

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, *MEAT JOY*, NOVEMBER 1994, Judson Memorial Church, New York, performance.

(PHOTO ON THE LEFT/LINKS: AL GIESE; OTHER PHOTOS: CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN)

ASSIMILATING THE Carolee Schneemann in Relation to Antonin Artaud

Carolee Schneemann's work in various media invariably foregrounds the processes of her own body, highlighting its dreams and its sensory and physiological bursts of inspiration. In the early sixties Schneemann took the precepts of action painting into boundary-smashing performances and "body collage" environments, fueled by what she called her feminist "double knowledge"—a combination of bold intuitive leaps and scavenging scholarship into archaic sources. Her insistence on the radical alterity of the body helped make her work opaque for at least a generation of feminist theorists, while, for Schneemann, the linguistic turn and elaboration of sexual difference in feminist art of the eighties could only come as a displacement and veiled suppression, rather than a fulfillment, of a fierce sexual politics. Given the trends in feminist theory, Schneemann finds it

ironic that critical champions of her work have tended to be male, and that only quite recently has a new generation of feminist art historians taken up an extensive study of her career.¹⁾ As David James writes, when Schneemann's film *FUSES* (1965) was shown in London in 1968, "the film could hardly be seen, either by the avant-garde establishment or by the women's movement."²⁾

By giving Schneemann her first one-person museum retrospective, the New Museum of Contemporary Art³⁾ has at long last provided some official art-world legitimation to a career that has exerted a tremendous but under-acknowledged influence on much art in the nineties. At the same time, the Museum of Modern Art has shown for the first time in the United States the drawings of the famed *poète maudit*, dissident Surrealist Antonin Artaud (1896–1946).⁴⁾ Artaud's exploration of the mind-body dichotomy of Western culture, still unequaled in depth, breadth, or anguish, was a key source for Schneemann's performances in the early 1960s. Given Artaud's wide-

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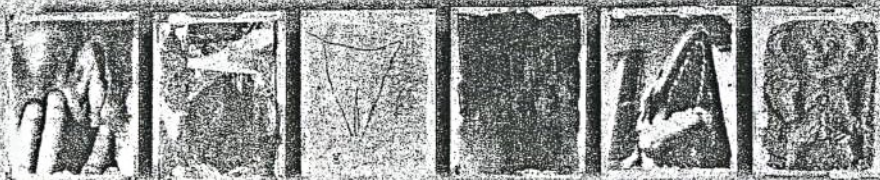
UNASSIMILABLE

JAY MURPHY

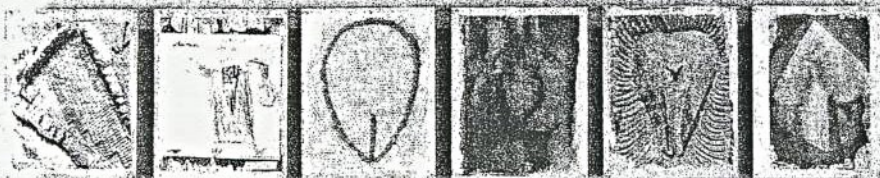
spread influence on the artistic avant-garde, the theoretical links between him and Schneemann may not be so surprising, yet the graphic works by the two artists show a more intimate relation. Both exhibitions may have been intended to answer questions about the art-world standing of their subjects, but they only succeed in raising such questions further. The nineties have been characterized by a veritable flood of art works concerning the body, yet both Artaud and Schneemann are oddly incongruent when seen in relation to these recent developments. Artaud's cries for a "true body" or "body without organs" have new resonance as artists grapple with the implications of the virtual or electronic body in cyberspace,⁵⁾ but in an art-world environment that often revels in eliding differences between high and low culture, and in its complicity with the fashion and entertainment industries, Artaud's search for a primordial language of pure signs is inescapably, quintessentially modernist. Schneemann's assertions of female power and sexual pleasure, often based on an archetypal feminine, have

an overwhelming positivity compared to the works of many young feminist artists who engage an erotic ambivalence that frequently and aggressively invites the abject. For these artists, as well as for feminist art in a more general sense, Schneemann remains a problematic pioneer.

