. According to Foucault, this repressive understanding of sexuality is reflective of the power structures of the society from which they emerge. He states:

All the longer, no doubt, as it is in the nature of power – particularly the kind of power that operates in our society – to be repressive, and to be especially careful in repressing useless energies, the intensity of pleasures, and irregular modes of behavior. We must not be surprised, then, if the effects of liberation vis-à-vis this repressive power are so slow to manifest themselves; the effort to speak freely about sex and accept it in its reality is so alien to a historical sequence that has gone unbroken for a thousand years now.⁸

To Foucault, the inhibited nature of sexuality is directly related to the discursive structures surrounding the sex act itself: cultural and moral prohibitions, issues of legality, decorum and appropriateness in the description and depiction thereof. The repressive nature of this sexual rhetoric cannot be understood as evidence of a society in which sex *only* existed within conjugal settings; the historical record shows a myriad of sexual behaviors that were commonly practiced outside these strictures. Instead Foucault asserts that the discourse surrounding sexual activity is itself the result of the repressive culture that exists within a particular society.

Arguably the most comprehensive and controversial examination of the subject from the postwar era, Alfred Kinsey's study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*

very tenable risks and consequences of violating the social sanctions towards sexual expression in an effort to illustrate the controversial and challenging nature of Schneemann's work, particularly with regard to the social and historical context from which it emerged.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vintage Books ed., 3 vols., vol. 1: An Introduction (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).9-10.

(1953), provides concrete evidence of a number of different types of sexual encounters that did occur with some frequency in midcentury America, many of which existed beyond the conjugal realm. Yet such encounters were widely considered immoral and problematic. According to the Kinsey Report, while premarital intercourse was common, the prevailing social sanctions against such behavior in the decades leading up to the 1960s pushed these activities underground and greatly limited the number of partners and types of relationships in which premarital or extramarital sexual encounters occurred. Kinsey notes that while in non-western cultures attitudes towards sexual activity prior to marriage are far more permissive, a plethora of factors prohibit such actions on the part of unmarried Western, specifically American, men and women. He states:

There are curiously mixed attitudes in our own country concerning coitus. Religious and legal codes, the psychologic and social sciences, psychiatric and other clinical theory and public attitudes in general agrees in extolling heterosexual coitus as the most desirable, the most mature, and the socially most acceptable type of sexual activity. Simultaneously, however, the religious and legal codes and much clinical theory condemn such activity when it occurs outside of marriage and thereby to a greater extent than most persons ordinarily comprehend, negate all of these claims concerning the desirability of coitus.⁹

Kinsey emphatically delineates that the *only* difference between pre- and post- marital sex is the existence of a marital contract at a given moment; “while human custom and man-made law may make a sharp distinction between coitus which occurs before marriage and the identical physical acts when they occur within marriage, it is

⁹ Alfred C. Kinsey and Institute for Sex Research., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953).285.

important to realize that physically and physiologically they are one and the same thing.”¹⁰

While Kinsey’s study does serve as a telling primary source for the types of sexual activities that were prevalent in midcentury America from a statistical perspective, the report further highlights the repressive understanding of the sexual act in the discursive language employed in this analysis. The diction utilized in the text itself is stark and cold; it consists of medical and scientific discussions of erotic activities, using some of the least stimulating words in the English language in order to describe the most sensual of all experiences. For example, in defining their terms for describing sex, the authors state: “the term coitus, as used in the present volume, refers to a union of female and male genitalia. The term intercourse, when used without a modifier, is often intended as an exact synonym of coitus.”¹¹ The lexical choices involved in the published findings of one of the most comprehensive sexual studies in the 20th century, highlight the ways that the discourse of sexuality both reflect the decorum of the day and reaffirm the power structures of such a repressive stance on sexual activity.

The clinical rhetoric employed in the discussions of sexuality— such as that found in Kinsey’s study – constitutes what Foucault has termed “scientia sexualis,” which he argues functions in Western cultures to supplement the lack of an erotic art containing prescriptions for sexual behavior, such as the Hindu Kama Sutra. He states: “On the face of it at least, our civilization possess no *ars erotica*. In return, it is

¹⁰ Ibid. 283.

¹¹ Ibid. 285-6

undoubtedly, the only civilization to practice *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power.”¹² While in other cultures forms of *ars erotica* function through the prescriptive depiction of graphic and sensuous sexuality, the clinical *scientia sexualis* that Foucault posits as the Western equivalent thereof is inherently repressive. The tactile qualities of sexuality, the erotic and sensual nature of the most intimate of carnal acts, are inherently omitted from the discourse surrounding Western sexuality, lest they arouse the audience, which is, at least in part, the intent of the *ars erotica* of other cultures.

While Kinsey’s writing employs a cold and clinical terminology, the outright success of the text and its relationship to other literature on the subject indicates something telling about the reality of Foucault’s Victorian hypothesis as it applied to the midcentury American discourse on sex. As I have indicated, Kinsey notes that a disparity exists between the realities of sexual practice in America during the post-war period and the rhetorical prescriptions towards sexual behavior. But the books’ success in the market further underlines the notion that in spite of – or rather as a result of – the prevailing moralistic and repressive rhetoric that characterized discussions of sexual behavior, people were deeply interested in actively engaging with the subject of human sexuality. As John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman write:

even before its official release date in January 1948, demand for *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* had far surpassed the original expectations. Almost 250,000 copies were eventually sold, and the book spent twenty-seven weeks on the New York *Times* [sic] best-

¹² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1: An Introduction. 58.

seller list. Five years later when the companion volume on the female was issued, it too became a publishing sensation.¹³

Americans nation-wide appeared to be clamoring to read Kinsey's findings. They note: "The reports became cultural landmarks, and Kinsey a household word."¹⁴ They became the authoritative texts on the subjects and myriad authors and theorists – including Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan – cited Kinsey's research in their discussions on gender and sexuality.

Yet Kinsey's immense popularity was dependent on the scientific lexicon utilized in the presentation of his findings. The clinical nature of the text prevented it from moralistic reproach; "the scientific credentials of the author gave legitimacy to the curiosity many Americans had about sexual subjects as well as to their presentation in the media."¹⁵ Kinsey's findings were presented in a manner that was considered unimpeachable because it ardently avoided lascivious and evocative description. D'Emilio and Freedman characterize the Kinsey's writing as "[presenting] his findings in dry unsensational prose, bereft of moral disapproval," asserting that "the aura of science that surrounded the studies made it safe for the press to give them ample publicity."¹⁶ Thus, the books were able to become a cultural sensation and to expand the discourse on human sexuality because they are defiantly un-erotic.

