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ART BOOKS | MAY 2021

Carolee Schneemann's *Parts of a Body House* Book

A new facsimile edition of the performance artist's feverish exploration of bodily autonomy, sexuality, and creativity.

By Kate Silzer





Parts of a Body House Book is a feverish exploration of bodily autonomy, sexuality, and creativity as conceived of by the groundbreaking feminist painter and performance artist Carolee Schneemann. First printed in an edition of 60 in 1972 by Beau Geste Press, the softcover book resists categorization of genre, collaging into a single art object correspondences, sketches, photographs, poem-like texts, and other experimental miscellany, much of which stems from pieces she performed over her artistic career. In 2018, the Women's Studio Workshop (WSW) began the process of creating 90 high fidelity facsimile editions of the original book under the close supervision of Schneemann. The reproduction effort involved, among other things, risograph, silkscreen, letterpress, black-and-white film, hand stamping, highlighting, and footprints from the artist's beloved cat. Schneemann passed away in 2019 during the later stages of production. As an artwork and a relic, this book provides a dizzying vantage from which to consider her legacy. The object is a temporary vessel for her oeuvre, a pulsing manifestation of something ultimately uncontainable.

*Parts of a Body
House Book*
Carolee
Schneemann
(Women's Studio
Workshop, 2020
/ Beau Geste
Press, 1972)

The book has a presence as if it were indeed a body. But when closed, it is unimposing, only a couple inches longer than standard printer paper, perfect bound along its shorter side. Possessing the hand-crafted quality of a scrapbook, it exerts the pull of a strange and singular artifact. The title establishes "body," "house," and

“book” as interchangeable elements: as a human body or a body of work. At the same time, we’re compelled to see the body as both a literary text and a physical scaffolding for the self. The titular piece in this collection literalizes the idea of the body as a home by treating each body part as a room:

“When you enter the Body House you walk south and north for a long time; you come to an open circular structure—a staircase of ribs, smooth and shiny and white.” Each room conjured here has its own characteristics and purpose, together creating an imagined shared experience of the body. The Lung Room is stretchy “like a trampoline,” followed by the “soft velvety warm damp walls” of the Heart Chamber/Cunt Chamber, the “ecstatic physical interchange” of the Nerve Ends Room, and the Kidney Room, where “people come together to discuss revolution.”

Because much of the content in the book is drawn from Schneemann’s performance works, it often begs to be read aloud. Her writing has very little punctuation, creating a propulsive rhythm that builds over time. In “Americana I Ching Apple Pie,” she confronts domestic stereotypes surrounding women:

Go into the kitchen with defiant [sic] joyful anger. On this scruffy battleground you will lay down the cookbook forever. You will cease competition with untold legions of sublimated self-satisfied female psyches engaged over the centuries in a pursuit of excellence through flour grease



Courtesy of Women's Studio Workshop.

onion turnips blenders colander strainer boilers mincers graters choppers
whiskers mincers beaters DESIST DESIST STOP. STOP NOW!

Coffee stains and line drawings encompass the words as if it were a well-worn family recipe or crafted in a fit of inspiration. “You are in this kitchen because you do not have a penis. Keep this in mind as you crush the garlic with the heel of your shoe. You are in this kitchen because you have or might have a baby.”



Courtesy of Women's Studio Workshop.

