

Carolee Schneemann and the Art of Saying Yes!

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In the course of Carolee Schneemann's long and influential career, she asked herself and was asked by many others, "why not?" Why her *influence* may have felt so omnipresent,¹ while her recognition did not. And why she was, in her own words, "not conflicted about [her body's] pleasures?"² This lack of conflict in pursuit of her pleasure—physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual—is key to understanding the "why not?" of the former.³

In 2002, Schneemann considered her decades-long legacy of producing work—just *outré* enough to alienate the gatekeepers, startle the critics, and lodge itself deep in the craw of culture—asking "is it because my body of work explores a self-contained, self-defined, pleased, female-identified erotic integration?"⁴ I imagine these words rolling gently, yet wearily, off her tongue. They highlight the banal absurdity of her predicament. "Is that what the culture can't stand?"⁵ Of course, Schneemann's question is rhetorical; every day she experienced the answer—she embodied it—but the point she is making is clearer when answered explicitly. *Yes!* Yes, Ms. Schneemann, the culture can't stand you because your body of work explores a self-contained,

self-defined, pleased, female-identified erotic integration.

Yes! is both an affirmation—brimming with conviction—of what Schneemann knew to be true, and a calling, a guide for how she manifested her pleasure through the making of her work. My recent thinking on Schneemann developed as I was ingesting Audre Lorde's 1975 essay, *Uses of the Erotic*, with the frequency and fanaticism of a miracle nutritional supplement. It's a potent six pages that set me on a course, hungry to declare my own *Yes!* to questions I might have once phrased rhetorically.

When the very meaning and modalities of consent are being discussed at the breakfast table, I began asking myself about what I had internalized to which I had not said *Yes!* And, if it was possible to re-examine, under the lens of Lorde's erotic, those ideas that had arrived in my consciousness so fully-formed that they seemed foundational. I had given consent by virtue of my long-term complacency. Sex and art seemed like the right places to start my interrogation—which is still very much underway. They are the origin and outlet for so many hang-ups and preoccupations, and both can easily shift from erotic to pornographic when they operate with a narrative authority that occludes mess, reciprocity, chance, and play.⁶

With this in mind, I began to conceive of a parallel vision of art history full of female-identifying artists whose sexual proclivities and fantasies inform their art practice and vice versa, and Schneemann's work served as my portal. In this parallel, the acknowledgement of the erotic in its many forms does not make a work any less intellectual—as academic art history would have you believe. Here, the power of the work stems from its ability to capture something otherwise limited by language, something experienced in the body and mind collectively, reciprocally. Artists such as A.L. Steiner, Jade Kuriki (a.k.a. Puppies Puppies), and Martine Syms

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1. Schneemann kept a binder she called "Influence/Plagerism/ I Forgot" with clippings of images collected over her career. It's an imagistic morphology in which the echoes of her art are traced through art and advertising. It's a work of art in its own right.



Carolee Schneemann, *Eye Body #5* (1963).
Silver gelatin print, 14 × 11 inches. Image
courtesy of the Estate of Carolee
Schneemann, Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales
Gallery, and P●P●O●W, New York.
Photo: Erró. © Carolee Schneemann

are among a growing number of artists that create unique systems of representation that make the word “identity,” as it is typically applied to art, feel quaint. They are informed by the erotic as it radiates through sexuality, race, and gender all the way to—borrowing an example from Lorde—building a bookshelf. It’s how they live: by saying *Yes!* to things they know to be true, even as the history of art, language, and academia may say otherwise, as evidenced by their own experience.

