THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

INCONVERSATION

RADICALIZE YOUR OWN IMAGES AND SENSATIONS

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN and HEIDE HATRY with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve met with Carolee Schneemann and Heide Hatry at Carolee's 18th–century home in upstate New York to discuss their current exhibitions. The result is a candid exploration of current art practice filtered through a unique intergenerational friendship steeped with feminism, meat, performance, the vicissitudes of aging, and the central role of context and controversy in both of their lives. Carolee Schneemann's exhibition *Flange 6rpm* is at PPOW Gallery May 11–June 22, 2013. Heide Hatry's *Not a Rose* is at Stux Gallery May 23–June 22.

Heide Hatry "Betty Hirst," 2005. Silver Halide Print, 30 × 20". Courtesy of the artist.

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (Rail): You are close friends and there are obvious affinities in your work as artists and feminists, and you both have exhibitions up at the moment. Heide, I'll start with you: you are of a different generation than Carolee. When did you first learn about her work?

Heide Hatry: I will seem like the country bumpkin that I suppose I was when I say that in 2004, when I had the idea for *SKIN*, I didn't know Carolee's work.

Rail: Really?

Hatry: I knew nothing about body art, feminist art, performance art. My knowledge of art was almost entirely historical, and things that had happened in my lifetime were almost terra incognita to me. When I came to New York after 17 years as a rare bookseller, a mother, and newly divorced, I was like a shaken bottle of champagne, bubbling over with ideas, all of which I was dying to realize. I made art wildly and in all sorts of media and styles. But when I looked at the work it seemed so diverse that it must have been made by more than one artist, which gave me the idea for *SKIN* (2005)—the idea of attributing the various styles of work to seven different personae. So I created a biography for each, apportioned her a unique body of work, created a portrait along the lines of Cindy Sherman, with whose work I was also unfamiliar at the time, and asked practicing art historians to discuss each artist's work. The result became a new sort of genre, a collaborative conceptual project in the form of a book whose ostensible purpose was to document an exhibition of seven female artists working with skin as a medium and whose dominant theme was identity. I have a Borgesian streak and I like the idea of insinuating fiction into reality as if it stood on equal footing with the rest. What we accept as true tends to be false enough already, and I like to leave little reminders of that fact in the world. In due course what is false now, but true in a deeper sense, might become truth later.

Rail: That was Picasso's argument about his portrait of Gertrude Stein. She complained that it didn't look like her. "But it will," he responded. Part of what's so remarkable about *SKIN* is that each of the separate artists you create is actually doing really amazing art. You did paintings that are quite wonderful, and the objects that you made demonstrate impressive technical skill in traditional art.

Hatry: I was working with what I knew from my studies of art history and technique. As I said, I didn't really know what performance art was then, and only later realized it could be described as what others called "performative," or performance art.

Rail: No one is going to believe this. Your performance works seem so attuned to concerns that animate artists like Carolee or VALIE EXPORT or Yoko Ono.

Carolee Schneemann: Yes, the performance aspects of your work are very droll, they're very funny, they're physically insightful and renegade.

Rail: Let's talk about curation as an extension of your artwork.

Hatry: I see curating as a humble and self-effacing form of art, similar to the way Borges

viewed the anthology or Benjamin saw the arrangement of his library as an artwork. I do it because I am constantly shocked at the meaningful art that is all but unknown, often because it makes us think in ways that upset our preconceptions or alter the hierarchy of categories by which we have been encouraged to view the world. For instance, the work of Theresa Byrnes and Kate Millett, for both of whom I have curated shows.

Rail: You have recently been criticized harshly by a journalist for curating your own work into an exhibition of unique artists's books that, notably, has traveled for two years without controversy. She was outraged that you would include work of your own—as if you are the only artist to have ever done this. But she was particularly offended by one of these personas—an artist named Betty Hirst. Would you comment on her criticism?

Carolee Schneemann, “SNAFU,” 2004. Motorized sculpture with projection. Courtesy of the artist.