This anti-erotic discourse of sexuality – specifically female sexuality, as I will argue – existed well beyond the scientific examinations of the subject. Discussions of

¹³ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). 285.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 287.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 286.

sexuality in mid-century popular media were also characterized by a repressive aversion to any form sexual stimulation or titillation. Books and magazine articles that explicitly focused on human sexuality employed euphemism and allusion in an effort to avoid delineating the carnal actions involved in sexual activity. Helen Gurley Brown's best-selling 1962 advice book, *Sex and the Single Girl*, for example, frequently mentions sexual activity in an implied manner, but never includes explicit descriptions. Even in her Chapter entitled "How to be Sexy," Gurley Brown illustrates the plethora of ways for a woman to be sexy but never mentions performing the sex act, lest she migrate from the conventional wisdom that the only acceptable sex is conjugal. Furthermore, every mention of the possibility for engaging in premarital sex in her book is predicated on the inclusion of lexical qualifiers so as to affirm that the author is not telling young, impressionable women to have sex or informing them as to how to do it.

The repressive use of language and the use of the implied and alluded to in place of the explicit in Gurley Brown's book – and in the advice of her contemporaries – parallels certain social changes delineated by Foucault with regard to the chaste discourse on sexuality during the Victorian era. With regard to the rise of Victorian prohibitions on sex, he writes: "this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way."¹⁷ Foucault argues that with the establishment of prohibitions on explicit discussions of sexuality – particularly although not exclusively within the public domain – the topic is broached no less

¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1: An Introduction.27.

frequently, but rather it is done so in a more implicit manner. With the institutionalization of such prohibitions in America during the first half of the 20th century, the sexual discourse thus became dependent on the use of euphemism, allusion, and qualification. American rhetorical sexuality existed in many ways but it was not and could not be – due to legal and social restrictions – frank in candor.

The portrayal of carnality did exist in literature at the time, but such depictions were often chastised and admonished as scandalous at best. In depicting explicit sexual behavior in text – not to mention in film – individuals ran the risk of their work being characterized as obscene. The legal ramifications of an obscenity charge in literature are perhaps most tenably illustrated by the controversy surrounding the U.S. publication of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Miller's novel, infamous for its graphic sex scenes, was written in the mid-1930s and published in France, but it was not released to American audiences until 1961. From the moment it arrived on American shores, Miller's text was the subject of numerous obscenity lawsuits and was often a prominent feature on banned-book lists nationwide. According to a 1969 Article in the *Yale Law Journal*: "shortly after publication, federal authorities announced that there would be no prosecution for the passage of *Cancer* through the mails.¹⁸ Yet within a year over sixty local communities – from the stereotypically provincial to the mythically sophisticated – had commenced legal proceedings against

¹⁸ During this time, most of the major laws regarding the creation, possession and sales of obscene materials were related to the circulation of said materials through the postal systems. Due to the tendency for such articles to cross state borders, the prosecution for such an offense generally occurred on the federal level.

the book.”¹⁹ The legal ramifications of an explicit depiction of sexuality demonstrate the fear of prurience and the repressive nature of discursive sexuality in America in the early 1960s. The dependence on the employment of scientific or euphemistic language in the discussion of sexuality – such as that used by Kinsey and Gurley Brown, respectively – and the legal issues surrounding the inclusion of graphic description – as was the case for Henry Miller – illustrates the inhibited and prohibited understandings of human sexuality in America during the 1950s and early 1960s.

Furthermore, mainstream visual depictions of such activity, such as those in film and art, were subject to strict censorship and obscenity laws. Those laws did change to some extent in the middle of the 1960s with the decision of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*,²⁰ but the repressive nature of public opinion remained ardently opposed to any graphic carnality in visual media. The depiction of sexuality in mainstream cinema at this time was subject to strict regulations and censorship. Film was not protected under the first amendment; a 1915 Supreme Court ruling “proclaimed that ‘freedom of speech must be denied to moving pictures because they may be used for evil.’”²¹ As such, the film industry decided to regulate its own content through the Motion Picture

¹⁹ Al Katz, "Free Discussion V. Final Decision: Moral and Artistic Controversy and the Tropic of Cancer Trials," *The Yale Law Journal* 79, no. No. 2 (Dec. 1969). 209.

²⁰ It was in this Supreme Court case from 1964 over the graphic depiction of sexuality in the French film *Les Amants* that Justice Potter Stewart made his definitive statement on pornography: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that." Yet even after such a profound statement against the obscenity charges, a myriad of new laws were developed and subsequently contested in the decades to follow.

²¹ Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*, Perspectives (Bloomington London: Indiana University Press ; British Film Institute, 1996).44.

Production Code, colloquially referred to as the Hays Code, which was enforced from 1934-1968.

The Hays Code not only prohibited the depiction of carnal activity, it also regulated the implications of the gestures that could and did appear on screen. Thus, according to Linda Williams: “it was prohibited for any movie to ‘infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.’ By ‘low forms of sex’ the framers of the code intended any ‘scenes of passion’ that might be likely to stimulate the lower and baser element.”²² Under this dictum, visual portrayals of illicit sexual activity were considered verboten, as were those euphemistic depictions that did not conform to the strict conventions of what was considered acceptable sexual behavior. Even then, the code applied to restrict the way such interactions were represented in film. As Williams writes:

However, it was not just the lower classes, the unmarried, the criminal, the homosexual, or the colored whose sexual contacts were made taboo by the code, but also those of married, reproductive heterosexuals whose pregnancies, births, and sexual relations became unrepresentable [...] From the origin of film through the late sixties, then, a kiss of variable length had to do the job of suggesting all the excitement and pleasure of intimate sexual contacts.²³

The censorship of the Hays Code and the fear of legal sanctions thus established a convention of euphemism with regard to the depiction of sexual activity, a practice that typifies Foucault’s repressive hypothesis. As such, the legal strictures and the

²² Linda Williams and ebrary Inc., *Screening Sex* Linda Williams, (Durham: Duke University Press,, 2008), <http://uclibs.org/PID/130450/10236549>.

²³ Ibid.

statutes of censorship illustrate the institutionalized conventions of prudishness and inhibition.

FEMALE SEXUALITY AND THE PROBLEM OF PLEASURE

As I have just illustrated, the discourse of sexuality in postwar America is inherently repressive. It is ultimately rendered even more problematic when considering female sexuality. Female sexuality has been and remains today a controversial topic, hinging upon the use of delicate and distinctive rhetoric, derived from the prevailing and hegemonic moralistic sentiment of the time. The postwar period is no exception. For the most part examples of female sexual activity throughout different cultural media were affiliated with masculine desire or were characterized by a defiant and definite lack of moral fiber on the part of the woman in question. A woman's role within the sexual act was rhetorically and discursively defined by her relationship to both the dictums of morality and female virtue as well as to the ideology of male phantasy.

