



# Carolee Schneemann

Further Evidence

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# Agitated Pixels: On Carolee Schneemann and Further Evidence—Exhibit A & B

By Soyoung Yoon

"A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain. Everything is movement, imbalance, crisis." In *Magnification* (1921), the filmmaker Jean Epstein writes of his love for close-ups in the cinema, of the magnification and dissolution of the actor's face into a mobile, animated mass. "The mouth gives way, like a ripe fruit splitting open. As if slit by a scalpel, a keyboard smile cuts laterally into the corner of the lips." The crux is the dissolution of frames, of framing, for a newfound intimacy with the image. Or, as the artist Carolee Schneemann might put it, "I didn't see the image—I was *in* it." Schneemann the painter speaks of an image as a collage of units of energy, units defined in terms of the time which it takes for the eye to move, to travel from one to another—units that she has more recently referred to as "agitated pixels," particularly in relation to televisual images. And the aim is to materialize, via various media, these units of energy into gestures: "gesticulations, gestation, source of compression (measure of tension and expansion), resistance, developing force of visual action." Emphasis is on the activity, the *process* of seeing, according to which the function of an image is not so much to represent as to collage, to color, to *gest*. As this essay addresses the works of Carolee Schneemann on view in the joint exhibition *Further Evidence—Exhibit A & B*, especially the critical but lesser-known installations of the eighties, nineties, and the present, I ask what is at stake in the magnifications of the image? What is the price of a pixel?

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## Exhibit A:

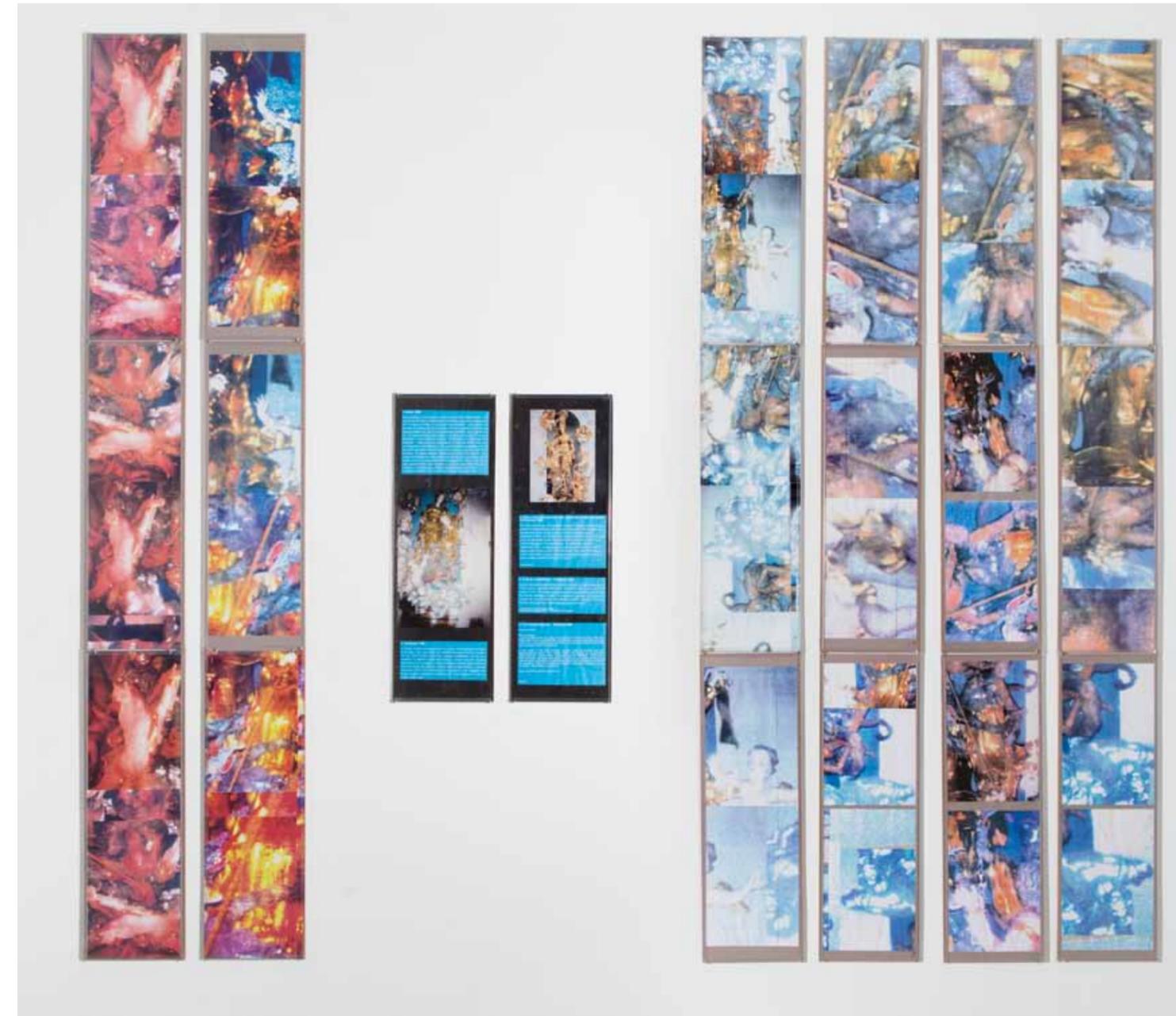
At P•P•O•W, the rarely exhibited multi-media installation *Plague Column: Known/Unknown* (1995-96) defines the critical thrust of the exhibition *Further Evidence*. The title of the installation refers to a Viennese plague column [*pestsäule*] from the 17th century, a Baroque monument dedicated to the Virgin Mary, where the bubonic plague is represented as a witch, impaled by an angel's spear. The end of an epidemic is imagined as the conquering not only of the pagan other, but also of an unruly and malignant femininity. And Schneemann draws attention to how the witch has been (de)formed, as a figure both feared and desired, underscoring the repressed erotics of the sculptor's hands, which shaped the witch's breasts "with serpents escaping from her nipples" and the base of the monument as "clouds of breasts, penises, and labia." *Plague Column: Known/Unknown* asks: is there a continuity between this representation of disease and our contemporary imagination about cancer, a link between witch hunts and modern medicine with its warfare model of cancer treatment? Is there a continuity of form, of movement—and of ideology—between the waves and swirls of the 17th century plague column and microscopic representation of cancer cells as medical data?