Hatry: I was hurt by the accusation, especially because I had spent untold hours creating that show and a catalogue and making sure it was seen. I certainly wasn’t trying to use my “position” as curator to take some kind of unfair advantage. What would that be, anyway, since very few people would have known that the Betty Hirst piece was mine. I did the work voluntarily, to reveal some art I thought was worthwhile in a medium that is rarely seen. Hirst is an artist who I use when I want to make something that I think would be problematic to do as a German or as a foreigner in general. I made a book out of pork, painted it white, and then wrote out in Hebrew the proscription against eating, and even touching, pork from Deuteronomy. It’s a work I really like, but I thought that whatever meaning I intended or interpretation it might engender in a

relatively neutral context, would be completely undermined if the work were seen as that of a German artist. Obviously it also relates to my interest in the complexities of identity in general.

Rail: This connects to what Avital Ronell said about your work at the panel at MoMA PS1 on *Not a Rose*. She wondered whether the use of discarded meat of the slaughterhouse was your unconscious reaction as a German to the Holocaust. Many people—Coetzee's animal rights character Elizabeth Costello, as well as Cary Wolfe and Derrida have written on this—the analogy of the slaughterhouse with concentration camps, the transformation of Jews into animals. When we demean a people we call them animals.

Hatry: To be a German, even a German born in 1965, whose parents were children during the Second World War, is to dwell in guilt. What I remember about growing up most vividly is the constant iteration of our guilt. It was this huge oppressive thing that wasn't even so clear to us as children, but which made me feel like I was gasping to breathe in an overpowering miasma. When I started to travel and to meet people from other places, I was always deeply embarrassed to tell them I was German. So, undoubtedly, there is some necessary and profound connection between, not just my work, but everything I do and the guilt of my "forebears," my own feeling of guilt. At the same time, I am not guilty, and aspects of my work circle around this tension of an unjust, if fundamental, feeling of guilt, our general human complicity in the wrong we have done to each other and the world, and my insistence that, as an individual, this guilt is not mine.

Rail: What was it like curating the exhibition of Carolee's work?

Hatry: I was ecstatic to have the chance to curate an exhibition for Carolee, and then later to create a show specifically in tribute to her innovative use of materials in the show *Meat After Meat Joy*. The small scale retrospective I curated gave a strong if condensed sense of the development of her work, and it was at a time when she hadn't had a retrospective in quite a while. I love her work, her pioneering in so many fields and creating new ways of doing and thinking about art and what it means to be a woman, and more pertinently, to be a human being. I felt that it was a chance to express my gratitude and the gratitude all artists should feel to her.

Rail: Carolee, what did you think when you first saw Heide's work?

Schneemann: I recognized a passionate, renegade, beautiful artist, devoted to taking her influences towards a unique outcome. And then our parallel, visceral farming backgrounds; also Heide being German and my growing up in a little German-American town. Her work has always exceeded any of my anticipations.

Rail: How do you feel about being this legendary artist for younger artists, especially young women?

Schneemann: The influence of my bodywork on younger artists—both women and men—is replete with contradictions. There has been a "phylogeny recapitulates ontology" aspect, as if my performative works have provided an imagistic bridge for another generation of artists. Since it is easily forgotten that my early events were often considered outrageous, marginalized, often demonized and censored in their original time, this subsequent appreciation and appropriation

has been both dismaying and confirming.

Rail: Were there woman artists who served the same role for you when you were starting out? The one I'm thinking of is Maya Deren whom I know you knew.

Schneemann: I was inspired by what I claimed as "missing precedents:" Marie Bashkirsteff, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Lou Andreas Salomé. And while at the University of Illinois, the open library shelves often lead me to obscure historic publications on artists in Germany, Italy, Holland, Greece where I would find women's names, artists who had disappeared from aesthetic consideration. The subsequent regard of feminist research would bring these artists again into focus, confirming my early affinities. I intensively researched Paleolithic African and Cretan art history, establishing attribution of female artists—usually where none had been given credence. For instance, when I went through the Egyptian galleries at the Brooklyn Museum I reappropriated every ambiguous gender figure to be both female and depicted by a woman artist. Since male aesthetic culture had declared all these traditions to be masculine, I felt free to reaccredit many ancient traditions.