The male domination of American culture at this point extended into the bedroom and thus dictated the politics of sexuality and the gendered component thereof. As such, female sexuality was conventionally understood to be the docile submission of a woman to the whims and wills of her male partner. The thought of a woman enjoying sexual pleasure of her own accord was considered immodest at best. More readily women who took on an active role within the realm of sexuality ran the risk of being deemed craven, oversexed, and unfeminine.

The cultural appraisal of gender relations at this time may have something to do with the perceived social implications of the action itself. This is perhaps best illustrated in the theories on sexual behavior within the scientific, philosophical, and popular literature of the time. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir – whose ever popular *The Second Sex* was first translated into English in 1953²⁴ - postulates that female sexuality is predicated on transgression. She states:

Woman is penetrated and fecundated by way of the vagina, which becomes an erotic center only through the intervention of the male and this always constitutes a violation. Formerly it was by a real or simulated rape that a woman was torn from her childhood universe and hurled into wifehood; it remains an act of violence that changes a girl into a woman: we still speak of ‘taking’ a girl’s virginity, her flower, or ‘breaking’ her maidenhead.²⁵

De Beauvoir asserts that for women, sexual activity is intrinsically dependent on the enactment of a violation. The act of intercourse is thus discursively understood to be an instance of trespassing on the female form by the male partner. As such, to de Beauvoir, the female sexual experience is directly related to the male domination of the woman’s body. Furthermore, she argues that female sexuality renders women submissive to men. She writes: “the normal sexual act in effect puts woman into a state of dependency upon the male and the species. It is the male – as in most animals – who has the aggressive role, the female submitting to his embrace.”²⁶ Thus to de

²⁴ Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* does, in my opinion, fall into the realm of the *scientia sexualis*, a discourse not about the sensuous aspects of sexuality, but the medicalized, detached understanding prevalent in this historical moment.

²⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage Books ed. (New York,: Vintage Books, 1989).372.

²⁶ Ibid. 373.

Beauvoir, Female sexuality is not an act instigated by the desires of women, but rather it is the male urge to which the female responds.

The discursive understanding of female sexuality as contingent upon the enactment of transgression and submission in postwar era America is also indicated in Kinsey's analyses of the subject. This is particularly true with regard to his discussion on the nature and importance of female sexual pleasure – particularly his theories on the incidence and prevalence of the female orgasm. Kinsey's findings – which are cited by the “feminist”²⁷ writers of the 1960s, specifically Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Helen Gurley Brown – express the understanding of the female orgasm as elusive, inconsistent and, in some cases, impossible to achieve. Gurley Brown summarizes Kinsey's findings on the subject in stating: “one-third of American women achieve orgasm most of the time [...] One-third rarely achieve it [...] And one-third achieve orgasm about half the time.”²⁸

Not only is the female orgasm considered hard to attain in such discussions, but there is little attention to examining the biology of female sexual arousal. This is perhaps best illustrated in Kinsey's approach to the vaginal orgasm. He specifically posits that: “in most females the walls of the vagina are devoid of end organs of touch

²⁷ I use the term “feminist” here in order to distinguish these writers from those authors whose work is explicitly related to the social and political feminist movement and feminist thought. De Beauvoir and Friedan have widely been considered feminist writers within academic discourse, but I am reticent to apply such a distinction to Gurley Brown on the basis that much of her discussion of gender, while liberally addressing the issue of sexuality and workplace representation, is emphatically not in line with the ideology affiliated with women's liberation or feminist theory. That said, Gurley Brown has been called a “feminist” by numerous individuals for her cavalier and explicit address of the issue of female sexuality both in her book and during her tenure as editor in chief of *Cosmopolitan* magazine – criteria I do not agree with, but that I will acknowledge.

²⁸ Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl* (New York: B. Geis Associates; distributed by Random House, 1962). 68.

and are quite insensitive when they are gently stroked or lightly pressed.”²⁹ As such Kinsey asserts that vaginal orgasms blatantly do not exist, a claim that has since been re-evaluated by the medical community.

While the medical community has questioned Kinsey’s theory on vaginal orgasms, this notion was prevalent in the discourses on sexuality in midcentury America. De Beauvoir herself does not refute its validity entirely, instead stating: “what is certain is that the vaginal reaction is a very complex one, which may be referred to as psychophysiological, because it not only involves the whole nervous system but also depends upon the whole experience and situation of the individual.”³⁰ She posits that for a female to achieve sexual stimulation, her partner must be able to adapt and comprehend the complexities of her deprived anatomy, and he must want to make considerable effort to please his partner. As such, sexual pleasure was not considered integral for women during such encounters; the completion and success of the sex act was theorized to be dependent on the achievement male orgasm as opposed to other criteria, such as mutual enjoyment. This understanding the sexual encounter had broader social consequences as well. If men are the ones who easily garner pleasure from the sexual act, it was thus understood as natural for them to desire and crave sexual contact. Because the orgasm was not a necessary or even achievable part of the sexual encounter for women, female sexual desire was not theorized to be natural or positive, but was more frequently admonished or pathologized.

²⁹ Kinsey and Institute for Sex Research., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*. 580.

³⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.373.

The discourse of the female orgasm was not only complicated by the insistence on elusiveness and unimportance, but also by the rhetoric surrounding its occurrence. For example, far from asserting female sexual enjoyment is impossible, de Beauvoir avers in *The Second Sex* that female pleasure is, when achieved, greater than that of her male counterpart. She states: “Male sex excitement is keen but localized, and – except perhaps at the moment of orgasm – it leaves the man quite in possession of himself; woman, on the contrary, really loses her mind; for many this effect marks the most definite and voluptuous moment of the love affair.”³¹ As intangible as this event might appear, de Beauvoir thus avers that female sexual pleasure – specifically the female orgasm – is a more complete moment of rapture and ecstasy than that of the male. She states: “Sexual pleasure in woman [...] demands complete abandon [...] This is one of the reasons why the woman closes her eyes [...] She would abolish all surroundings, abolish the singularity of the moment, of herself, and of her lover.”³²

Yet, according to de Beauvoir, this achievement of absolute pleasure is tempered by the modesty and vulnerability associated with female sexual behavior. She writes: “A man may sometimes feel afraid of the woman in his embrace, so beside herself she seems, a prey to her aberration; the turmoil that she experiences transforms her much more radically than his aggressive frenzy transforms the male. This fever rids her of shame for the moment, but afterward she is ashamed and horrified to think of it.”³³ To give oneself over to frenzy and to enjoy the pleasure of orgasm entirely is to become interior to the exclusion of the other. For a woman to enjoy her stimulation

³¹Ibid. 391.