Her troubles of placement and definition within feminism notwithstanding, Schneemann's work has been cannily included in several recent international exhibitions. In "féminin/masculin: Le sexe de l'art,"⁶⁾ Schneemann's mixed-media, kinetic VULVA'S MORPHIA (1981-1995) deploys images which form an archaeology of vulvic space against reigning phallocentrism. In "Hors Limites (Out of Bounds),"⁷⁾ Schneemann's propulsive beginnings—in an interdisciplinary milieu of dance, film, music, performance, painting, theater, and collaborations with the Judson Dance Theater, the Living Theater, and Fluxus, a polyvalency difficult to even imagine today—were suggested through the juxtaposition of two key 1963 works by Schneemann next to the paintings, films,



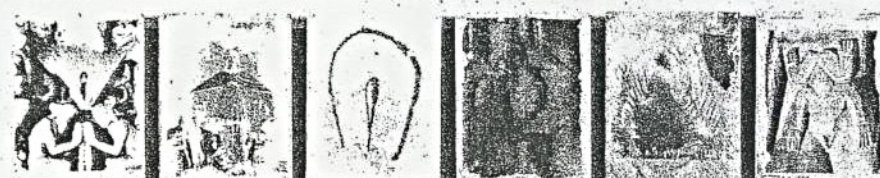
VULVA REACHES BLOODY AND UNDERSTANDS SHE IS AN ANALOGY OF PROTEINS AND DISTANT HORMONES WHICH GOVERN ALL HER DESIRES.



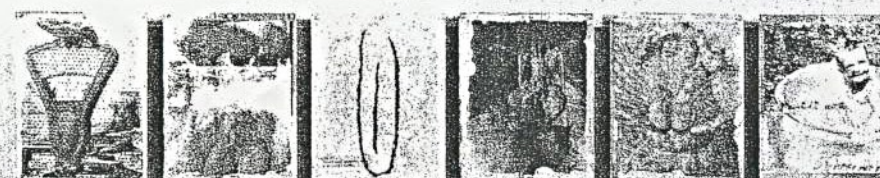
VULVA DISCOVERS LACER AND BUCKLAND AND DISCOVERS SHE IS ONLY A SIGN A SIGNIFICATION OF THE VOID OF ABSENCE, OF WHAT IS NOT MALE... (SHE IS GIVEN A PEN FOR SAKING NOTES.)



VULVA FLAUNTS MASTERS AND JOHNSON AND UNDERSTANDS HER VAGINAL ORGASMS HAVE NOT BEEN MEASURED BY ANY INSTRUMENTALITY AND THAT SHE SHOULD ONLY EXPERIENCE CLITORAL ORGASMS.



VULVA RECOGNIZES HER SYMBOLS AND KEEPS ON DIAPHRAGM UNDER THE BALCONY FREESTYLE ALT, SKATON, ENGLADA, BERRY, MUFF, COOZE, HEN AND ANOTHER.



VULVA STRETCHES, PULLS HER MOUTH AND CLUT WITH PINKY BAWHEL AND RINGS INTO THE CESAR BAR AL MORGISTO TO PROTECT THE GHOSTS OF HER MOTHER, PLEASANT, MUM.