Heide Hatry, "Jennifer," 2008. Silver Halide Print. Photograph of pigskin, pig eyes, pig eyelashes, meat on clay with wig and shirt, 30 × 30". Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: Would you relate this to your current show? The forms are cast to look ancient, like artifacts marked by years of geologic deterioration.

Schneemann: My current exhibit is titled *Flange 6rpm*. I've worked for several years building this complex kinetic installation. It began with a very simple spontaneous image—a curved shape about two and a half feet high. I sculpted many permutations of this shape in the lost wax process, which would then be cast in aluminum. Each flange was then grouped and motorized to

move around and back and forth. The original wax molds were burnt in a fiery foundry pouring and filmed to become an enveloping projection. They are aluminum so the original wax is poured in and it's a very heavy, gritty shape. I don't polish them. I want them rough, so, yes, they look as if they've been dug up from some archaic site.

Rail: The image of the forms just came to you?

Schneemann: Yes, and then I went around asking people, "Have you seen anyone doing work like this?"

Rail: That's interesting because what came to mind for me at the opening was how unlike anything it is. I mean, what is it? Performance? Environment? Theater? Maybe all, but so much more. There is a mythic or operatic feel, like I am in the bowels of Hell and the flanges are concretized flames, actual relics of fire twirling in infinity. Why six r.p.m.?

"The influence of my bodywork on younger artists—both women and men—is replete with contradictions."

Schneemann: Most of my motorized works have been at six r.p.m., starting with the umbrellas in the '60s on the big painting-collage "*Four Fur Cutting Boards"* (1963). It's a perceptual motion that has a musical sense for the eye, or it might correspond to a heartbeat. In the exhibit there are seven motorized units, of two to three flanges each, which are spread across a 20-foot wall. The flames from the foundry are projected from floor to ceiling—voluptuous, bloody, rosy—the viewer must stand within that red moving projection in order to experience the piece.

Rail: This quality of immersing the viewer is important to you. Could you elaborate on that? Does it have something to do with immediacy or movement versus stasis and reflection?

Schneemann: I have always written about the physical demands of perception and the visceral energy of painting—from nature, from closely observing the strokes of paint creating an image, the energy of abstract expressionism—all has lead to the actualization of perceptual energy.

Rail: I think what is interesting is that it's a shape that comes from a spontaneous image rather than something mimetic in the world. There must be something to this shape for you? And why project the making of it on it? Does it feel like a natural process when we're watching it? I mean, is it about the cycle of life and death, that kind of thing?

Schneemann: Oh, no, no, no. You don't know when you see the projection that a sculpture is being cast by flame. It's not explicit. It's about interior rhythms, motion, subtle momentum of a force of nature—being on fire. And it relates to other kinds of motorizations I've done. I always need to physicalize my work, that's just something innate.

Rail: *Vulva's Morphia* (1995) is also in the show. It's one of those unsung works that critiques the phallocentrism of our culture in a humorous and profound way. You deliberately flip from a phallic to a vulvic discourse at both a visual and linguistic level. This is also true with "Interior Scroll"(1975). I have always thought your work on "istory," on the cultivation of systems of

representation and language from an ontologically female point of view, was extraordinary. Certainly *Fuses* (1965) is an example and, interestingly, in the early ’80s when I studied with Annette Michelson at N.Y.U. we saw a lot of [Stan] Brakhage, but nothing of yours. But *Fuses* is an amazing critique of the male gaze and it was made a decade before Laura Mulvey’s famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975).

From Skin: Heide Hatry as Hermine Roth, Collage IX, 2005. Silver Halide Print. Courtesy of the artist.

Schneemann: There were some very hurtful exclusions of my work by early feminist historians and curators, from whom I had a justifiable but foolish anticipation of appreciation—that they would get what was really subversive in my physicalized actions.

Rail: Here is where the generational difference is so profound. Carolee, you were a young artist amidst an extraordinary spontaneous zeitgeist in the early ’60s, from James Tenney and Brakhage to Yvonne Rainer and Rauschenberg. Whereas Heide, although you’re younger, ironically you were the late starter because of marriage and a child, and in the beginnings of the 21st century! Talk about how you became the artist you are. It’s quite a story.