³² Ibid. 97.

³³Ibid. 391.

in its entirety, she must be lost in a moment of complete solitude, and thus she must deny her lover. In this denial, the woman becomes the subject of her own pleasure, as opposed to the object of a man's. This interiority is, however, fleeting and transitory, and is thus quickly replaced by inhibition and modesty. During the moments of coitus and those immediately thereafter, the woman is uninhibited, lost in the reckless abandon of carnal activity, but when her lover departs, she is returned to the realm of the mundane, greeted by concerns of morality and modesty.

This fear of immodesty and the dictums of propriety that surround female sexual behaviors can have drastic consequences. If the sexual encounter does not end in orgasm and/or intense shame is felt, de Beauvoir argues, the woman is likely to enter a perpetual cycle of un-pleasurable and shame-filled sex. She states: "The feminine body is peculiarly psychosomatic; that is, there is often close connection between the mental and the organic. A woman's moral inhibitions prevent the appearance of sex feeling; not being offset by pleasure they tend to be perpetuated and to form a barrier of increasing strength."³⁴ Thus, while the discourse on male sexuality is rendered simple and animalistic – men being the dominant forces in their own achievement of sexual pleasure – female sexual behavior is deeply complicated. A woman who achieves the intense sensation of orgasm may alienate her lover, while a woman who fails to do so may turn frigid because of its absence. In either case, the sexually active female risks great humiliation in addition to suffering from claims of immodesty and moral depravity, consequences far greater than any experienced by her male counterpart. So much therefore hinges upon the female sexual experience and it

³⁴ Ibid. 391.

is so discursively complicated that it is no wonder that the dictum of monogamy and premarital chastity was so highly valued in such a repressed society as midcentury America.

THE FEMALE NUDE IN ART

Given the repressive stance and the legal constraints regarding the depiction and discussion of sex in America at this time, Carolee Schneemann's experiments with the portrayal of sexual activity in the works *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses* explicitly tread within the territory of the taboo. Yet to Schneemann, such a maneuver was considered necessary and important to her as a woman and for her art practice. It is nothing new to suggest that Carolee Schneemann's artistic career has, for several decades, involved an active criticism of the social constructions of gender and sexuality. From the beginning of her career, Schneemann has challenged the masculine hegemony of the art world and has sought to discover new avenues for women artists to express themselves. She has at many times experienced overt sexism first hand, and has in many cases, used those experiences as fodder for her art. In many ways, Carolee Schneemann was a trailblazer for women artists, exploring both new subjects and media in her work in order to analyze and criticize the role of women in the art world.

Throughout the early to mid-1960s, the American art world was largely and unquestionably male dominated. A few women had earned some acclaim, yet in most cases their successes were both contingent upon and secondary to the successes of

their male counterparts.³⁵ Women artists were expected to employ similar styles, subjects, and techniques to their male counterparts in order to be taken seriously as professional artists. As Jayne Wark argues, in the mid-1960s, it was possible for women to achieve “considerable acclaim working within variations of abstraction and Minimalism. It was another matter, however, if a woman artist attempted to integrate her experiences as a woman into her work.”³⁶ Abstraction and minimalism were lauded as virile, rational forms of artistic expression. They were championed for their non-representational content and the attention to medium specificity as opposed to narrative content. The climate of the New York art world was particularly dismissive of the inclusion of any kind of subjective experience.

Carolee Schneemann was acutely aware of the masculine- centered nature of the art world. Wark describes her as “one of the first women to bring attention to this situation [...], an artist who produced films and performances that celebrated the sensual and visceral energy of the body.”³⁷ Carolee Schneemann’s work, both then and now, embodies a critical curiosity towards the conditions of female sexuality and women’s art. In 1961, she moved to New York City and almost immediately became involved with “the circles of artists associated both with Happenings and with Fluxus,

³⁵ Artists Lee Krasner and Helen Frankenthaler, for example, did enjoy critical acclaim as established abstract painters, but both women’s careers were widely considered to be lesser than and secondary to their husbands, the Abstract Expressionist golden boys Jackson Pollock and Robert Motherwell, respectively. Lucy Lippard writes extensively about the phenomenon of women artists being misconstrued as “part-timers” or “accessories” and not being taken seriously at this moment in her essay, “Sexual Politics: Art Style,” which first appeared in *Art in America* in 1971 and has since been reprinted in her book *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: EP Dutton, 1976) pp. 28-37.

³⁶ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures : Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006). 28.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 28.

a loosely formed, international group of artists influenced by John Cage's experimental music and the ideals of 'democratizing' art by narrowing the gap between high art and everyday life."³⁸ While she was an active participant in this movement, Schneemann found her position as a woman in the art world extremely problematic.

Faced with the conditions of marginalization and discrimination, Schneemann thus began employing her own body in her work intent on exposing and subverting the male power structure prevalent in artistic movements in the early 1960s. She states in her notebooks: "In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting-constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved **enough** like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men."³⁹ Schneemann did not want to be considered a serious artist on the basis that her work conformed to a masculinist formula that dominated the institutions of art. She sought to create an art that involved her ideas experiences as a woman to spite the art that her male colleagues were creating. She sought to challenge the hegemonic artistic conventions that relegated women artists to the margins of the art world.

One of the most pronounced ways that Schneemann confronted the masculinist culture of art in the early 1960s was through her use of her own body as the subject of her works. While in film and in literature, prohibitions and sanctions against obscene content greatly restricted the portrayal of nakedness, there has always been a tradition

³⁸ Ibid. 38.

³⁹ Schneemann and McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy : Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*. 52.

of nude representation within the visual arts. For centuries, it has been understood as conventional for men to depict women in the nude in their art. The female form tacitly conveys beauty, sensuality, and the erotic, and in many ways embodies the male sexual phantasy. As the subject of painting, the female form is rendered the object of gaze, occupying a passive position within the context of heterosexual male desire. Moreover, this tradition of representation has led to the naturalization of distinct gendered roles with regard to creative process associated with artistic practice. Women have conventionally been understood to be the subject of men's work and not creators in their own right, leading to the development of culture of sexism within the arts establishment.