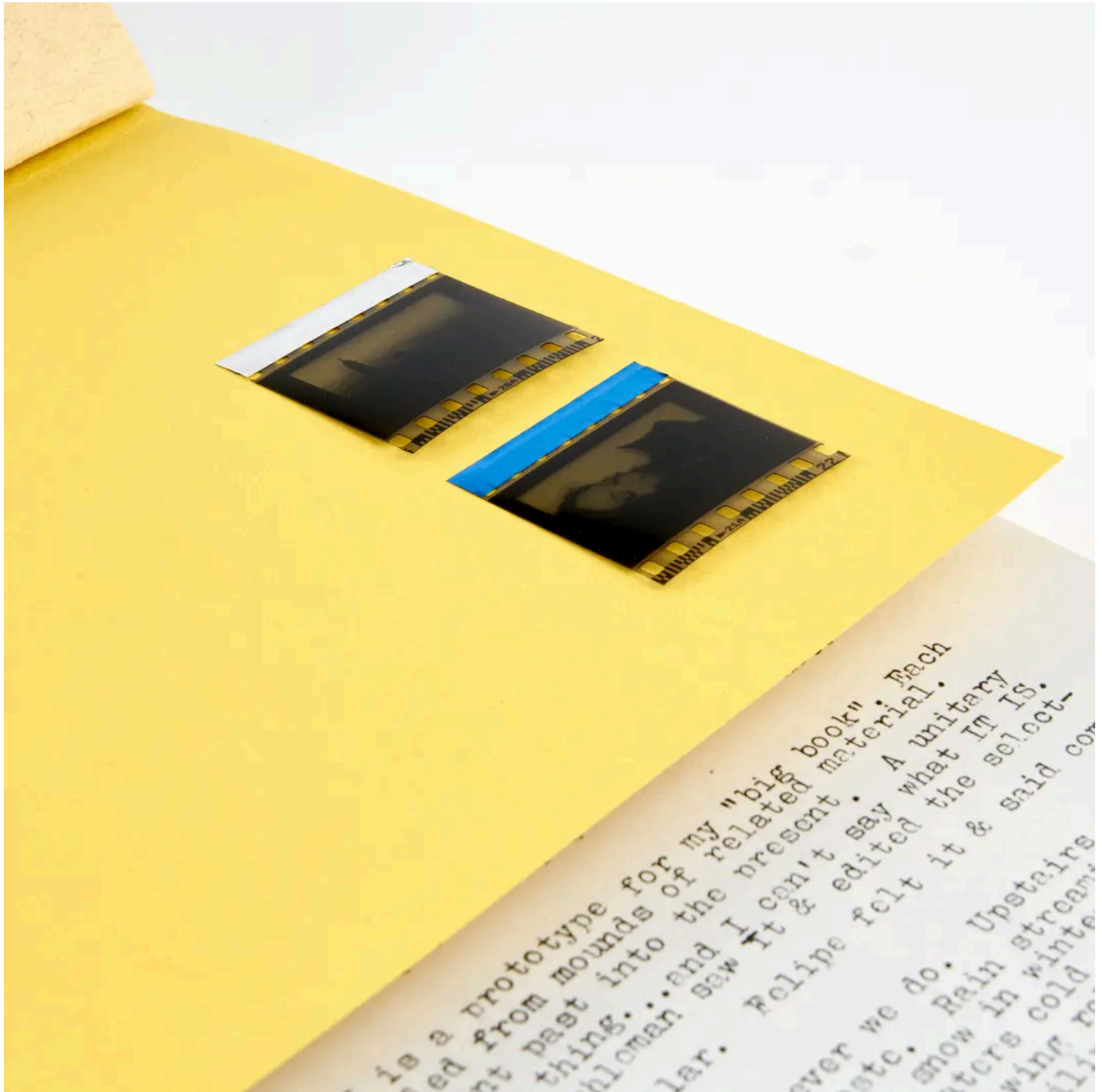
The artist spent a lifetime creating idiosyncratic work that inspired controversy as well as admiration. She is best known for her more superficially scandalous pieces, such as *Interior Scroll* (1975), *Fuses* (1967), and *Meat Joy* (1964), which were often dismissed as pornographic or too perplexing to be considered “serious” art. *Interior Scroll*, a piece she performed only twice, combines textuality with sexuality. In it, she stands naked on a platform and reads from a scroll which she pulled slowly, methodically from her vagina. The piece was a reaction to film critic Annette Michelson allegedly calling Schneemann’s work a “diaristic indulgence.” It’s not hard to see where Michelson was coming from: Schneemann’s work is nothing if not personal. But the intimacy, the “personal clutter” and “hand-touch sensibility” that Michelson rejected is the point. Schneemann shamelessly exposed the physical and emotional parts of herself that society wanted to hide. “Don’t you all sniff underpants socks undershirts shoes fingers armpits balls hairs pussys? ?? don’t you?” she writes, “well I proclaim it all normal & important!”

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Though Schneemann’s primary goal was not to be provocative, it's undeniable that her art incites strong reactions, provocation ultimately having more to do with the viewer’s sensibility than any fixed intrinsic quality of a work. An apt illustration of this point: the original book included blottings of Schneemann’s own menstrual blood (volunteers donated blood for the reproduction). I oscillated between feeling impressed and repelled by this detail. Shouldn’t I be more like Schneemann, who revered the body unflinchingly in all its gory materiality? Would it seem different if the art were hung on a gallery wall, rather than lying open on my desk?

Interacting with a book incurs a greater level of intimacy and responsibility—it removes the distancing veil of art that is tucked behind glass. It's an ideal medium for an artist whose work fixated on physical touch. Bound directly into the structure, the menstrual blood blotting must be confronted. "What does it tell us about the ways in which our fears of the body are ingrained in us in a way that is patriarchal and maybe doesn't benefit women?" posed Erin Zona, artistic director at WSW. Ultimately, how we react to her work stems from what is widely considered acceptable in society. "We still exist in a world where [...] a menstrual cycle is still tied in with capitalism and consumerism," said curator Jasmine Wahi. "Why don't we have free and accessible period products?" Schneemann sought to "normalize what is normal, and was seen as a radical artist for doing that."



Courtesy of Women's Studio Workshop.

In the face of a society that rejected her art, Schneemann continued to create work that she believed in with an unshakeable ferocity. From a piece dated 1966 in *Parts of a Body House Book*:

Be prepared: to have your brain picked
 to have the pickings misunderstood
 to be misunderstood
 to be mistreated whether your success increases or decreases
 to have detraction move with admiration—in step.

The piece concludes “NEVER justify yourself just do what you feel carry it strongly yourself.” In a 1999 letter to the MacArthur Foundation, she wrote, “I am not the only woman artist with a distinguished history who has no way to sustain her work, nor provide for her future.” Like so many artists sidelined by the art establishment, Schneemann is only beginning to get her due. Luckily, she had the foresight to take her legacy into her own hands. *Parts of a Body House Book* acts as a powerful proxy for the artist’s presence, especially now that she has passed away. It is a tangled, often convoluted house of her ideas, embodying the variety, complexity, and confusion of being a woman, of existing in a body, of existing in a society that regulates that body.

Kate Silzer is a writer living in New York City. Her work has appeared online at *Hyperallergic*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Artsy*, and *Interview Magazine*.

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