VULVA DISCOVERS PINKY (SHE INACTIVELY REMINDS AND REALIZES SHE HAS NO AUTOMATIC FEATURES AT ALL, EVEN HER BIRTH ORGASMS ARE CONTROLLED BY AN OUTSIDE PROJECTOR, SHE EXPERIENCES AND COMES TO KNOW.)

and documentation of actions by Hermann Nitsch and Otto Mühl of the Vienna Aktionists. The sculpture *FIVE FUR CUTTING BOARDS* was made according to Schneemann's own physical scale, incorporating abstract-expressionist strokes of rhythmic color; a quixotic, kinetic umbrella; shards of glass; bits of fur. The series of *EYE-BODY* photos document Schneemann's first experiment with her nude body as the unifying force-field, the votive, oscillating subject-object in the environment. The sense of shattering prior self-image and enclosed social definition, of literally breaking the mirror into fragments, has a strong visual affinity with the color photos of Aktionist performances where Otto Mühl is shown suffering, writhing under immense piles of congealed blood, egg yolk, and various other substances, trying to expunge what Wilhelm Reich described as the socialized "body armor" that is the legacy of an erotically stunted civilization.

For all their immense differences, Schneemann and the Vienna Aktionists raise a common voice not frequently heard in these days of AIDS and prepackaged sexuality—advocating the abolition of sexual taboos, the emancipation of maimed humanity from what Herbert Marcuse had called unnecessary or surplus repression.⁸⁾ Schneemann and the Aktionists both saw their work as inseparable from the radical political cauldron that gave birth to it. But whereas Schneemann—whom the Aktionists regarded as their "crazy sister"—offered an optimistic paean to sexual liberation, the Aktionists headed pell-mell into scatology, masochism, S/M ritual, and quasi-sacrifice. In Mühl's work particularly, participants were violated with objects in ceremonies crossing boundaries of brutality; in a July 1968 event, Mühl's group whipped a masochist wrapped in newspapers.⁹⁾ In *SHIT GUY* (1969) a woman stripped off Mühl's clothes, tied him up, and defecated on his face. In contrast, Schneemann's *MEAT JOY* typically opened with Schneemann spraying cheap perfume over the audience, while verbal, dream-text cues would unleash a slowly intensifying erotic ritual of diffused light, audio collage, pop music, and movement. The performance culminated in a simulated dance/orgy of painted bodies writhing amid fish, sausages, chicken, and scraps of colored paper. Im-

presario Michael White recalled the London premiere: "Various tableaux unfolded before the entranced audience. A girl had a picture of the Pope projected on her bottom. More girls were painted, slapped about with wet fish and strings of sausages, parcelled up in polythene bags. Two schoolgirls flogged a policeman. It was sensational, I suppose. But many of the performances were very evocative and effective."¹⁰⁾ Schneemann's Eros was challenging Mühl's Thanatós.

The New Museum showcases *UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS* (1973–1976), a key transitional piece from Schneemann's ensemble performance works—a group that includes *WATER LIGHT/WATER NEEDLE* (1966), *SNOWS* (1967) and *ILLINOIS CENTRAL* (1969), among others. In this performance/installation Schneemann uses herself as a seismograph or the planchette of a Ouija board; suspended in a manila rope harness for the daily 8-hour run of the gallery or museum, she makes meditative strokes with chalk on the adjacent walls and floor. Certain incarnations of the work consisted of live performances, others video installation, and still others a combination in which the live action took place while video monitors displayed edited sequences of prior performances. Influenced by the theories of John Cage, Schneemann stripped herself of all previous accoutrements and trappings, including fixed audience, rehearsals, predetermined durations, even any central theme or conscious intention. It would have been difficult to stage a more dramatic departure from the complicated "happenings" of the previous decade. Her works began to feature a more conscious, quotational use of her researches in feminist archaeology, and to explore language as a material, seeking to give "a phrase, a sentence, an idea the primacy, the immediacy, and physicality of a stroke of paint."¹¹⁾

If Freud and Lacan built their model of female sexuality around its lack of a phallus, Schneemann has operated from the opposite pole: "I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually, as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation."¹²⁾ Her original sources and inspirations—early anthropological studies of ancient matriarchal societies, Wilhelm Reich's orgonomic model of sexuality, de Beauvoir's adamant advocacy of female self-

hood, and Antonin Artaud's unplugging of centuries of Western metaphysics and mind/body dualisms—have remained central. But, of these crucial sources, the now-paradigmatic Artaud might best represent Schneemann's own relationship to theory. For Schneemann, Artaud's synthesis of the visual and theoretical was a constantly mobile positioning, "a depth charge that detonates unconscious energies"; thought was a lived, bodily process that fed his graphic work. Artaud perhaps holds the key to Schneemann's own radical feminist version of an alchemical resurrection of the body:

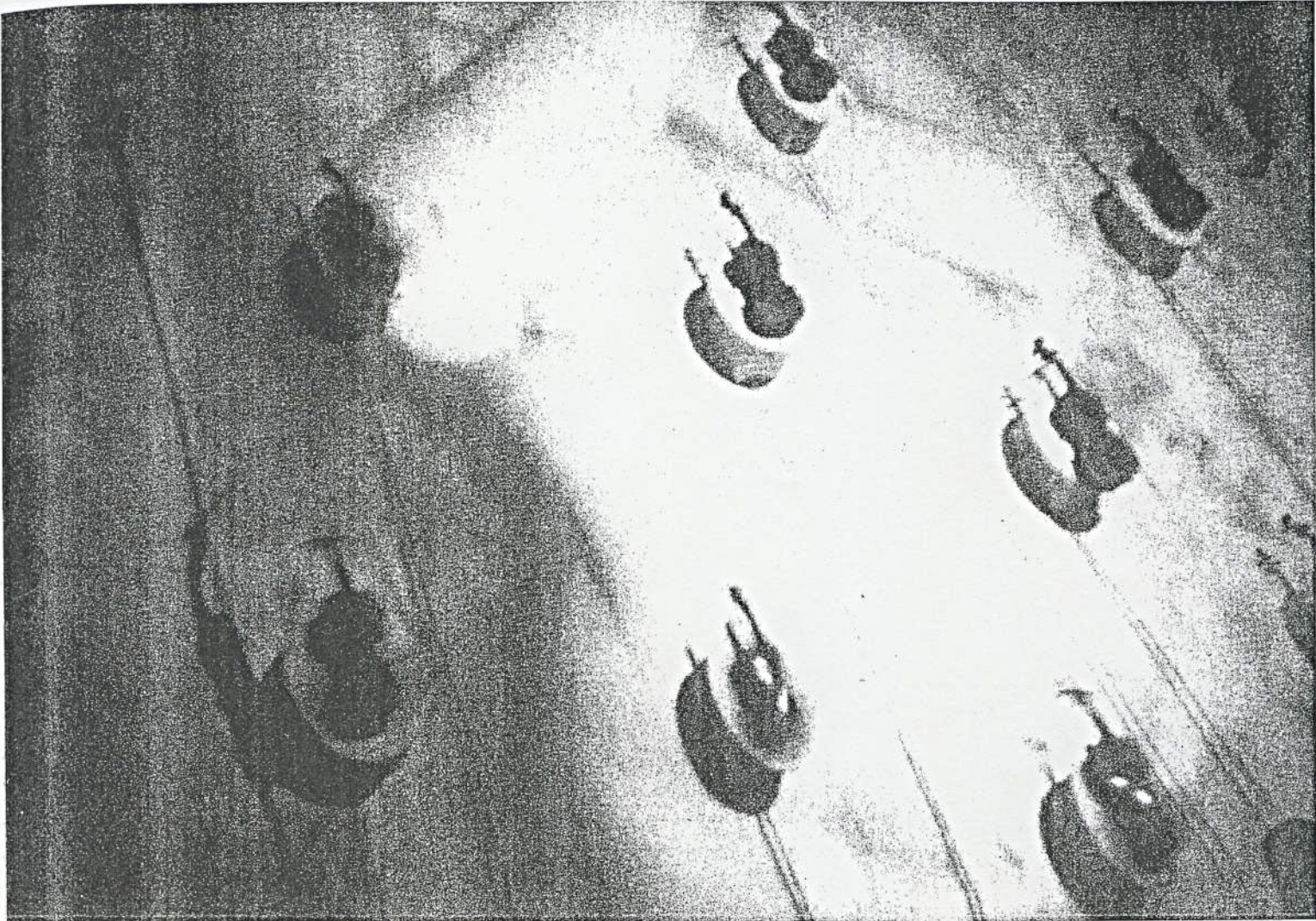
It's so easy for the rest of us, once he's gone through his abominable contortions and that real shredding and torment he underwent to put the mind and the body in the same texture and the same tonality. Artaud is a depiction of the degree of resistance that has to be imagined... It's like an epiphany.¹³⁾