Schneemann was all too familiar with the schism between male artist and female subject. When she first moved to New York City, Schneemann supported herself by working as a nude model.⁴⁰ She also participated in a number of performance pieces wherein she occupied a more traditionally female position as subject. Arguably the best example of this is Robert Morris's 1964 piece, *Site* (Appendix: Figure 5), performed at the Surplus Theatre in New York. Schneemann played the role of the reclining odalisque figure modeled after Victorine Meurent's portrayal in Manet's *Olympia*. In the performance, "wearing a mask and work gloves, Morris manipulated large panels of plywood so as to 'frame' the Olympia tableau in order to make explicit the constructed nature of art."⁴¹ Literally employing articles

⁴⁰ Carolee Schneemann, from "Interview with Kate Haug" in Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Carolee Schneemann: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002). 28.

⁴¹ Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. 43.

affiliated with construction (as a form of labor) Morris's performance highlights the nature of art as a form of fabrication.

While the idea of artifice and construction is quite apparent in Morris' *Site*, what is perhaps more pronounced is the gender binary enacted in this performance. Dressed in "work clothes," Morris plays the part of the American male art laborer, actively engaged in the process of fabrication. His attire, reminiscent of those worn by Abstract Expressionists – specifically Jackson Pollack – as they appeared in media of the time,⁴² provide a stark contrast to Schneemann's costume – completely naked except for a few key accouterments, which serve indicate her portrayed personage. The differences between their manners of dress are immediately apparent and indicate a few key binary relationships that play a key role in the mythology of artistic production.

To start, there is the dichotomy of the clothed and the naked. Morris hyperbolizes this distinction – which is immediately apparent to the viewer –in order to illustrate the exaggerated nature of this dialectic relationship with regard to the mythology of artistic production. Robert Morris appears in this work not simply clothed, but entirely covered. He is not only fully dressed, but he also hides his face and hands behind gloves and a mask. In contrast, Schneemann is not nude – which is

⁴² While the most famous example of this kind of costuming is in Hans Namuth's heavily fabricated images of Jackson Pollock in *Life* magazine, other artists, such as Frank Stella, exploited this form of dress in an effort to democratize their appeal and to play into the myth of the American artist as the working class hero in the Cold War rhetoric surrounding American art during the 1950s and 60s.

an idealized state of natural undress – in this performance, but is naked.⁴³ Her lack of clothing is thus discomfoting, connoting both vulnerability and lascentiousness. The overt distinction between the excessively covered Morris and the exceedingly bare Schneemann thus calls into question the binary relationship between artist and subject. Morris, as creator, occupies the position of power, covered and protected, while Schneemann's exposed nakedness renders her subordinate to his creative whims.

This contrast in apparel furthermore serves to highlight the gender dynamics at play within the art world. According to Wark, many art historians: “have remarked on the unmistakable gender-role determinations in *Site*, whereby Schneemann's/Olympia's feminine role as the passive object of sexual desire – as both sight and site of the male gaze – is confirmed, while Morris aggressively asserted his own active, and therefore safely masculine, role as an artist.”⁴⁴ While Schneemann ultimately consented to her role in the performance, her position as female subject is bound by these patriarchal tendencies of objectification in male art. She is not the artist creating the work, but rather the subject of representation. She enacts the part of the model and the muse, the subject and the static art object. She sits still and naked, while Morris, in hypermasculine dress, enacts the creative process, establishing how

⁴³ The distinction between “nude” and “naked” is a central feature of T.J. Clark's analysis of Manet's painting *Olympia* in his essay “Olympia's Choice.” Clark argues extensively that Manet's (in)famous painting depicts a naked prostitute, gazing actively at her potential client. Clark highlights the ways in which Manet's painting radically diverges from the academic nudes that dominated in the salon of 1865, while simultaneously drawing on the conventions for depicting the female nude, such as the allusion to Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, the composition that was part of the source material for Manet's *Olympia*. The nakedness that Manet presents in *Olympia*, was widely criticized by both members of the press and of the art world at the time of the painting's initial display. The work was marked by scandal, ultimately becoming a great sensation, which has been used to explain its continued fame today, when those works lauded in the salon that year have been brushed to the margins of art historical discourse.

⁴⁴ Wark, *Radical Gestures : Feminism and Performance Art in North America*. 43-44.

she is to be framed and understood through his manipulation of the plywood surrounding her; her position is entirely dependent on his mediation. He is the artist, he is a man, and she is simply an image.

SELF AS SUBJECT, SEX AS SUBJECT

Shortly after moving to New York in 1962, Schneemann began experimenting with using her own form in her art practice. She asserts herself as both the subject of the work and its creator. In so doing, she notes: "I was using the nude as myself – the artist and as a primal, archaic force which could unify energies I discovered as visual information."⁴⁵ It is in the role of the artist that Schneemann has the autonomous control over her own form in her works.

The inclusion of herself in Schneemann's work thus allows for a new type of critical engagement with the idea of the subject. Amelia Jones argues:

*As the maker but also the object of the work, the artist's dual role casts into doubt the inexorability of the gap that normative subjectivity manufactures in order to produce the subject as definitively separate from the object. Our role in viewing the artist's self-portrait photograph, becomes one of projection and identification via our own psychic past but becomes further complicated by the artist's having performed herself or himself actively as the object of our desire.*⁴⁶

The construction of the artist's form and the active nature of the subject of the photographic self-portrait undermine the normative processes of viewing. No longer is

⁴⁵ Schneemann and McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*.52.

⁴⁶ Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27, no. No. 4 (Summer 2004).963.

the subject rendered inert and passive, but rather the subject of such a work is declaratively active. The artist who presents herself has thus constructed a self for presentation, one with which her person is identified, but also one that is performed overtly to be scrutinized and consumed by the spectator. Furthermore, by rendering the subject active, the artist has returned agency and implicated consent into the idea of portrayal. The artist is cognizant of the self being projected because she consented to it, and thus uses the active self as a means to critically engage with a particular notion or idea.

For Carolee Schneemann, the usage of the self was intrinsically related to her curiosity and intrigue with regard to the nature of human sexuality. Nowhere is this association more explicit than in her photographic series *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions* from 1963. Photographed by the Icelandic artist Erró, Schneemann presents her naked form to the camera in an effort to examine and explore the nature of the sexualized and erotic body. She carries out a variety of “actions for the camera” in order to capture the sexual and sensual qualities of the female form, doing so without shame or modesty, but rather being explicit about the reality and relevance of pleasure as a condition of sexuality.