Hatry: It was not as ironic as it might seem, since during that time I created and ran a business and taught art as well, but I did forgo the life of an artist that I always imagined. In 2002 when my husband left me, not only for a younger woman, but for a friend of our family, I was so shocked, insulted, and furious that I wanted to kill him. I thought: How can I make a realistic effigy of him that I can murder? I realized I could get everything I needed at a slaughterhouse: bones for the structure of the body, intestines, organs, meat skin, eyes, eyelashes. My plan was to

place this figure beneath a tree where he used to read, with a book in his hand, and ask a friend who had two pitbull terriers not to feed them for a day so they would be ravenous when they came upon my husband in effigy and devour him while I taped the carnage. That was the original idea. But it took me three days just to make his head and then it started to stink, and in the end I almost vomited over him, it was so intense. I tossed the whole head in the trash and didn't even take a picture of it. It wasn't an artwork, it was a catharsis. But after those three days, I felt only sad, and the hatred that had animated me was completely gone, and I started wondering why I liked this material so much. So I began making other sculptures depicting bodies that were not so realistic. I also made sculptures out of lungs, and I sewed pig eyes and legs onto them and put them out onto the street as a kind of organ transplant performance, right in front of my rare bookshop in Heidelberg in the main pedestrian area.

Rail: What?! They must have thought you'd gone mad.

Hatry: They did. They called the police. I had to pay a fine for disturbing the peace—it became a real problem in Heidelberg because everybody knew me as this nice rare bookseller and suddenly it was like I had gone crazy. And the funny thing was, about six months later, when I told my sister what I was doing, she said, "Oh, so you've gone back to your roots?" And I didn't even know what she meant. "You're cutting up pigs again," and I was shocked because I hadn't made that connection.

Rail: You mean with the pig farm in Germany where you were brought up?

Hatry: Yes. It was a large factory-style pig farm. My father wanted me to be his butcher.

Rail: Why?

Hatry: It's complicated but it had to do with my dog, my psychologist.

Schneemann: A dog? Your psychologist was a dog? [*Laughing*.]

Carolee Schneemann, *Flange 6rpm*. Foundry poured aluminum sculptures, motors 6rpm each unit; DVD projections floor to ceiling of foundry firing. Photo: Susan Alzner.

Hatry: Yes, he was the only one I could talk to and who understood me. He loved raw meat, so I started to cut up the dead pigs that were waiting to be picked up by the factory that made animal food out of them. When my father realized that I had no problem cutting off parts of the dead pigs, he had the idea to use me as his butcher and set up a kind of butcher shop where he would hang a cleaned pig. He explained to me which pieces of the animal were usable and how to cut and package them, and from then on I would prepare the meat that our family lived on.

Schneemann: How old were you at this point?

Hatry: I did that from seven to fifteen.

Rail: From 7 years old?!

Hatry: Yes, none of my siblings wanted to do that, and my dad loved me for doing it.

Rail: It is just crazy how close to you both I am because I am a total meat-o-phobe and heartily embrace my emotional—even sentimental—attachment to non-human animals as sentient beings whose suffering I seek to reduce everyday. Carolee, I've always wanted to ask, in light of all the discussions on animal welfare now and food production and thinking about the animal in terms of the subjugated other, would you do *Meat Joy* (1964) now if you were young?

Schneemann: Probably not, because the conditions surrounding the female body and its aspect as potentially pleasured have shifted so much. *Meat Joy* was radical in 1964 because it insisted on the improvisational, eroticized, or sensualized ritual, which included the extension of the body

into chickens and sausages and very stinky raw mackerel. The video is still wild, ecstatic, and hugely exciting for current audiences. The raw chickens, the stinky fish, the lengths of sausages remained shocking since for populist dietary habits meat has to be sanitized—just as the viscerality of the human body is culturally sanitized. The viscerality of *Meat Joy* also implicated the overshadowing Vietnam War, its mutilations, endless destructions, and atrocities of the time. So that even my joyous works signify a privilege occluded within a culture of militarism and domestic political assassinations. I questioned if critical regard of my work could contain the context surrounding my motives.

Rail: Both of you were very close to your fathers and both of your fathers worked with living beings: one a pig farmer, the other a country doctor.