Artaud's thinking refused to deflect or defuse itself, to stop or give pause to its sensations, an absence of

self-censorship that was at least one facet of his so-called madness. His emphasis on the mark and the gesture, on subverting the legibility of the image, suggests the dissolution of form characteristic of Schneemann's paintings, and she has on occasion made works intended as healing talismans, like Artaud's SPELLS. (An example of these is JIM'S LUNGS, 1986.) The energy and fluidity of line evident in her works on paper, like the drawings for CHROMO-LODEON (1963), the watercolor studies for WATER LIGHT/WATER NEEDLE (1965–1966), and CYCLADIC IMPRINTS (1992), radiate a synergy common to Artaud's drawings; like Artaud, Schneemann seeks the blurring of boundaries between the graphic and the performative, between art and life. In taking and enlarging archetypal strokes from Cézanne and de Kooning, she activates a living environment, a "body collage" in a numbed sensorium. Artaud, too, said that he was "not sure of the limits at which the body of the human self can stop," and produced drawings that "are mixtures of poems and portraits, of written interjections and plastic invocations of elements, of

CAROLEE SCHNEEMAN, POUR LYON (from: WATER LIGHT/WATER NEEDLE), JUNE 1965, crayon, chalk, felt pens, 12 x 18" /
FÜR LYON (aus: WATER LIGHT/WATER NEEDLE), JUNI 1965, Pastell, Kreide, Filzstifte, 30,5 x 45,7 cm.





CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN, CYCLADIC IMPRINTS, 1990-92, *mixed media*, ZYKLADISCHE PRÄGUNGEN.

materials, of personages, of men and animals" concerned, above all, "with the sincerity and spontaneity of the line."¹⁴

To see Artaud—or Schneemann—simply as an originator of "body art" may be to miss a larger revelation. In Artaud's drawings, the boundary between bodily experience and its two-dimensional, visual expression is erased: "The canvas is the body."¹⁵ In these convulsions and operations-upon-the-self, "body art" can only seem a redundant procedure. Even in many of Artaud's last portraits at Ivry-sur-Seine, in which recognizable likenesses appear, the gestural marks seem to form a force-field around the subject, as if in protection or to manifest the interior significance of each figure. These drawings, too, are laced with warnings or prayers. In the burned, scarred, and bloody SPELLS; in the "anatomy-in-action" figures, whose interiority is scraped, ripped, and spewed forth (as in the Rodez drawings); or in the later portraits, it is the phenomenon of possession (and representation) that Artaud is obsessed with resolving. Each drawing is "a machine which is breathing" which, through his marks and gestures, attempts to open up what is innate to it; each drawing is a trial, an act of rebirth.

As "Hors Limites" demonstrated, after about 1968 getting to know the body increasingly meant to abolish it, cut it up, subject it to endurance tests—a process Mèredieu calls a "theatricalization" or "miming" of castration and death that relied on real pain in places like Auschwitz, Chile or El Salvador to make its point. It was only in retrospect that Vito Acconci realized that works like his TRADEMARKS (1970) were intimately connected with protest against the Vietnam war.¹⁶ The more notorious body art of the seventies by Acconci, Chris Burden, or Marina Abramovic, for example, could be seen as actions directly

performed on the body that destroy its symbolic boundaries; this is the inverse of the operation Artaud lives/performs. Artaud was enough of a Gnostic to see that quotidian events and appearances were themselves traveling, symbolic borders. With Artaud the body from its inception is already myth and symbol: "Because reality is terribly superior to all history, to all fable, to all divinity, to all surreality."¹⁷