In *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1988), Susan Sontag had famously argued against the tendency to interpret illness as a sign (e.g., a curse, a punishment, or a blessing), projecting upon it punitive or sentimental fantasies, fantasies with dire consequences in the treatment of the so-called modern plagues of cancer or AIDS. Sontag especially critiques the proliferation of medicine's military metaphors, according to which the body is a battlefield, illness an enemy: "[the military metaphor] over-mobilizes, it over-describes, and it powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill." There is a necessity then "to calm the imagination, not to incite it," to literalize and see. In *Plague Column: Known/Unknown*, Schneemann appropriates and amplifies the microscopic view. Throughout the installation, the cancer cell is a repetitive motif, appearing as a series of photographic wall panels or a floating sculptural constellation of oranges with hypodermic needles stuck into their thick pitted rinds. The cells are magnified; the heat of their image is raised, through the intensification of cellular lines, textures, weights, and colors. In the case of the "cell blow-ups" for the panels, Schneemann describes how the process of magnification—of photocopying, enlarging, and enlarging again, via "the mechanical 'eye'/lens" of the laser-printing machine—animates the image of cells as an image for "the configuring surface of ben day dot, of pixel to become forms of cells themselves": an abstract expressionism of cancer cells. The effect is of an exhortation to grasp the materiality of the cell forms, to see the cells as cells.

