

**THE OPULENT TOWERS' FIRST
RESPONDERS
CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN'S
TERMINAL VELOCITY AND
DARK POND
RICHARD MOVE**

Dedicated to:
Paolo Canevari, Molissa Fenley and José Esteban Muñoz

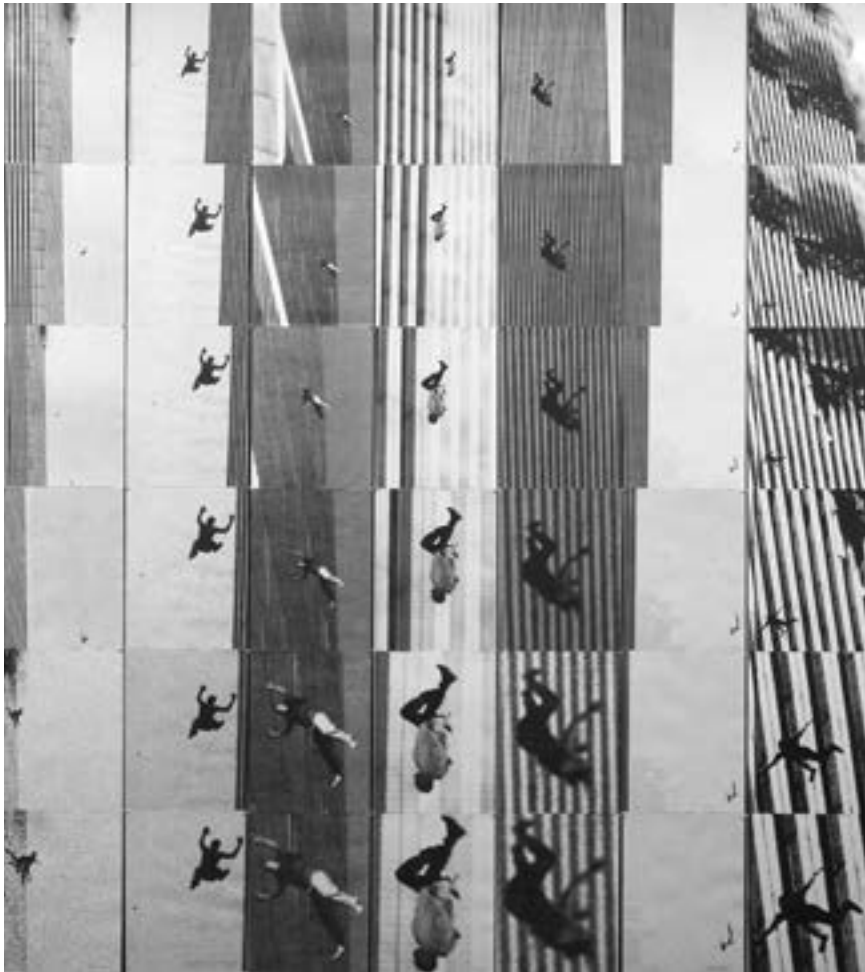
Carolee Schneemann's prolific body of work spans nearly six decades. In the late 50's, she incorporated techniques credited to her male contemporaries, like Rauschenberg, with a three dimensionality achieved by using heavily textural characteristics. In the early 60's, she began exhibiting the embodied self as political territory within the aesthetic. She's linked with Judson Dance Theater, Beats, Fluxus, Happenings, and more. However, she disavows association with such categorization.

In the late summer of 2008, Carolee invited me into her enchanted home and studio near New Paltz. She described the atmosphere of 1963. The air charged with "implacable resistance. I was called an exhibitionist, who really should be working in pornography, not really an artist...critics, gallerists...they, without exception, said my work is crap."¹ Carolee persisted to "reclaim the body from ...pop art, where the female body was mechanized and dead... And then to reintegrate that body from the traditions of art history with a vital materiality related to historical traditions, always determined by masculine aesthetics."

She is habitually labeled a Feminist Performance and/or Body Artist, despite generating substantially more works of film, video, painting, multi, inter, trans, across, through, over, under and inbetween media. As Carolee stated six years ago, "...for the past 24 years or so, I've been doing what I call these morphologies of form. They begin with some basic shape that I can make an affiliation with."

After 9/11, Carolee created *Terminal Velocity* and then *Dark Pond*.

A shamefully vague estimation of several hundred of the equally shamefully vague estimation of three thousand deaths on 9/11 were by falls from the opulent Twin Towers. Bodies rained down on lower Manhattan. Bodies trapped forever in time by the camera's eye and persistent image of collective, traumatic memory. Bodies caught between the



Carolee Schneemann, *Terminal Velocity* 2001-2005
 inkjet on paper
 96 x 84 inches overall; 35 pieces in all, 16 x 12 inches, each
 Copyright: ©C. Schneemann
 Courtesy of C. Schneemann and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York



Carolee Schneemann. *Dark Pond*, 2001-2005
 12 hand colored digital prints with watercolor and crayon
 59.25 x 63 inches overall; 12 pieces in all, 19.75 x 15.75 inches, each
 Copyright: ©C. Schneemann
 Courtesy of C. Schneemann and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York

infinite, picture perfect blue sky and soon to implode edifice. Bodies that externalize others inside the soon to collapse colossus. Bodies that symbolize heroic, horrific acts. Bodies that evoke a formation of self and identification with the other. Bodies demanding immediate recognition. Bodies borne not of fate, or fate's allusion of stasis, but bodies of action. We project upon these bodies anticipated expectations that may have nothing, and everything, to do with the victims. Bodies through which we speak, "It could have been me." Bodies through which we ask, "What would I have done?" Thinking "jump" affirms a sense of self, of free will and an act. A question is predicated on choice.

