

# Exhibitions

## Carolee Schneemann: Body Politics

Barbican Art Gallery, London  
8 September to 8 January

This first survey of Carolee Schneemann's work in the UK and the first major show since her death in 2019 at the age of 79 is a treasure trove of experimentation, with sections dedicated to era-defining performances such as *Meat Joy*, 1964, and *Interior Scroll*, 1975, and lesser-known video installations including *Viet Flakes*, 1962–67, and *Up To And Including Her Limits*, 1976. Together with documentation, ephemera and Schneemann's personal notes and correspondence, the displays flesh out the artist as a woman possessed of brilliance, humour and courage. The show roughly falls into two parts, the Barbican's upstairs rooms presenting Schneemann's early works chronologically, while downstairs a more fluid installation traces themes that ran through most of her career.

From the start, the body is everything for Schneemann: source of sensation, image, language and concept. As a teenager, she paints canvases heavily indebted to Paul Cézanne, including a nude of her partner, the composer James Tenney. For this act of 'moral turpitude' she is expelled from art school. Undeterred, she forges ahead, producing a rotating painting, which at the Barbican is spun by an invigilator every 25 minutes. She wanted to paint both space and time, and to bring the figure off the canvas. After meeting Joseph Cornell in 1959, she began using materials that enliven the senses, making box sculptures encrusted with shards of glass and mirror that fragment perception. Her first kinetic work, *Fur Wheel*, 1962–63, a rotating fur-lined bucket adorned with clanging tin cans, augurs her performance *Noise Bodies*, 1965, for which she and Tenney wear get-ups designed to create sound as they move.

With *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera*, 1963, she adorns her body with props including a toy snake, making images that echo and subvert historical female nudes, stepping into her power as both the image and the image-maker. Her famed performance *Meat Joy*, with bodies cavorting among raw carcasses (Features *AM257*), and the performative film *Fuses*, a collage of three years' worth of footage of her and Tenney making love, build on the creative and sexual liberation she cultivated with *Eye Body* as she and her collaborators revel in different kinds of pleasure that, according to the artist, make the works both ritualistic and realistic. Taking for granted a radical democracy of body parts, *Fuses* casts a level eye on nipples and



Carolee Schneemann, *Water Light/Water Needle*, 29 May 1966, photo Charlotte Victoria

clitorises, spines and hips, mouths and penises, and her cat, in ways that still surprise and delight.

Barbican curator Lotte Johnson proposed the exhibition in late 2018, and it received the green light in early 2019, but sadly Schneemann never knew about it. It exposes important themes in her oeuvre, notably a devotion to collaboration: either as part of Judson Dance Theater, in bed with Tenney or with a series of boyfriends. The amusing *ABC – We Print Anything – In the Cards*, 1976–77, is a set of cards for performance made with ex-boyfriend Anthony McCall and new-boyfriend Bruce McPherson as one moved out and the other moved in to her home. Later, Schneemann collaborated across species in works such as *Infinity Kisses*, 1981–87, a photo and video installation showing her deep kissing of her cats.

As Schneemann's first retrospective in the UK, and for the quality of the research and care invested in presenting her work, this exhibition deserves to be seen by the widest possible audiences. Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore how the arrangement of works reproduce some of the cultural scissions that Schneemann railed against, specifically the separation of body politics from other politics. I was left wondering why her anti-war work, the earliest of which is the protest video *Viet Flakes*, begun a year before *Eye Body*, doesn't appear until the final section of the show, titled 'Personal Politics'. Separating out her anti-war works, which use footage from conflicts in Lebanon, Bosnia and the US, from her anti-misogyny work raises the question as to what kind of activism she was supposed to be conducting with that early, globally revolutionary art. It seems to imply a hierarchy of types of oppression, which her work was committed to transcending. Both 'kinds' of political work pushed against institutionally sanctioned violence – she devised *Meat Joy* as a pleasure-based riposte to the war in Vietnam – and she risked her freedom and safety making them; she was strangled onstage during the Paris

OLIVIA PLENDER  
*OUR BODIES ARE NOT THE PROBLEM*  
16 SEPTEMBER – 30 OCTOBER 2022

MAUREEN PALEY  
60 Three Colts Lane  
London E2 6GQ

PAUL P.  
*VESPERTILIANS*  
16 SEPTEMBER – 30 OCTOBER 2022

STUDIO M  
Rochelle School, 7 Playground Gardens  
London E2 7FA

MAUREEN PALEY  
INFO@MAUREENPALEY.COM  
WWW.MAUREENPALEY.COM

performance of *Meat Joy*, which was invaded by police, and she was fearful of CIA retaliation for later videos. Instead of separating these works out, it would have been fascinating to see how they might directly converse with one another.