Schneemann emphasizes the gendered nature of medicine's military metaphors and the repressed libidinal economy of "the war on cancer." She also attends to the supposedly separate domain of nurses, of family, of friends and lovers, of the personal, the rawly-emotional, and the affective, through the collaged texts of a "plague column report" included in the photographic wall panel or the montage of a looped video playing on four TV monitors buried amidst a mound of latex breasts and vein-like

plastic tubings. The video begins over and over again with the sharp, jagged clatter of an ever-growing pile of empty vials and syringes, then the insertion of a needle in a doctor's office cut to the penetration of a penis during sexual intercourse. As the critic Eleanor Heartney wrote, "the effect was to bring back the pulsing, bleeding corporeal body that medical terminology obscures." And I recall in Schneemann's "plague column report" the description of a wince: "She could always make a doctor flinch when he reminded her of the urgency of a mastectomy: 'My breast is an erotic organ—as your penis is—I'm keeping it with me.'"

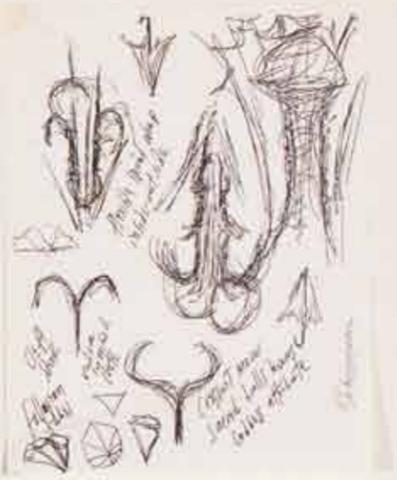
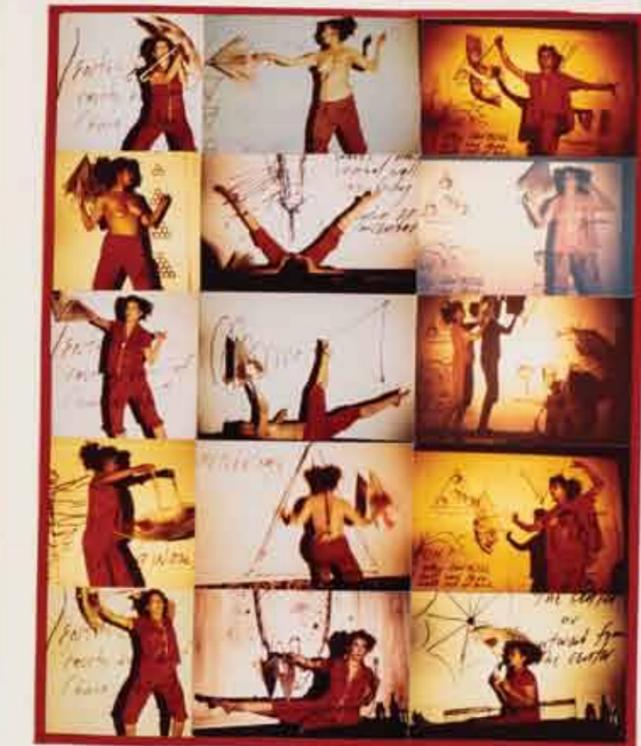
In *Plague Column: Known/Unknown*, Schneemann's feminist critique consists in part in how she relates the war on cancer to the witch hunts of the 15th-17th centuries, which were not only instances of mass hysteria, but a long, violent history of the struggle to control women's bodies, to regulate and restrict their labor, knowledge, and desire. As part of the exhibition on display at P•P•O•W, there are also maquettes of an earlier work, *Venus Vectors* (1986-88), a sculpture of ten plexiglass panels, structured like a star or the spokes of a wheel, which presents on its panels an iconography of V shapes that Schneemann displays as recurring derivations of the "archaic, most primary symbol of the female... the simple, incised vulvic vector." Schneemann collected the V shapes—from the human body, from snow crystals, branches, molecules, from an umbrella, a tent, alphabet characters, and a bicycle—for a performance entitled *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology* (1982-86), the documentation of which would be shown on two monitors built into one of *Venus Vectors'* panels. The performance sought to rediscover a suppressed history of forms indexed to the female body. *Venus Vectors* incorporates these forms and seeks to present them in a new spatial configuration that foregrounds the tactile, bodily aspect of viewing. The sculpture was positioned at eye-level on a six-foot circular platform; as the viewers walk around it, they perceive the thick layering of images from one panel to the next as well as the refraction of Schneemann's moving figure on the monitors flickering in and out of the dense superimposition. By radiating outwards, branching out and layering over and over again, *Venus Vectors* inverts the topography of the archetypal Pandora's Box and its "tortuous male tradition of vaginal terrors": "[the viewers] move around, look into space which is not phallicized, does not reiterate a male realm of projective castration or idealization."



