

The Cunt Speaks

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It's great I can write about Carolee today, who was five minutes older than me. Ten years ten minutes. That's where she stands today. I can even be jealous of her. I read in my new favorite journal, *White Fungus*, about Rose Wachter, Carolee's 'angel-force' teacher, who taught her about poetry and the life of the mind when she was eleven or twelve.¹ Rose stuck a piece of paper in the young Carolee's pocket with the names of three colleges on it: Bard, Antioch and Oberlin, because she guessed her parents might not want her to go to college. Which was true. They wanted her to go to typing school. Rose fortified her student with that gesture. And Carolee applied and all those schools accepted her and she went to Bard. That's why I'm jealous. I didn't even get the note. I went to a school that wound up being pretty good, but it was a commuter working-class university and I walked those large left-over feeling halls in my bell bottoms feeling despair, because this didn't feel like college at all.

I think the last time I saw Carolee Schneeman was at the Met. I had gotten an invite from Katie Hubbard and A.K. Burns asking me to take part in the poetry parade. They're friends and it sounded cool, but what did 'poetry parade' mean, I wondered. The art world has definitely come over to poetry. It's like a thing. And it's also really into Carolee. Was *I* in deep respect for Carolee then? I mean cause I was not a full generation after. I was the half-generation. The generation after can be her worshipful babies. I'm more like an awkward younger peer. So in general (at least in the past) I was probably just as embarrassed for Carolee as I was for myself. The two of us always being dedicated to exposing ourselves somehow. I came to New York like the year after she was pulling the scroll out of her cunt in East Hampton. But I don't think I truly understood the import of it until at Fez in 2001, when Every Ocean Hughes was drunkenly trying to reprise it. She had a dress on and it seemed she kept bobbing in and out of her shot. An awkward take was so right and everyone was in on the joke.

I thought since I was nobody (when I arrived in New York) I should probably make a copy of myself. Like a recording of a *thing*. It seemed Warholian. I was not me, though I used their *stuff*. Nobody got it for a while. My insistence on myself as an entity, a body of information (named Eileen Myles) was as obnoxious as Carolee's naked body. Because I also kept forgetting I was female. Like I thought I could slip through as a man. Ha. My writing professor at U. Mass (Boston) had warned the class if some of us had gotten 'A's we should keep in mind that a female 'A' was not the same as a male one. So it was really still the same time and clearly *I* was to blame.

According to Carolee: 'The double knowledge was that you are female, so you're gifted, but it can't really have consequence.'² I love the generative implications of the word 'consequence'. Men give *birth* to each

¹ Ron Hanson, 'Double Knowledge: In Conversation with Carolee Schneemann', *White Fungus* (March 2019), pp. 76–129.

² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

other. Like the world is their cunt. I notice when a big book comes out, like the collected poems of Bertolt Brecht, the blurbs on the back are all by men. The one non-man one (mine) was tucked on the inside flap, which the editor insisted was the place of honour, though pretty invisible when you pulled it off the shelf. Almost presciently I had tried to get into my blurb that both Rae Armantrout and myself had stood one day over Brecht's grave in Berlin making jokes. It seems the only revenge the female artist can have on the legendary male is to laugh over his grave. I don't want Carolee dead. I'm only beginning to miss her. What's clear in the absence of her body is the clarity of her force. I love that Carolee threw *this* (ecce femina) in their face her whole female life. Looking at her from the prospect of another time in which one can operate with no gender or no fixed gender, Carolee held that iconic position, kind of an ur-female, which apart from whether it was true or not did very much reflect how she was spoken to – the generalities she was *offered* by men as to who or why or how or what women are – and she articulated her own account of those qualities in spades and performed as the quintessential woman in response to them. There are men who have cunts and persons of no fixed gender who have cunts and women who do not have cunts, but she was that redundant thing: a woman with a cunt, a woman who was only a cunt according to men and 'the culture at large', and so the extremely essentialised nature of a great deal of Carolee's work well I'm thinking of the work she is most known for was begged for by the male response, but nobody really expected her to answer not like that.

Later in life (like towards the end of hers) I heard this about Carolee: that she would often invite her assistant during workdays to take a nap. We're going to take a nap now, she announced and I didn't exactly ask but I think the implication was that they did it together, that when Carolee napped, her assistant napped too. On the same bed. I dunno but I picture that. It was part of the legend of working for this iconic female artist that the workday contained cosy moments which perforce they would do together. It was soft force here, but force all the same. Bodily force. The force of nature. The human gets tired. And it's time. It's time to act, it's time to rest. It was always dead serious with Carolee, with maybe a smile as the two curled up to continue the day's work.

So there's the entire body of information which is her art, but I think that *all* the different kinds of persistent thrusting was her career. Like when John Cage opted to only do percussion in music and he was told by a former teacher he would just be banging his head against the wall and he retorted that that would be his career, Carolee acceded rebelliously and righteously that her body would be hers and later or eventually or always (this is the best part) the abstraction of that body in effect produced a deity, an awkward one, an imperfect one, a messy one, but a very good very real god like Kali or any missing limbed deity that repetitively dances and waves their limbs, which are there and not there, and says I am *because* you deny me. I hold the negative space. I am gigantic and thus you are small. I am everything and you are nothing, man. You are covered with my ectoplasm and my juices. You will never be free of my mess. I built this world and in it you serve me.