Carolee's cenotaph is "made from photographic newspaper images because that's the only way I could get closer and closer. I could enlarge it almost to infinity. I concentrated on...With a sense of, well, concentration as a consecration, to show every detail that was possible. To show a progression, almost a filmic progression through time, an implied time."

Carolee's implied time allows viewers to impose upon bodily images a sense of subjectivity and identification. An imposition upon bodies that may have no bodily remains.

In our global nightmare, bodies are forever resurrected by enlargement.

Carolee: "It is this permeable momentum of self into the image. We are inside the image..." She echoes Jacques Lacan's premise that, "the collective is nothing but the subject of the individual."² Carolee: "...their choice was to either to be incinerated or exploded out of the space where they were, because the spaces were blowing out of the windows."

The bodies of *Terminal Velocity* and *Dark Pond* live in the "or." Images enlarged almost, but not yet, to the breaking point of invisible pixilation. Details remain intact. Through repetition and reproduction, Carolee remaps the moment with narrative,

optical sensations filled with meter, momentum, motion and rhythm.

The formal lines in space with a vertical figure, surrounded on both sides by the equidistant columns of the opulent structure, bring the bodies incrementally closer. Carolee: "I'd been doing research on when the body falls at a certain speed. It is this permeable momentum of self into the potential image...It's a threshold on a certain dynamic that's so hard for the living to imagine."

Carolee's bodies repeat repetitive loops of mass media's incessant replay. Rather than dull the senses, these bodies plea for attentive meditation, as she reveals the intervals within a trajectory of time and space.

Carolee gives birth to a multitude of images from few sources with addition, duration and variation. She arrests the captured instant, proposing her own Lacan like, "before and afterness." She focuses attention to subject formation through the process of perception, by working between the before and after.

News reports, viral banter, street level conversations with friends, family, co-workers, colleagues, enemies, frenemies and total strangers, witness and document this "before and after."

Carolee offers Lacan's model of modulation of time, complete with the instant of the glance, the time for comprehending and a convulsive, conclusive moment of subject formation as, "temporal tension culminates here...it is the process of its release... the test of its logical necessity."³

Lacan's address of the inherent rhythm of psychoanalysis calls our attention to the breaks, stammers, stutters and breaks of tempi that occur at the subject and object interface. Like Lacan's temporal pressure cooker, Carolee illuminates moments of the identification of "self" and recognition of

the “other.” It is a temporality of suspended moments that Carolee’s bodies elucidate and magnify.

The artist intervenes with acts that reconstruct, re-imagine and reactivate memory. Her bodies are animated. Animism is hope. She creates an instance of hope.

Leaps from the opulent Twin Towers’ inferno hurtle me backward, forward and sideward to José Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*, and his “ecstatic unity of temporality- Past, Present and Future.”⁴ There is ecstasy in Carolee’s bodies.

Dark Pond is Carolee’s utopic gift. The same black and white photographs of *Terminal Velocity* provide a canvas for a grid of twelve new works upon which she adds crayon and watercolor with Romantic, deeply rich colors of grass-like greens, hot pinks, scarlet reds, golden yellows and sky blues. Carolee’s strokes of the brush offer soft, flowing lines and squiggly streaks of bold black in direct contrast to the Opulent Twin Towers’ perfect architectural symmetry, pre- implosion. Choice of colors, mediums and strategic placement create landscape with the horizon of that stunningly beautiful late summer morning...until...

Dark Pond creates newness from historicity with pastoral light, an idyllic pond of ethereal beauty with bodies in flight, steering attention away from the brutality of the before and after. Bodies beautifully re-captured in mid-air. Bodies in an aviary to safely land like other species. The archetypal dream-state of human flight becomes realized.

Carolee’s easily criticized transformation of bodies into the art spectacle of *Terminal Velocity*, is even more brazen and more easily criticized with *Dark Pond*. Carolee glorifies bodies in space, not as tragic, but also as beautiful specimens traveling through air, as the unthinkable is not yet here.

Carolee demands a sense of attunement to the presentness of the figures. She exhibits possibility with a palpable desire

to save her bodies by preserving and embalming them with digital animism, painterly color and the formalism of repetition. Each body is granted temporal transcendence and escape from horrific futures past. In the words of Muñoz, “for the purpose of critiquing the present (is) propelled for a desire for futurity.”⁵

Nowhere else in history have so many leaps from such heights as those made by Carolee’s bodies taken place in one space and time to be re- witnessed, and re- witnessed and re- witnessed by the world. The desperate bravery of jumping bodies exhibit agency, making their final gestures utopic, to once again follow the flowing, painterly thoughts of Muñoz. Carolee’s bodies, Herko, and other dancers seek to defy gravity, and transcend the limitations of the body, time and space, by attempting to take flight with leaps.

Leaps of faith.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from “Interview with Carolee Schneemann: August 13, 2008” Interview recorded by Marc Hilton and Richard Move. Transcription by Emily Smith.
2. Jacques Lacan, “Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty; A New Sophism.” *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 2.2 (1988), 19.
3. Ibid, 13.
4. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia-The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 12.
5. Ibid, 30.