Lorde writes that “we are taught to separate the erotic demand from the most vital areas of our lives other than sex.”⁷ I’d argue that, with the increasing burden of capitalism, the erotic is quite often even separated from sex, at least the normative variety. This systematic quarantining applies not only to the erotic but also to art. In her novel, *8* (2007), Amy Fusselman writes about how a child’s space to create, name, and give history to any object they desire gets increasingly restricted by adults as they grow older. Their creative space becomes confined to materials such as glue and paint; their skill judged on the ability to make something identifiable; and their creative output regulated to “art class,” a specialty class separate from reading and math. According to Lorde, dichotomies like these result from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. Schneemann’s attention to the erotic was always integrated. That is why, for example, she allowed her performers to go pee if they needed, greet friends in the audience, and feed themselves if they were hungry. The stuff of life is the stuff of art, and Schneemann wanted to “eroticize [her] starved and guilty culture.”⁸

Schneemann also trusted and was interested in her own experience. She called herself, in 1975, a “witness of herself,”⁹ meaning that art allowed her to shape and explore her life, and that the shaping and exploring of one’s life is an artwork in and of itself. Unlike her male contemporaries who enjoyed sex as a perk of being cool downtown artists, the sex Schneemann was

having was part and parcel of her art. In her notations from the decade between 1956 and 1966, she wrote such gems as: “Capacity for expressive life and for love are insolubly linked” and “sexual damning is expressive damning.” Her film *Fuses* (1965), a self-shot sex romp, is Schneemann saying *Yes!* to creating her own eroticized image, acting in her own fantasy, and *yes! oh yes!* she’s getting off while doing it.

How can pleasure be anything but frivolous or prurient? Culture struggles mightily with this. Lorde wrote that the European-American male tradition, under which many of us still operate 40 years after her writing, is what limits the erotic charge. Few industries pay as much lip-service to the harm caused by this tradition, while still happily performing its rituals, than the art world. What else could explain the timing of Schneemann’s first comprehensive retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art’s PS1? It happened a year before she died, in her 80th orbit around the sun, still proudly “tight and wet.”¹⁰

Her first sale to a U.S. museum was also late, already three decades into her career in 1993. However tardy the acquisition, it’s one of her most erotic works. *Infinity Kisses* (1981–88) is comprised of 140 images that form a tapering grid of pictures of Schneemann open mouth wet kissing her cat Vesper, a sleepy morning ritual they practiced for years. Each picture is next to its mirror image: Schneemann and Vesper’s position switches left to right, giver and receiver, audience and performer. They are each both, and sometimes they appear to become one being. There is an erotic transmission taking place; Lorde writes that the erotic allows us to “share deeply.”¹¹ In order to do this we must know ourselves deeply. We must visualize and project ourselves deeply.

Schneemann saw her cats and her camera as mediums of perception—third eyes, fourth, or fifth eyes even—through which to see herself

2. Maggie Nelson, “The Re-enchantment of Carolee Schneemann” in *The Magazine of the Artist’s Institute*, ed. Jenny Jasky (New York: The Artist’s Institute, 2016), 186.

3. “Lack of conflict” is not to be confused with ease or lack of rigor.

4. Caroline Koebel, “Imaging Her Erotics: Carolee Schneemann,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, July 2002.



Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (1964). Silver print, signed, titled and dated on front, 23.75 x 20.25 inches. Image courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong & Co., HalesGallery, and P•P•O•W, New York. Photo: Al Giese. © Carolee Schneemann

outside of the structures of culture, outside the limits of language. It fits how the artist Nayland Blake, in an recent interview with me, describes a kink scene as “a piece of performance art where the audience and the performers are coextensive, where the people who are performing are also the people who are receiving the performance.” All involved are vulnerable, all are “deeply sharing,” and that energy created, passing back and forth, is generative and unique—and making out with cats is kinky, of course.

Whether human or feline, Schneemann and her partners were always both eye and *body*, circuits of observation and sensation transmitted through various orifices and temporal spaces. This reciprocal play between performers, this evolving, escalating consent among participants and viewers is a reminder of how we depend on each other for survival in a way that subverts the transactional exchanges of capitalism. These increasingly seamless transactions define and predict us, they limit us before we’ve tested our boundaries and defined ourselves. *Saying Yes!* to the erotic jogs us out of our complacency and the tyranny of a narrative we did not create for ourselves.

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5. Koebel.