Hatry: My father was an insanely hard worker. It's obvious to me now that I wanted him to know that I was like him and that his values were my values: that he should love me because I was like him. As painful as it is to grow up on a farm, where the youngest children already know that they are expected to do nothing but work and have no meaning except as workers, it's great to have the habit and to know the satisfactions of work as second nature.

Schneemann: I traveled around when my father drove into the countryside to deliver a baby or care for various illnesses. I learned extreme patience, sitting in the car in all weathers when his ministrations took forever. He was a very happy practitioner. I learned to follow how engaged and positive about all aspects of health, sickness, and healing he was. I didn't realize at the time how unusual his graceful sensuousness, humor, and devotions were.

Rail: Heide, in *Not a Rose*—the parts you use are what is discarded at the slaughterhouse.

Heide Hatry, Linguae saeta cervorum, sanguis coagulates (Deer tongues and coagulated blood), 2011. Silver Halide prints. Courtesy of the artist and STUX Gallery, NYC.

Schneemann: I've always wanted to ask how you get the materials you work with.

Hatry: It depends on what it is, but for anything considered problematic I just lie. I say I am a biology teacher and I need the parts for some kind of scientific project. Or I say I am a tattoo

artist and need pig flesh for practicing tattoos. But it's funny, butchers are squeamish. They don't like the misuse of the animal, and to them misuse of the animal is to not eat it.

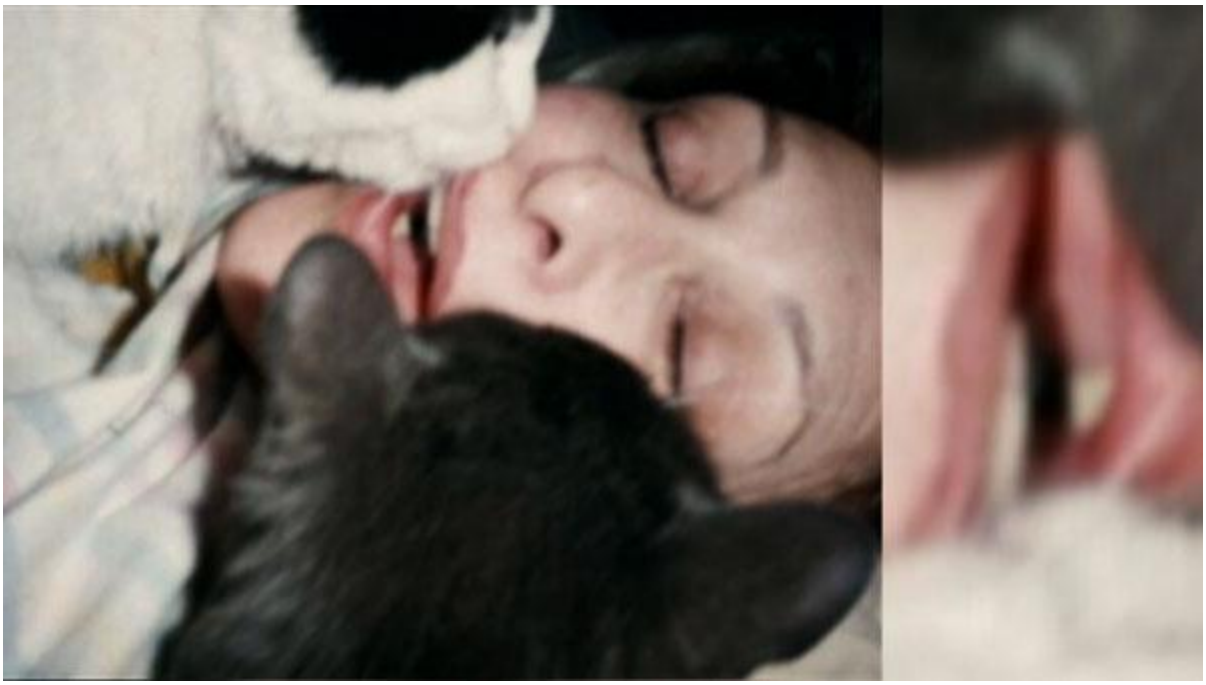
Rail: You retool it and by doing this you unveil the hypocrisy of eating animal parts because meat eaters in America have no problem eating liver or kidney or breasts (I mean breasts!!!) but ask them to eat ears or eyes or penises, and well—we haven't talked about the show at Stux yet, and your book.