Schneemann utilized the medium of photography in *Eye Body* in order to establish an avenue to investigate sexuality, which she considered a fundamental part of the human experience. In her notebooks, she recounts that:

in the early sixties I felt quite alone in my insistence on the integrity of my own sexuality and creativity [...] I didn't stand naked in front of 300 people because I wanted to be fucked; but because my sex and work were harmoniously experienced I could have the audacity, or

courage, to show the body as a source of varying emotive power: poignant, funny, beautiful, functional, plastic, concrete, 'abstract'; the key related perceptions of our own nature as well as the organic and constructed worlds with which we surround ourselves.⁴⁷

To Schneemann, investigating the subject of sexuality meant exploring what she considered to be an integral part of daily life. Schneemann did not view sexuality as shameful and as such she attempted to foreground and explore the physical qualities of this essential and biological phenomenon. She sought to utilize the artistic media at her disposal to distill the experience of sexual activity from the repressive social and political mores of her time.

Schneemann not only presents her naked form to the camera, but she does so in a way to emphasize its sexual function. She notes: "one of the startling aspects of this image of my naked body is that it includes a visible clitoris. Western, masculinist art history has been obsessed with the female nude, but the image of a contemporary artist as a genitally sexed nude sets off a tireless round of inquisition."⁴⁸ Schneemann pays careful attention to highlight particular attributes of her anatomy, specifically those that are affiliated with sexual activity and pleasure. The visibility of her clitoris in this image undermines the conventions for depicting even the sexualized female form. The clitoris is a location strictly for female arousal; it serves no other sexual function and therefore its inclusion in art is inherently problematic.

Even amongst works that prominently feature the labial folds and pubic hair of the female nude, such as Gustave Courbet's nefarious *L'Origine du Monde*, the clitoris

⁴⁷ Schneemann and McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy : Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*.195.

⁴⁸ Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic." 29.

is rarely depicted. Being the only part of the vaginal complex that is not affiliated with childbirth, and the one most readily associated with the tumultuousness that encompasses the female orgasm, the exclusion of the clitoris from the canonical depictions of the female genitals speaks to a highly specific understanding of female sexuality and reproduction. Excluding the fundamental element for female pleasure from depictions of the vagina reveals a general disregard for the experience of arousal and orgasm by women by the larger population. Thus, by including her clitoris in the photograph, Schneemann asserts her position as sexual and active, embraces the pleasurable aspects of eroticism and female sexuality within her art.

Schneemann's embrace of her own sexuality in *Eye Body* was controversial at the time as it greatly undermined the conventional conception of gender and sexuality, but it was not judged to be obscene. Schneemann readily employed the conventional artistic tactics for presenting the naked form in the works, thus excluding it from the criteria of pornography. Because each photograph in *Eye Body* involves the singular positioning of Schneemann's body in a held pose for the camera, all eroticism is implicit. Moreover, because the medium of photography produced static images, the work avoided some of the scandal afforded to later works, which addressed the condition and experience of sexual activity through the inclusion of movement.

In one of her more canonical and controversial works, *Meat Joy* (1964), Schneemann uses movement as a means to examine the nature and experience of sexual activity. Schneemann describes the piece in her notebooks stating: "*Meat Joy* has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as

material [...] its propulsion is toward the ecstatic – shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon: qualities which could at any moment be sensuous, comic, joyous, repellent.”⁴⁹ The score for the piece includes directions such as “wet fish, heavy chickens, bouncing hot dogs – bodies respond sporadically; twitching, pulling back, hands reaching, touching, groans, giggles.”⁵⁰ Schneemann very explicitly attempts to simulate a form lascivious act in the performance *Meat Joy* through the allusion of her direction. While no explicit sexual activity is actually carried out in the performance, the work itself is predicated on the intrinsic carnality affiliated with the nature of flesh, be it in the forms of meat or the human body.

The work centers around a group of performers - four heterosexual pairs and the figure of the maid who “functions throughout as a stage-manager-in-the-open, wandering in and out of the performance area to care for practical details”⁵¹ - who participate in a variety of sexualized movements, enacting a pleasure-filled scene of carnal lust as they engage with a plethora of visceral materials. Schneemann’s performers were, if anything, active; throughout the piece, Schneemann and her actors engage in a variety of movements including, but not limited to, the thrashing of bodies against one another on the floor of the performance space. Movement was so fundamental to the work that Schneemann did not simply refer to the piece as a work of performance, but she called it a work of “kinetic theatre.”

⁴⁹ Schneemann and McPherson, *More Than Meat Joy : Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings*.63.

⁵⁰ Ibid.80.

⁵¹ Ibid.67.

Given the restrictive context wherein *Meat Joy* was first performed, it is very easy to see how a work centered only on the pleasures of the flesh with no moralizing rhetoric may be decried as obscene. Schneemann did have to confront the legal constraints of the context in which the work first debuted. She writes:

Conceived for the Festival of Free Expression in Paris [...] I had intended the performers to be nude; the moral-decency rules in France at that time stipulated that naked male and female performers were subject to arrest *if they moved*; they could remain in the frozen positions of statues without breaking the law. In New York, moving *or* frozen nudes in public were forbidden. I devised scanty feather-and-fur coverings for our active group of nine performers.⁵²

Schneemann adhered to the restrictions put forth by the law upon her performance, removing nudity from the work in favor of keeping the kinaesthetic aspect part of the work. The result is an orgiastic pantomime performed by (scantly) clothed heterosexual pairs, mimicking the gestures and motions integral to sexual expression.

Yet even without breaking any laws, audiences both in France and the United States accused Schneemann of producing obscenity and propagating indecency. While overt sexuality and nudity has become fairly commonplace in both theatre and art since the late 1960s,⁵³ in 1964 it was still considered to be scandalous and immoral. The responses of various audience members to the work in the original performances attests to the deep-seeded and visceral quality of the conservative attitudes towards sexual expression in the earlier part of the decade. Schneemann writes:

⁵² Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic." 29.

⁵³ The Broadway musical *Hair*, which debuted in 1967, and the Off-Broadway play *Oh! Calcutta!*, from 1969, are widely credited as the first mainstream instances wherein sexuality and nudity were readily included in theatre.

In both the Paris and New York performances, informants from the local police stations and from various ‘moral decency’ groups were present. A truncated version of the performance at Vauxhall in London ended abruptly when police entered one door as we performers exited another, covered in blankets, to be hidden on the floors of cars speeding away. During the Paris performance, a man from the audience came on stage, pushed me against the wall, and tried to strangle me. I was saved by three older women who had never seen any performance, but were convinced that this assault was not part of it.⁵⁴

That people were moved to violence in response to the work speaks both to the licentious nature of Schneemann’s work and the repressive strictures around sexuality at the time. The fact that both “moral decency” groups and the local authorities were on ready alert highlights the codified and institutionalized power structures at play to suppress prurience and lasciviousness.