6. Written without a value judgement about pornography.

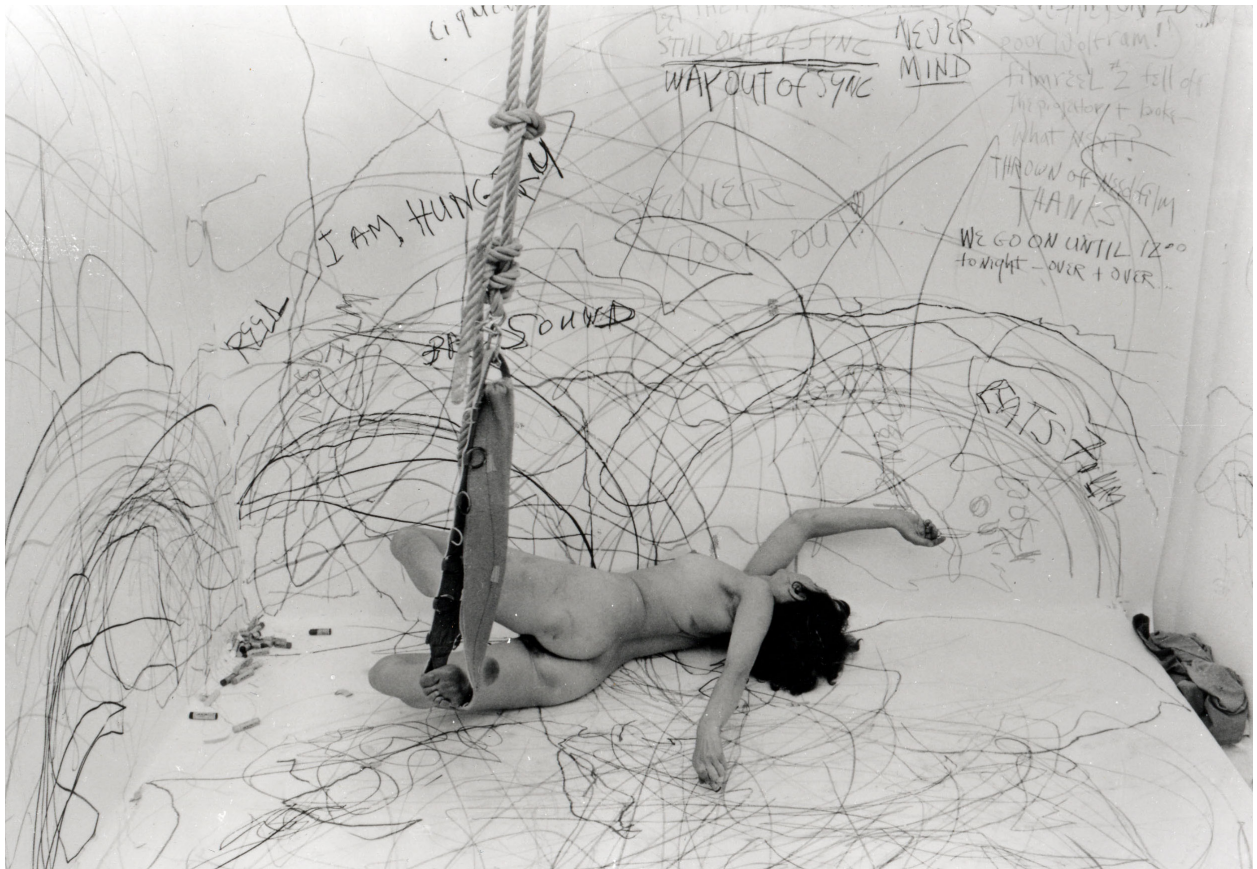
7. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 55.

8. Carolee Schneemann, *Uncollected Texts*, ed. Branden W. Joseph (Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2018), 139.

9. Schneemann, 119.

10. Nelson, 187.

11. Lorde, 56.



Above: Carolee Schneemann, *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1976). Gelatin silver print, 26.5 x 34 inches. Image courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P•P•O•W, New York. Photo by Henrik Gaard. © Carolee Schneemann

Below: Carolee Schneemann, *Infinity Kisses-The Movie* (video still) (2008). 9 minutes, color, sound, HD video. Artwork courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York. Image courtesy of the Estate of Carolee Schneemann, Galerie Lelong & Co., Hales Gallery, and P•P•O•W, New York. © Carolee Schneemann