Hatry: *Not a Rose* evolved out of my previous project *Heads and Tales*, particularly, the way viewers were initially fascinated by the work, thinking the photographs were simple portraits, but obviously portraits with something *unheimlichem* (uncanny) about them. Gradually it dawned on them that these were not living beings but photographs of sculptures made out of pig skin, eyes, eyeballs, eyelashes, and meat, they would recoil in horror or disgust. I saw how knowledge affects our perception of beauty, so I conceived a thought-experiment, which became the basis for *Not a Rose*. I chose a subject—flowers—that is universally regarded as beautiful, and made them out of a material that is universally regarded as repugnant: animal offal. Using the conventions of nature photography and scientific nomenclature, I prevail upon the cultural expectations of viewers to have them look at them in a certain way, which would be upended as it dawned on them that there was something amiss here. In the book, the interventions of my collaborators entwine the work like rampant vines, imposing new conditions of seeing them and revealing new perspectives. Like all of my large-scale projects, *Not a Rose* is conceived along the lines of the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a term Wagner used to describe his enhanced conception of opera as "total artwork," bringing together wonderful collaborators to make something emerge that is greater than the sum of its parts, that transcends the old boundaries by recontextualizing every individual contribution.

Rail: It was pointed out to me by a writer that it's wrong to describe *Heads and Tales* and *Not a Rose* as *your* books because your collaboration with writers is integral to the project and by claiming them as yours you re-instill, "I'm the artist, I made these things," when, in fact, the impact is the interaction of text and image. Do you think this is an unfair criticism? Carolee, what do you think?

Schneemann: *Not a Rose* resembles a well-tended garden, a jungle, a wetland of unexpectedly fertile and delicious mutations. I think the concept is remarkable, brilliant. It constantly reminds me of when I am gardening how certain aggressive plants will grow next to the ones I cherish, stretching out as leaf or vine to strangle them.

Hatry: For *Not a Rose* I asked 101 contributors to write generally about nature and flowers; my images function as a springboard for their thoughts and articulation of their words, often in complex and interesting ways. I think of this as an essentially collaborative work, and my name functions as a shorthand, like the name of a director of a film. I have no desire to take undue credit for the work. I'm not aware of any other art being made quite this way, although there are parallels with Matthew Barney's large-scale conceptual multi media work and his use of the book as a place where all of the material comes together.



Still from Carolee Schneemann, *Infinity Kisses* (2008). 9:05 minutes, color, sound. Courtesy of the artist.

Rail: In ending, Heide is there anything you would like to ask Carolee?

Hatry: Yes, do you think we should stop performing because our bodies are aging?

Schneemann: It depends on how old you are when you consider your body to be aged. Recall Proust's famous inquiry to Madame DeNoailles, the great seductive, beautiful countess when she was in her 80s. Proust asks her "Madame, now that you are in your 80s, how does it feel to be relieved from the fangs of desire?" She replied, "Dear boy, you will have to ask someone older than I." Actually, I was recently approached about this via email by a woman who wanted to re-perform *Meat Joy* with the original, now aged, participants. Unfortunately, or inevitably, most of my splendid participants are dead. Others are somewhat incapacitated, or they are completely overwhelmed with their own work, or have disappeared into the desert or mountains and I cannot locate them. But the dilemma with using obviously older performers is an interesting one. Somehow it is never made culturally very clear that by the time you're in your 60s or 70s, people have lost flexibility, mobility, and the sort of ecstatic sensuality that is best communicated by young bodies which are obviously flexible and mobile. Older/aged performers physically embody distractions that have not been codified within Western culture. Popular culture only introduces subjects of aging or old age as anomalous, sorrowful, or ridiculously optimistic, which is why I am not a fan of "redo" or "reconstructions." As I mentioned, you can't reconstruct past performances because the work is about context so in the end, to answer your question, what we must do as we age is continually radicalize our own images and sensations.

Hatry: I am all in favor of radicalizing. As Marx said, let's get to the root.