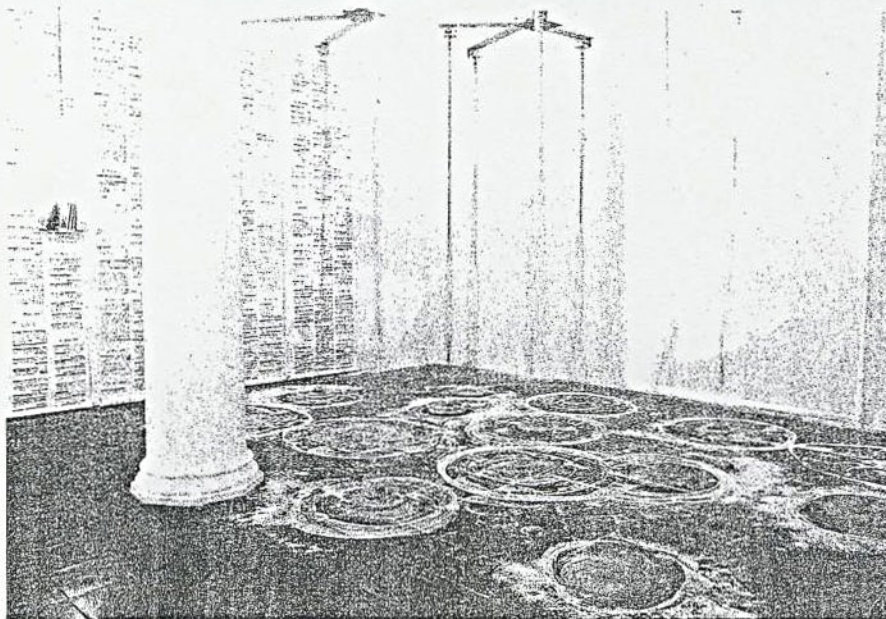
Artaud is such a terrifying "black sun" because the notion of artistic activity as product cannot be further from his volcanic, self-consuming furor, what Mèredieu called his "creative self-cannibalization" in a body which "ceaselessly makes and unmakes itself." Artaud made it clear that "there will be hell to pay for whoever considers them [his drawings] works of art, works of aesthetic simulation of reality. Not one properly speaking is a work."¹⁸

Artaud provided Schneemann, as so many others, with a certain indispensable trigger to her own life, performance/theater, and art. But what Lawrence Alloway called Schneemann's "dionysiac cul-de-sac" leads not to the inalterable, unconsolable loss of "self," but to an activated space where full, orgasmic sexuality opens a door to the psychic.

The paranormal seems to be invited to hover more closely, because it has to do with this dematerialization of the normal envelope around the self. You didn't lose something, something came through you.¹⁹

The torturous, excremental economies of Artaud or the Aktionists thus become for Schneemann the ecstasy of excess, where obedience to the pleasure-principle leads to a glorious expenditure. Despite its myriad embodiment in prints, photographs, sculptures, and films, Schneemann's work—like the sources of its inspiration—keeps moving just beyond complete grasp or assimilability.

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN,
MORTAL COILS, 1994,
 installation, "Carolee Schneemann:
 Up To And Including Her Limits,"
 November 1996–January 1997, at the New
 Museum of Contemporary Art, New York /
 IRDISCHE PLAGEN.
 (PHOTO: FRED SCRUTON)



1) This includes commentary by Kristine Stiles, Joanna Frueh, Kathy O'Dell, Amelia Jones, Laura Cottingham, Kathy Constantinides, and Rebecca Schneider. Although Schneemann was certainly mentioned and supported by other women critics, the main essays on her works have almost invariably been by male critics: Dan Cameron, Frederick Ted Castle, Thomas McEvilley, Lawrence Alloway, Henry Sayre, Robert Haller, Robert C. Morgan, Johannes Birringer, Gene Youngblood, Scott McDonald, and David James. Major exceptions to this include articles by Ann Sargent-Wooster, Valie Export, Julia Ballerini, and Carey Love-lace.