*Plague Column: Known/Unknown* (1995-96)

The collage is a complex visual vocabulary. It features numerous small sketches and drawings, many of which are annotated with handwritten text. Key elements include:

- Photographs:** A central grid of 12 photographs showing a person in a red outfit in various poses, some with large fabric wings or structures. Other photos show people in conversation or in dynamic poses.
- Sketches:** A wide variety of hand-drawn forms, including anatomical studies of the torso and limbs, abstract geometric shapes, and organic, branching structures. Some sketches are labeled with words like "Vegetable", "Vibration", "Vesica", "Venus", and "Vestibular".
- Text Notes:** Handwritten notes in various colors (black, red, yellow) are scattered throughout, providing context or descriptions for the visual elements. Some notes include phrases like "The center of the earth", "Vegetable plant grows spiral - just around", "Vibration", "Venus", "Vestibular", and "Venus".
- Color Coding:** The collage uses yellow and red outlines and highlights to group related elements together.



*Handwritten notes in red and yellow ink, including the word "SCORER" and other illegible text.*

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN "VENUS VECTOR VOCABULARY" SCORE FOR THE PERFORMANCE "FRESH BLOOD - A DREAM MORPHOLOGY"



*Precarious*, Tate Liverpool Installation (2009)

## Exhibit B:

*Venus Vectors*, I propose, offers a conceptual infrastructure to Schneemann's kinetic theaters of the 1960's and '70s. It operates as a perpetual-motion machine that condenses within it the structural dynamic of a work such as *Meat Joy* (1964) and "its propulsion toward the ecstatic," or the more explicitly politicized *Snows* (1967) and its projection of Vietnam atrocity images via dual projectors swung 360 degrees to bring about "a collision and absorption of images like the collisions of our bodies." *Venus Vectors* also anticipates the dynamic of Schneemann's more recent, large-scale, immersive, multi-channel video installations, such as *Devour* (2003-04) or *Precarious* (2009), on view at Galerie Lelong for this exhibition. In particular, *Precarious* was commissioned by the Tate Liverpool in 2009 and is on view in New York City for the first time. And at Galerie Lelong, the focus of the exhibition *Further Evidence* shifts to multi-layered movements of the social, collective body, where "the war on cancer" is folded into "the war on terror."

*Devour* is a multi-channel video installation with two video projections and four TV monitors. It was developed out of an earlier installation *More Wrong Things* (2001), where fourteen TV monitors were suspended amidst a gnarled web of wires and cables. In *Devour*, the images contained within the box of the TV monitors are juxtaposed with the projected images on the screen, as if the latter had spawned the former, encrusted in their shells, miniaturized versions of the magnified images that not so much throb as blink from the bright glare of the monitors. Schneemann had initially envisioned *More Wrong Things* and *Devour* as a fractured reflection of Dutch still-life painting of the 17th-18th centuries ("a Vermeer"), highlighting the luminosity of the paintings' depiction of domestic intimacy, amidst the various wars and turmoils of the global market. In *Devour*, the looped video cuts back and forth from three seconds of footage of recent war zones to three seconds of footage of the everyday and the intimate. As Schneemann describes it, all of the images in the looped video, their rhythms and durations, are bound together by the dissolution into "agitated pixels," as in the magnification of the cancer cells in *Plague Column: Known/Unknown: a contemporary danse macabre*.