*Viet Flakes* collates images from Schneemann's archive of atrocities of the war in Vietnam, some filmed through a magnifying glass. In many of her video works, Schneemann manipulates, even mauls, her materials, reshooting, degrading, layering and accumulating glitches. In *Viet Flakes* this makes for uncomfortable viewing of upsetting material. Since the war in Vietnam was broadcast into American living rooms, war footage has constituted its own class of heinous pop cultural imagery. Schneemann's work long combined pop and personal elements, from The Supremes' 'Baby Love' blaring over performers in *Meat Joy* to her final video installation *Precarious*, 2009, which uses motorised mirrors to reflect footage shot from television and computer screens around the room. There is an incongruous vitality to the viral clips of humans and animals dancing in captivity, from prisoners in orange suits to Snowball, the cockatoo, stomping his way through 'Another One Bites the Dust'.

The exhibition leaves the topic of censorship relatively tacit, even though Schneemann never did. But what it does instead is show her work, even when it is appalling; for example, the mural of blown-up details of bodies falling from the Twin Towers on 9/11. Its presence here might be about more than gratuitous provocation: it is a record of the bodies of New Yorkers subjected to atrocities installed alongside images of Lebanese, Bosnian and Vietnamese war victims. Until a few years before her death, Schneemann's work was largely ignored by institutions ill-equipped to deal with performance and archives, by dealers unsure of how to sell it, and by a society squeamish about bodies. She transmuted that rejection into energy, never compromising to make her work more commercially or culturally viable. Schneemann's persistence is vital, especially now, when censorship chokes culture on so many fronts, when the fear of getting something wrong often means nothing gets done at all.

Ellen Mara De Wachter lives in London.



Sylvie Selig, *Stateless: 'Weird Family'*, 2022

## 16th Lyon Biennale: manifesto of fragility

various venues, 14 September to 31 December

The phrase 'manifesto of fragility' is almost a contradiction; it is a declaration of intent, a call to arms that foregrounds vulnerability. One term weakens the other, countering any connotations of resistance with an admission of futility. Such a manifesto therefore isn't about replicating existing structures of power and seizing them for the masses; it is instead about holding on to impoverishment, to helplessness, as a collective goal in its own right.

This unifying approach unfolds across three thematic strands of the Lyon Biennale, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, each elaborating a different aspect of fragility. 'The many lives and deaths of Louise Brunet' at the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon draws on a fictional retelling of the eponymous figure's life; Brunet was imprisoned after the Lyon 'Canuts' (silk weavers) uprising of 1834 before eventually making her way to Lebanon. As an embodiment of personal defiance, her narrative finds parallels here in stories of other oppressed subjects, disenfranchised by race, gender, class and sexuality. The installation overlays historical objects with contemporary artworks, including Jean-Antoine Houdon's plaster statue encased in a free-standing storage crate, Salman Toor's painting of a hunched-over human-animal hybrid with a stiletto heel perched on his shoulders, a notoriously racist 'ethnographic' poster from the Exposition Coloniale de Lyon of 1894 and Jesse Mockrin's diptych combining elements from religious paintings, amalgamating one nude figure in her bedchamber with another, dagger in hand. Together, they cumulatively situate impotence in the subjugated body. In the downstairs galleries, the exhibition 'Beirut in the Golden Sixties' follows the same, albeit earlier, trajectory as Brunet, landing in the Lebanese capital at a time of artistic experimentation, sexual liberation and economic prosperity (a new banking secrecy law led to its reputation as the 'Switzerland of the Middle East'.) However, this

**John  
Hansard  
Gallery**

**BLACK: The Graphic Novel**

**Liza Sylvestre: asweetsea**

**Anne Tallentire: Material Distance**

**www.jhg.art**

**Free Entry**

**28 September – 5 November 2022**

**8 October 2022 – 14 January 2023**

**8 October 2022 – 14 January 2023**

