



Stephanie Hanes (MFA Ceramics 2017),
Will It Ever Be Enough, 2015, stoneware,
 oil paint, plaster, epoxy, 64 × 19 × 12 in.

Notes: Carolee Schneemann in Real Time

Anne West

Carolee Schneemann, a pioneer of 1960s feminist art, began her talk "How Things Go Wrong" (RISD Auditorium, March 22, 2016), lying concealed under a layer of blankets, waving two small American flags. Then she struggled to her feet—with assistance—taking her place on the stage like a resurrected version of *Liberty Leading the People*. It seemed apparent at this moment that she used this struggle to freedom to rewind our memory to ideals now covered over by noise. Even in her late seventies, she is still willing to challenge the limits of her body, as well as our expectations. Age and physical frailty are no impediment to being a sensitive receptor as she carves space for more complex embodiments of human, and especially female, display.

Schneemann is an independent artist and intellectual fueled by care and affection. Her extemporaneous talk (and Q & A) was full of vitality, matter-of-fact humor, and an organic generosity that continually brought awareness down to that part of ourselves that is bigger than ourselves. The stage became an active space—a place where she and the audience could meet. It was a platform to experiment, raise questions, unsettle, and realign attention.

Living with dark shadows benefits her she says. With honest confrontation (doubt and conviction) she looks directly into the face of horror, suffering, destruction, and fragility. She is also a huntress of beauty. These opposites beat in tension in her split-screen installations, each provoking an angle on our humanity.

At one moment with straightforward affirmation, she reminded us of what balance looks like, striking the pose of a Neolithic Cycladic goddess. She crossed her arms, displaying a posture of harmony—a demonstration of what female-centered symmetry looks like. She has this way of sourcing from a lineage of feminine power, drawing links with history, and acting as a protagonist who knows how to establish ground where a center is lacking. She is confident, self-determined, and never demeaning.

School is part of the real world, she tells her audience. And in the real world it is important to be tenacious. Don't accept rejection, she insists. The practice of making work is unstable, unconfined, demanding ongoing investment. Keep applying for grants—even if it means reapplying sixteen times for a Guggenheim like she did—she counsels her younger audience!

Despite what the men have been telling her and the continual dismissal of (even contempt for) her work, she persists. Never hesitant to assert that she is a female, a body with a womb, Schneemann showed her vagina paintings (still unsold) and then responded to a student who reminded her that she is best known for pulling a scroll out of her vagina. Trespassing boundaries and disturbing conventions doesn't reduce these actions to theatrical spectacle. The practice of performance is deliberate. She reasserts that using her body for performance is arduous. It demands endurance and discipline. Because of this she denounces efforts to appropriate her work. It is not open for somatic theft.

Our thanks to Patricia Phillips, Dean of Graduate Studies, who invited and supported Schneemann's visit to RISD at every level, and whose own tenure at RISD embodied values of honesty and steadfastness in common with her friend Carolee.

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Francesca Krisli (MDes Interior Architecture 2016),
The Wing Project, 2015, paper