In the film *Viet Flakes* (1966), included as a component of *Snows*, Schneemann created the effect of "agitated pixels" by using magnifying glasses to move in and out of focus, in fitful rhythms, within the Vietnam atrocity images clipped from newspapers and magazines. It is an experience of horrifying farsightedness, a straining of eyes and ears in a vertigo-inducing play of here and elsewhere, as "abstract motions and shapes converge into the terrified frozen expression of people burning, dragged, drowning." As the art historian Kenneth White suggests, Schneemann's Vietnam-era works ask, "which is worse: that the visceral imagery is too close and too many for one to attain coherence, or that the fragments one can discern in their specific ordeals and pleasures, are so far away, so distant, in their mediation as to only evoke one's inconsequence...?" However, in the video of *Devour*, the movement of the "agitated pixels" is not so much a flickering in and out of focus as a leveling. It imbues the magnified gestures of the everyday and the intimate—the close-up of a straight razor shave, a cat scratching bark from a tree, a baby suckling at a breast, a bird flapping its wings in flight, an

airplane decreasing its altitude in descent—with the same menace as the footage of recent war zones. And the effect of leveling, of a dissolution into an eerie, oneiric flow of the same restlessness and apprehension, the self-same agitation, is further enhanced by the tonal inversions of the footage rendered in negative as well as the sound collage and its reverberation effects—fragments of human voices or music caught as but aftereffects amidst the buzzing, the crackling, the whirr. Different wars, different media: a different affective economy.

In *Precarious*, the leveling effect and its atmosphere of menace is achieved via a motorized mirror system, co-designed by Schneemann and James Schaeffer, through which the projected images, at a slow pace, scan back and forth, back and forth, across the room, enfolding and engulfing it, through a series of superimpositions and dissolves. And the montage of *Precarious's* looped video intertwines different modes through which various bodies are restrained and made to dance under duress: for instance, a widely-circulated video of the dancing cockatoo Snowball or the CPDRC [Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center] Dancing Inmates, a clip of the dancing bear from Sergei Eisenstein's film *Strike* (1925), or a sequence from Schneemann's solo performance in *Cat Scan* (1988). How to perceive the cockatoo's seeming delight in dancing, that is, in bobbing his head and tapping his feet to music, presumably the first non-human animal to be recognized with the capacity to synchronize its movements to a beat? How to grasp the apparent enjoyment of thousands of prisoners in their orange jumpsuits performing the choreographed movements of Michael Jackson's 1983 music video *Thriller* as a daily routine for exercise and rehabilitation? And how to comprehend the fact of their dancing as images, dancing not only from within cages, but from within the frames of our vision? And what to make of their mediated existence as viral entities, to be clicked at and shared, each click the propagation of their necessity to dance and to dance more? The ambivalence of this sight, of the intertwining of bodies and images, is crystallized in the dissolve between the dancing bear, chained at nose and neck, and Schneemann, dancing blindfolded, unbinding herself from a length of red fabric.

I'd argue that the effect of leveling in *Devour* and *Precarious* addresses "the continuous, low-level fear" that the philosopher Brian Massumi has recently described as a key aspect of our contemporary mediascape. It is a fear that is not so much an emotion as "a habitual posture, an almost bodily bracing for the next unforeseen blow, a tensing infusing every move and every moment with a vague foreboding"; it is fear as "the very medium of everyday life." A fear, then, where an emergency alert is also your wake-up call, a cheerful applause at the JFK airport sounds like gunfire, and the exhortation to see is all too quickly, with cursory and deadly speed, deflected into an almost reflexive need to call-out ("if you see something, say something"), to attack, arrest, detain, or to shoot. And it is at this level of the everyday and the intimate, of the nervous system itself, we can situate the more recent work of Schneemann's "agitated pixels" and their *danse macabre*, critiques of not simply representations of the female body, but also of the increasing conditioning of our affective comportment.



## Further Evidence – Exhibit A

# P·P·O·W

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*Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology* (1983/2004)

front cover top:

Still from *Precarious* (2009)

front cover bottom:

*Fresh Blood – A Dream Morphology* (1983/2004)

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## Further Evidence – Exhibit B

# GALERIE LELONG

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Still from *Precarious* (2009)