Regardless of the public perception that the work constituted some form of illicit sexual activity, the sexual display in *Meat Joy*, like that of *Eye Body*, is intrinsically implicit. The performers roll around, moaning and groping each other, but they do not perform any form of authentic and explicit sex act. Schneemann does examine the condition of explicit sexual activity in her 1965 film *Fuses*. The film, consists of multiple sexual encounters between Tenney and Schneemann, collaged together to create a coherent examination of the understanding of sexual behavior. The intent of the piece was not simply to expose the conditions of human or female sexuality, but also to examine the conditions of intimacy and pleasure in such situations. Schneemann states:

⁵⁴ Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic." 29-31.

I began shooting my erotic film, *Fuses*, in 1964. Since my deepest expressive and responsive life core was considered obscene,⁵⁵ I thought I had better see what it looked like in my own vision. I had never seen any erotica or pornography that approached what lived sexuality felt like. I taught myself to make films with borrowed wind-up Bolexes; this meant that any lovemaking sequence had thirty seconds of film time.⁵⁶

Schneemann utilizes the constraints of her apparatus to capture different moments that comprise the sexual encounter. She includes images of kissing, intercourse, fellatio, cunnilingus, male and female orgasms all spliced and laid together. She thus examines the different types of sexual activities as they manifest in her relationship with Tenney through the inclusion of fragmented moments of sexuality.

Moreover, by including multiple encounter and different forms of sexual (and non-sexual) activity within the film, Schneemann examines not only the types and incidence of sexual expression in hers and Tenney's lovemaking, but also the intimacy that exists within their relationship. For example, Schneemann includes several frames in which she and Tenney are kissing. The kiss is an intimate expression of affection, that exists both within and external to sexual activity. From infancy, we are socialized to believe that kissing is an act of expressing caring and closeness. Schneemann and Tenney's kiss is clearly an expression of their intimate appreciation for one another, as seen in the gentle way he rests his hand upon her chin and she closes her eyes and leans towards him. They are close to and comfortable with one another.

⁵⁵ Schneemann had at this point been criticized by gallery owners and critics alike as being both narcissistic and obscene in her use of her sexualized, nude form in her work.

⁵⁶ Schneemann, "The Obscene Body/Politic." 31.

This closeness and comfort is also evident in their interactions while engaged in other forms of sexual behavior. In one vignette, where the couple appears to be having intercourse next to the bedroom window, there is an understanding of mutual enjoyment and care. They both smile as they look at one another and Schneemann's arm is placed softly on Tenney's shoulder, as if lovingly caressing him. Schneemann intersperses these clearly intimate frames with those that focus in on the hardcore physical action of the sexual encounter, such as a close up of Tenney performing cunnilingus on Schneemann or a shot depicting vaginal penetration during intercourse. In so doing, she attempts to illustrate the relationship between carnality and intimacy.

Schneemann also attempts to convey a sense of intimacy in *Fuses* by highlighting the authenticity of the sexual encounters, which occur between her and Tenney. Schneemann includes several frames within the film of her and Tenney outside the context of the bedroom. For example, in one particular shot, Schneemann appears alone, running down a beach in a bikini, a scene presumably filmed by Tenney. By including frames such as this, Schneemann suggests that hers and Tenney's relationship extends to other contexts. As such, it conveys the notion that the two share a bond of mutual respect, appreciation, and caring, all of which are hallmarks of romantic intimacy.

Furthermore, the employment of multiple sexual encounters between the same partners as the basis of the film highlights the selective nature of this form of sexual expression, a fundamental aspect of monogamous romantic relationships. Intimacy is inherently dependent on mutual consent and appreciation; there is no intimacy in rape.

Furthermore, intimacy is predicated upon the establishment of a bond between the parties involved in the form of mutual respect and desire. Sexual intimacy often manifests in a desire to please and be pleased based on some deeper appreciation of one's partner. While any person could – physiologically speaking – satiate sexual desire in an individual, sexual intimacy exists when there is selectivity and an interpersonal connection between the people involved. It is the idea that while anyone can scratch an itch, there is something special about the way one particular individual does so. Intimacy is thus related to the psychic, not physical, experience of sexuality. It is this psychic closeness that Schneemann is trying to make physically apparent in her depiction of sexual activity in *Fuses*.

While Schneemann intended to portray the intimacy of her sexual experiences with James Tenney in the film, this effect was ultimately lost on her audience. As a work, *Fuses* toes the line between art and pornography. This boundary, as Lynda Nead argues, has always been a selectively permeable one:

Although conventionally art and pornography are set up in [an] oppositional relationship, they can be seen instead as two terms within a greater signifying system that is continually being redefined and that includes other categories, such as obscenity, the erotic and the sensual. All of these terms occupy particular sexual and cultural spaces; none of them can be understood in isolation since each depends on the other for its meaning.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Lynda Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality," *Signs* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1990):325.

Pornography and art are, as Nead suggests, related entities that exist on a continuum. Where a work ends up with regard to that spectrum can either result in its celebration or condemnation.

Since its premier, *Fuses* has continually oscillated between these two distinctions, resulting in several instances of both acclaim and censorship. Schneemann notes: “My film *Fuses* has been subject to constant censorship at its showings, despite its special awards in Cannes in 1968 and at the Yale Film Festival in 1972.” The fact that the work has a long and continued legacy of censorship, beyond the context of its original presentation, illustrates that despite Schneemann’s efforts to convey intimacy in eroticism as opposed to hardcore carnality, the explicit sexuality of the film *Fuses* is the dominant focus of the work.

The inability to convey to audiences the central role of intimacy in the film *Fuses* was ultimately the work’s undoing and yet, in many ways, it was inevitable. *Fuses*, like *Meat Joy* and *Eye Body* is intrinsically about exploring the natural condition of unabashed sexual expression. Yet, Schneemann went to great strides to embolden the work with the purpose of conveying that particular feeling of affinity and fondness that she felt characterized her relationship with Tenney. She attempted to do more in this examination, but her methodology was, from the start, a flawed one. Schneemann was unable to convey to the audience her particularly intimate appraisal of these encounters because they were intrinsically her own. While many have excoriated the film as narcissistic and exhibitionistic, chastising Schneemann for “showing off” her body and sexual prowess, I maintain that the film’s ultimate failure

was a result of Schneemann's solipsism, not vanity. The intimacy that exists between two people is simply that, between them. Others may recognize and empathize with the kind of fondness people have for one another, but they will never understand exactly what it is that exists within another couple's relationship. As I have shown, there is evidence in the film that intimacy does exist between Tenney and Schneemann, but that quality is not first and foremost apparent. The feeling that Schneemann ultimately wanted to convey may have been tenable to her in creating the film, the general audience is not privy to such a sentiment.

