

Obituaries

# Carolee Schneemann, artist known for taboo-breaking performances, dies at 79

By [Harrison Smith](#)

March 7

Carolee Schneemann, a painter and performance artist whose taboo-bursting works explored gender, sexuality and the body politic, often by using her own nude figure as a canvas, died March 6 at her home in New Paltz, N.Y. She was 79.

The cause was breast cancer, said Wendy Olsoff, co-founder of PPOW, a Manhattan gallery that had long represented Ms. Schneemann. Her mid-1990s installation “[Plague Column](#)” was inspired by the illness, Olsoff said, but the artist largely avoided publicizing her struggle with the disease.

Ms. Schneemann described herself primarily as a painter, but in a six-decade career she leaped between photography, collage, assemblage, film, dance, multimedia installations and ecstatic works of performance art. Among her most indelible was a piece called “Interior Scroll” (1975), in which she stood on a table and slowly pulled — and read — a feminist screed from her vagina.

Her goal, she once wrote, was “to eroticize my guilt-ridden culture and further to confound this culture’s sexual rigidities.” “The life of the body,” she added, “is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit.”

Ms. Schneemann was largely shunned by the art establishment until the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in Austria held a massive retrospective of her work in 2015. Two years later, the show traveled to MoMA PS1 in Queens, and Ms. Schneemann received a lifetime achievement award from the Venice Biennale.

“She was pushing against some very powerful barriers — not just against women artists, but against women artists who were deploying their bodies as a kind of political gesture,” said her friend Dan Cameron, who curated a 1996 retrospective of her work at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Manhattan.

Ms. Schneemann and artists who followed in her footsteps, including Cindy Sherman and Marina Abramovic, “were essentially saying we have been made into objects by men, and the very thing that has caused men to objectify us, we’ll take ownership of,” Cameron added.

Originally grouped among the abstract expressionists, Ms. Schneemann had begun to take a more experimental approach by the early 1960s, when she moved into a former fur manufacturer’s workshop in Chelsea and became a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater.

Building on the improvisatory, chance-based philosophies of composer John Cage and performance artist Allan Kaprow, the group performed works such as Ms. Schneemann's "Meat Joy" (1964), in which eight underwear-clad dancers writhed and rolled across the floor, playing with raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, plastic, rope, brushes and scraps of paper.

Ms. Schneemann described the piece as "a celebration of flesh as material," and Lady Gaga seemed to nod at the work when she wore a dress made of meat in 2010. While the concept endured, its execution sometimes proved challenging; Ms. Schneemann recalled a London performance in which her leading man was drunk and, according to [the Guardian](#), "one of her chickens got stuck in a sink, causing a flood of bloody water."

With the Judson group, Ms. Schneemann performed in works such as "Site" (1964), by conceptual artist Robert Morris, playing the nude model in Manet's painting "Olympia." Around that same time, she devised a series known as "Eye Body," in which the Icelandic artist Erró took pictures of Ms. Schneemann posing with feathers, shards of broken glass and snakes.

More controversial was her film "Fuses" (1964-67), which showed Ms. Schneemann and her partner at the time, composer James Tenney, having sex. Their coupling was abstracted and obstructed through the use of collage, superimposed images and scratches on the celluloid.

In 2016, Ms. Schneemann [told the New York Times](#) she had been vilified by feminist critics who accused her of "playing into male fantasies." Others "called it narcissism," artist Marilyn Minter told the Times. "Today it would be called slut-shaming. I wish I had had the language to defend her, but it registered that this is someone who's really making a giant move."

Ms. Schneemann forged ahead, strapping herself naked into a tree surgeon harness for the mid-1970s work "Up to and Including Her Limits," in which she hung from the ceiling and floated across a room, drawing on the walls and floors as much as the harness allowed. (An artist character in the Coen brothers' movie "The Big Lebowski" later used a harness to similar effect.)

"I never thought I was shocking," Ms. Schneemann told the Guardian in 2014. "I say this all the time and it sounds disingenuous, but I always thought, 'This is something they need. My culture is going to recognize it's missing something.'"

Ms. Schneemann was born in Philadelphia on Oct. 12, 1939. Her mother was a homemaker, and her father was a traveling doctor whom Ms. Schneemann accompanied on visits to treat patients, where she was exposed to blood, gore and bodily maladies from a young age. "No fantasy of the sanitized body in this household," she once said.

When she announced she wanted to become an artist, her father refused to send her to college, telling her she would be sent to typing school. She received a full scholarship to Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., but was similarly discouraged by instructors who suggested she try modeling instead.

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“Even when I had a fellowship for painting,” she told the Guardian, “some of my teachers were very hostile. ‘You’re taking this too seriously. You’re only a girl. Don’t set your heart on art.’ My boyfriends in college stole my brushes and my books, like, ‘We need this more than you do.’”

She was kicked out of school for one year for what she described as “moral turpitude,” after painting a self-portrait that showed her with her legs open, but received a bachelor’s degree in 1960. While away from school she met Tenney in New York; they became partners, and married when they went to the University of Illinois for graduate work, after being told that only married students could live together.

Her marriages to Tenney and Anthony McCall, a British-born artist known for his installations of “solid light,” both ended in divorce. She has no immediate survivors, Olsoff said.

After receiving a master of fine arts degree from Illinois, Ms. Schneemann moved to Manhattan. She soon struck up friendships — and often began collaborating — with artists such as Cage, Philip Glass, Claes Oldenburg, [Stan Brakhage](#) and Yoko Ono.

She later taught at schools including New York University, California Institute of the Arts, Bard and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ms. Schneemann turned repeatedly to war and tragedy as themes in her art, including in a mid-1960s collage work, “Viet-Flakes.” She also incorporated her cats into many of her pieces, most notably in a 1980s photo series, “Infinity Kisses” that showed her and a beloved pet touching tongues.

But she remained closely identified with her provocative early work, which seemed increasingly relevant for its political message. A [Times review](#) of her recent MoMA PS1 exhibit noted that Ms. Schneemann began one performance of “Interior Scroll” with a reading that featured a warning to female artists, or perhaps to women everywhere:

*BE PREPARED:*  
  
*to have your brain picked*  
  
*to have the pickings misunderstood*  
  
*to be mistreated whether your success*  
  
*increases or decreases*  
  
*if you are a woman (and things are not utterly changed)*  
  
*they will almost never believe you really did it*  
  
*(what you did do)*

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they will patronize you humor you

try to sleep with you want you to transform them

with your energy

**Correction:** An earlier version of this obituary incorrectly reported that the MoMA PS1 art museum is located in Manhattan. It is in Queens. The story has been updated.


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### Harrison Smith

Harrison Smith is a reporter on The Washington Post's obituaries desk. Since joining the obituaries section in 2015, he has profiled big-game hunters, fallen dictators and Olympic champions. He sometimes covers the living as well, and previously co-founded the South Side Weekly, a community newspaper in Chicago. [Follow](#) 

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