And Carolee Schneemann was gorgeous. And it's an important part of the art. As all one's powers are. I was having dinner with my friend Honor the other night, who is exactly the ten minutes older than me that Carolee is. I have never seen someone with such a beautiful body is what she said when I told her I was writing about Carolee. It was just a fact. I think that's the point in so many ways. If you are blocking me for being female, I will thrust the magnificence of my armature in your face. That's the god touch. It's the performance of woman. It's war. In the centre of the art world, in galleries and museums, in letters, in film, on the podium, undressing, then covering herself with the drape of the model, then shoving that utilitarian glitch, the occupied female form to the side, becoming a naked female monstrosity reading, not posing but reading instead – a contradiction in terms – and if you don't think that's true, look at the percentage of the world that still believes that the best way to control women is to deny them literacy (rendering her only and forever just body) so the redundant double spectacle of the naked woman in the gallery, the gorgeous naked woman, who runs her own carny is that she is reading a text that she (nothing, nobody) wrote that she pulled out of her interior. The cunt speaks.

I said
even
if you
are
older

than
me
you
are
a monster
I spawned
you have
slithered
out of
the
excesses
and
vitalities
of the
'60s³

³ Carolee Schneemann, text from the artist's film *Kitch's Last Meal* (1975), typeset on a paper scroll (and recited) for the performance *Interior Scroll* at Telluride Film Festival, 4 September 1977.

(ugh, gross) and she loved them. She threw her love in their face. There is no violence. *Yet*. That act, to unravel the scroll from inside to *unroll my cunt*, that's what she's doing, making the inside out, kind of a trans act if you think of it, turning a cunt into a dick and, one more step, destroying art. If the capitalism of the art world is structured around patriarchy, if you will not accept little girl me, then I will just blow you, your everything, the fuck up.

In a poem to Kathy Acker a few years earlier she made these claims:

I say the serpent is my cunt
serpent tarantula vagina grip
the walls of this city are built of my cunt
snake roll of pottery
is roll of muscle of my cunt
the vessel is built of us the dish amphora desire
shrieks in the roll muscles which build the wall
folds this city sculpts the pillar the pyramid⁴

It's a halting and highly graphic piece. A mega poem. It's almost like everything. The city hence the world is produced by the shudders of her orgasm. And you can't take *that* back. What was the art world supposed to do *then* – take her 'in'. Inside what?

So yeah, I don't think I entirely gathered the extent to which the poetry parade at the Met was honouring Carolee. I lost my keys that night. That's what I mainly remember. Did I honour her then? I *liked* her. Our bodies had been around each other's for about forty years. Yeah I didn't *really* know her. But we're similar. Shameless in some way and no kids came out of either one of these cunts, hers or mine. She was making the world, why would she want to make *a baby*. This work was enough. Self referentiality. And horror. *Ecce Femina*. That's the stuff. I don't even think I registered she had a concurrent show at the Artist's Institute.⁵ Or maybe I've forgotten. Maggie [Nelson] reminded me in a text that Carolee was at our conversation at the Guggenheim, which kicked off the big Joan Mitchell retrospective that they subsequently pulled.

There's *always* something special about how a female artist gets honoured.

⁴ Carolee Schneemann, 'FOR THE BLACK TARANTULA', in Schneemann, *Cézanne, She Was A Great Painter (Unbroken Words to Women – Sexuality Creativity Language Art Istory)* (New York: Trespass Press, 1975), p. 8.

⁵ The 'Poetry Parade' was one of several public events organised to accompany a series of four exhibitions dedicated to Carolee Schneemann held at The Artist's Institute in New York, 13 February – 2 August 2015.

To do my part at the Met (in the poetry parade) I was to choose something from the list of approved art objects in their collection to essentially serenade. I chose the female pharaoh. Which was Carolee indeed. I knew something. I knew she was grand. She had become grand. The essence of grandeur I believe is to become something that never empties. She told Maggie: I'm some part of nature that just keeps pouring and pouring and pouring. It's stupendous revenge. She was rolling around that night on a wheelchair, being completely golden. Part was the Met, but so much was the radiance pouring out from her. She was enjoying being revered, the show referenced her original misunderstanding that Cézanne was *not* a man, but a woman (that 'anne') was at the heart of the event. Yes he had painted his wife, Madame Cézanne, for years. But Carolee would be getting his name wrong for all time. He was Carolee's bride tonight, another angel force. It was a huge female joke, the history of art in New York. It was the Met, it was her night. What's not to pour light, no longer body, different body, vase, globe, she was it. Still living, she had become essentialised by time.

And she's dead. And she's good at it. I saw *Mortal Coils* when it was installed at MoMA PS1. I poked my head in and its intensity was a surprise. The thick brown ropes were undulating. It was calmly fierce and strangely minimalist, an overwhelming unceasing enactment of power. It was the industry of life, a detached description of its momentary eternal force. It sure beats Kennedy's eternal flame. Because *seeing* this is permanent. Not the fact but the experience. I feel it now. Wow, I thought standing there. *That* is a great artist. She really gets death. I stepped out into the hall and her work is still in there, happening, falling, spooling, absolutely present yet historic, *ancient*. I mean – a little like the pharaoh too. But dirtier. Just not still. Not ever.