THE LEGACY OF CENSORSHIP

As I have illustrated, Schneemann's early trio of works *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* were considered controversial and problematic at the time of their creation. In each of the works, Schneemann sought to explore the conditions of sexuality in a manner that diverged from the rhetorical conventions of the time. As such, she frequently found herself and her work subject to prohibition and censorship. People have admonished her practice for engaging too much with the subject of sexuality, suggesting she is oversexed, exhibitionistic, narcissistic, or craven. The display of her works has been interrupted or altogether thwarted at various times on the basis that what she depicts is immodest or lewd. For nearly 50 years, Carolee Schneemann's art practice has been embroiled in scandal.

As such, the legacy of censorship has resulted in feelings of resentment and embitterment on the part of the artist, sentiments that have informed her thinking and

practice throughout her career. Looking back upon her own experiences with censorship, Schneemann writes: “Censorship breaks your integrity; it’s sinister because the work is both physically endangered and engaged in a falsification of a motive.”⁵⁸ Exasperated from years of such criticism, Schneemann has attempted to rationalize the reasoning behind these charges. She notes:

Censorship and pornography are blood brothers. We will never find one without the other. If my paintings, photographs, film and enacted works have been judged obscene, the question arises: is this because I use the body in its actuality – without contrivance, fetishization, displacement? Is this because my photographic works are usually self-shot, without an external controlling eye? And are these works obscene because I posit my female body as a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire; and insist that as an artist I can be both image and image maker, merging two aspects of a self deeply fractured in the contemporary imagination?⁵⁹

Ultimately the issue of her censorship is related to her blatant disavowal of the normative rhetoric surrounding sexuality in her art practice. For decades, Schneemann has openly challenged the dominant discourse and the social mores surrounding sexual activity. Schneemann is and was aware of the confrontational and subversive nature of her subject matter, insisting on doing so not only in spite of but because such restrictive dictums existed. In her opinion, her explorations of sexuality, particularly in the early trio of *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy* and *Fuses* constituted a rethinking of sexual activity and a hearkening back to a different conception of the roles and virtues of female sensuality, eroticism, and sexual expression. Moreover she asserts that there is

⁵⁸ Schneemann, “The Obscene Body/Politic.” 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 33

a vested and continual interest in suppressing such attributes as a method to propagate a repressive discourse on sexuality and pleasure.

Still, despite her efforts to fight back and challenge the hegemony of repression, Schneemann was ultimately unsuccessful. She was unable to engage with the larger cultural discourse of sexuality in order to liberate the notion of natural sexual expression or the importance of female pleasure. Instead, her works were continually chastised as either being illicit and obscene – and therefore deemed unworthy of display and censored – or marginalized by her critics as narcissistic or exhibitionistic, her deep interest in the subject of sexual expression thus written off as an idiosyncratic preoccupation.

Schneemann's early erotic works were born out of both her curious interest in investigating sexuality as a natural and essential part of the human experience – beyond the repressive and moralistic prohibitions of the dominant discourse - and her deep frustration with the sexist double standards that faced women of her day. As such, she employed different, medium-specific strategies toward exploring the issue of carnality, looking at the still of the sexualized female form in *Eye Body*, the eroticized motions in the kinetic theatre piece *Meat Joy*, and the enacted scenes of sexual expression in *Fuses*. In utilizing these different media, employing artistic conventions in order to facilitate such an investigation, Schneemann creates works that do capture some of the essential qualities of human sexuality, isolating them from the context of her experience and putting them on display.

Although Schneemann aims to remove the repressive stigma from the sexual act through her portrayals, she is ultimately unable to do so. Human sexuality is, inherently, a complicated entity. As such, the sexual act is laden with cultural significance and cannot be separated from its connotations. Furthermore, cultural mores and prohibitions are intrinsically woven into the discourse on sexuality. The way that the subject is discussed, the type of language and the kinds of imagery all reflect the prevailing social views. Moreover, sexuality is not only regulated by the use of language, but it is subject to institutional structures of power; sexual activity has been throughout history subject to legal sanctions and explicit regulation. Censorship, thus functions to reinforce the existent ideological conceptions of the role and nature of eroticism.

The censorship of Schneemann's pieces thus serves to highlight the radical nature of her works when they originally debuted. Because she did not adhere to the strictures set forth to her by the codes and laws governing moral decency, her works were not allowed to be shown. These pieces were considered subversive and obscene, inciting her audiences to anger, disgust, and even at times violence. As such, *Eye Body*, *Meat Joy*, and *Fuses*, drew attention to the issue of sexuality – particularly female sexual pleasure – at a time when explicitly engaging with the subject in artistic media was considered radical and in some manners even criminal. These pieces toed the line of legal obscenity and as such highlighted the major disparities between the cultural mores against and the actual experience of sexual expression. Like Kinsey, Schneemann sought to reconcile the hypocrisy that existed between the repressive

rhetoric that admonished non-marital and non-normative sexuality and the actual incidence and prevalence of sexual behavior in American society. Yet while Kinsey legitimated his findings through the use of a clinical and anti-erotic lexicon in discussing carnality, what ultimately caused Schneemann's work to be embroiled in scandal was her reluctance to abandon explicit content in her work or to utilize socially acceptable means to convey the idea of the sexual encounter.

Given the historical context of Schneemann's practice, the embrace of sexuality as subject in the early-to-mid-1960s renders her a forebear for the barrage of works by women and men who would ultimately and more freely examine the sexuality in myriad forms in their works. The subject of sexuality in art became subsequently less and less taboo over the course of the following two decades, and was taken up readily by many feminist artists across a wide range of media. In the latter half of the 1960s, premarital and extramarital sex entered the cultural mainstream as a result of what some have termed the "sexual revolution," which encompassed the embrace of non-conjugal sexual activity by Americas youth affiliated with the rise of student groups of the New Left (i.e. Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), countercultural movements – like the Hippies who dogmatically embraced the notion of "free-love" – amongst other cultural phenomena, including the emergence of New Hollywood Cinema and the repeal of the Hays code. Many of the laws and strictures around obscenity and the distribution of pornographic materials that threatened the production and display of Schneemann's work were relaxed or done away with, opening avenues for artists, performers, and

filmmakers to more freely explore the condition and practice of explicit sexual activity.

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