2) David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 321. For contemporary responses to Schneemann's early performances, see, for example, Jill Johnston's ambivalent review, "Meat Joy," (*Village Voice* X, no. 6 [1964]: 17.) Johnston writes, "I like the spirit of MEAT JOY but I tend to agree with the observer who saw the meat and missed the potatoes. Miss Schneemann prefers culture in its rudimentary state before and after the refinements of pride and parlor...the beginning and the end of a thing are commonly considered to be bedfellows in chaos: the matrix of unformulated activity whirling into shape and the phoenix which burns into rubbish and rises from its ashes."

3) "Carolee Schneemann: Up To and Including Her Limits," curated by Dan Cameron, November 24, 1996 to January 26, 1997, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City.

4) "Antonin Artaud: Works on Paper," curated by Margit Rowell, October 5, 1996 to January 7, 1997, Museum of Modern Art, New York City.

5) At least one group, Floating Point Unit (<http://www.thing.net/~floating>), has dedicated a performance/installation "Body Without Organs" (1996) to Artaud, whom they "acknowledge [for] his ability to hear the disembodied voices of the internet 50 years prior to its existence."

6) Curated by Marie-Laure Bernadac and Bernard Marcadé. October 24, 1995 to February 12, 1996, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photographs of Schneemann's UP TO AND INCLUDING HER LIMITS (1976) were included in the "Identity

and Alterity" exhibition at the 1995 Venice Biennale.

7) Curated by Jean de Loisy, November 9, 1994 to January 23, 1995, Centre Georges Pompidou.

8) There was much discussion in the Vienna press comparing the sex-positive Schneemann with the still controversial Vienna Aktionists when her work MORTAL COILS was displayed at the Wiener Kunstraum, April 13 to May 13, 1995. See Christoph Blash, "Frau unter Kontrolle," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, p. 38, May 3, 1995; Doris Kruppl, "Die amerikanische Schwester der Wiener Aktionisten," *Der Standard*, April 11, 1995: 23.

9) See Hubert Klocker, "The Shattered Mirror," in *Viennese Actionism 1960–71*, Vol. II., ed. H. Klocker (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1989), p. 211.

10) Michael White, *Empty Seats* (London: Hamish Hall, 1984), p. 77. Although photographs of MEAT JOY may suggest that the performance was a wild melee, in reality this "celebration of flesh as material" was a carefully rehearsed and imaginatively structured evocation of the body's sensitivity to different combinations of materials, light, color and sound. For a description of the structure of MEAT JOY, see *More Than Meat Joy*, Carolee Schneemann, ed. Bruce McPherson (New Paltz: Documentext, 1979), pp. 62–87.

11) Interview with Schneemann by author, September 21, 1991.

12) Carolee Schneemann, "Erotic Taboo." Talk, Hartford Symposium. October 19, 1989.

13) Interview with Schneemann by author. April 9, 1995.

14) Antonin Artaud, *Watchfiends and Rack Screams*, edited and translated by Clayton Eshleman with Bernard Bador (Boston: Exact Change, 1995), pp. 278–9.

15) Florence de Mèredieu, *Antonin Artaud, portraits et gris-gris*, translated by Charles Doria (Paris: Editions Blusson, 1984), p. 62.

16) Mark Hinson, "Interview: Vito Acconci," *Art Papers* 11, no. 2 (March/April 1987), pp. 41–2.

17) Antonin Artaud, *Artaud Anthology*. Ed. Jack Hirschman. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965), p. 143.

18) Artaud, *Watchfiends and Rack Screams*, pp. 278–9.

19) Interview with Schneemann by author, April 9, 1995.