Carolee Schneemann's Fuses as erotic self-portraiture.

The birth of the women's movement across Europe, the UK and North America during the 1960s had an impact on the New York art scene in which Carolee Schneemann played a major part. Alongside her contemporaries Meredith Monk, Rachel Rosenthal, Yvonne Rainer and Yoko Ono, Schneemann's films and performance work became a catalyst for the emergence of feminist consciousness in this sphere. Schneemann was a forerunner of performance art and new media installations before there were terms in place to describe such work. However, up to 1968, women artists working in performance were marginalized in both the realms of production and exhibition, thus little critical attention was paid to such works. It was not until art works by this group of female artists shifted the "collective thinking about art" that the imbalance in the New York art world began to change. (1)

[Illustration Omitted]

Schneemann's particular experiences of marginalization extended beyond the visual and performance art circles of 1960s New York. She was also struggling both against sexism within the avant-garde film movement she contributed to and against neglect by feminist film theorists.

This paper suggests it was Schneemann's emphasis on the primacy of the female body as tool of feminist resistance that marginalized her work amongst such theorists. At the time, the newly emerging feminist consciousness in film theory was uncertain how to incorporate the sexualized, erotic and self-produced image provided by Schneemann. For most feminist theorists, it was indistinguishable from the objectified female image actively being resisted.

David James locates the unique position feminist film criticism found itself in during women's liberation struggles in the 1960s and 1970s as one with a "double relation" to cinema. Women's particular exploitation in cinema "corresponded not to their exclusion from the filmic but to hyper-exposure within it ... a use that was thought ipso facto to objectify women and to repress their own sexuality." (2) In light of this, Schneemann's film Fuses was "defused and diffused by the terror (her) vision evoked." (3)

Early feminist audiences did not meet the overt sexuality of a female subject of Fuses warmly. Rich (4) reflects that during one particularly heated screening audiences were outraged by ... Carolee for giving head ... out there on the screen. The practice was ruled subservient and antifeminist. A woman, any woman, performing a blowjob, bigger than life, on film, was not yet acceptable ... The fact that Carolee was simultaneously "actor" and director was lost on [the] crowd.
What is troubling is that traces of these early strains of feminist thought have shaped and created our present perspectives, and can still be found operating in contemporary feminist film theory. The misreading of Schneemann's work, then and now, indicates that early influential critical positions need to be reassessed for what they left out.

Reflecting on early feminist films from the 1960s, and on Carolee Schneemann's film Fuses in particular, I wish to propose a generic category indexing a particular trajectory within the history of feminist film practice. The proposed category—erotic self-portraiture—describes self-reflexive films in which the artist’s body figures prominently as an erotic subject. Although there are many instances of erotic self-portraiture present in the corpus of feminist cinema, it remains an under-explored area within film theory. In outlining the parameters of this category I hope to provide a frame for the productive engagement with female-authored films, which may have been overlooked in the formation of the feminist film canon.

There are three central elements that define erotic self-portraiture as a generic category. First, such films are self-shot, thus freeing themselves from the control of an external, potentially misogynistic eye. Second, erotic self-portraiture asserts the presence of the female body as a site of pleasure and desire—as something to be celebrated, not merely consumed. Third, is the use of hand processing techniques (5) within such films, effectively inserting the embodied presence of the artist into the act of production. (6) Through an investigation of Fuses, I wish to suggest that erotic self-portraiture provides a crucial intervention into both conventional cinematic representations of female sexuality and the discourse surrounding such representations within feminist film theory.

At the 1967 Cannes Film Festival Carolee Schneemann screened her film Fuses to both critical acclaim and public outcry. Fuses is a twenty-two minute lyrical film about sexual intimacy. The film explores sexuality from Schneemann's perspective as both subject and filmmaker. The first film in Schneemann's Autobiographical Trilogy, it has been described as "a new copulation between the filmic and the erotic." (7) In Fuses, Schneemann combines photographic footage of sex between her and her partner James Tenny with layers of collaged paper, painting and tinting added directly to the celluloid. Her texturally mediated representation of sex sensually evokes a complex experience of cinematic eroticism. The combination of light, color, abstract and photographic images challenges standard representations of sex in dominant cinema, promoting an alternative erotic cinematic language. The film is both a feminist response to patriarchal representations of female sexuality and, as part of the 1960s avant-garde, a critique of dominant cinema.

Throughout its forty-year history Fuses has been alternately celebrated and censored, constantly finding itself at the center of intense criticism as obscene and narcissistic. In response to such negative reactions, Schneemann has questioned whether her works of art, film and performance are censored and seen as obscene because they are "self-shot, without an external controlling eye." (8) She further questions whether it is her presentation of her body as "a locus of autonomy, pleasure, desire" as well as her insistence that she can be "both image and image maker," that has produced contestations over her work. (9) These observations outline clearly the key characteristics of erotic self-portraiture. Schneemann recognizes that what is found most obscene in her work is the lack of an external gaze. She acknowledges the contentious space she holds as both the image and image-maker, highlighting how this position challenges the binary opposition in conventional film theory between an active voyeuristic spectator and passive object displayed on screen.

Schneemann notes that her decision to place her body as the central focus of her work was inspired by the fact that she "was permitted to be an image but not an image maker creating her own self-image." (10) Being an image and not the author of the image illustrates a crucial distinction between object and subject and that Schneemann explores extensively in her work. Schneemann alludes here to the bind women face as the primary object of representation by male artists while never being accorded the chance to enact their own subjectivities in art practice. In response, Schneemann positions herself "not as sex object, but as willed and erotic subject, commanding her own image." (11) This distinction between sex object and active erotic subject reveals the motivation behind Schneemann's extensive use of erotic self-portraiture in her films.

There are several questions that arise when the filmmaker places herself in the dual role of author of the image and the image represented. The most pressing question is: what is the difference between the terms sex object and willed erotic subject? And in the particular case of cinematic erotic self-portraiture, it must be asked how an artist expresses this distinction formally in cinema? At the beginning of an article on censorship, Schneemann states:

Bullets of projection are aimed into our bodies: trajectories of phallic erotic apprehension produce our 'wounds.' A smoking gun grasped in that frozen hand. There’s a cock/dick tracing this Saturday Night Special directed at our "privates." Projection deforms perception of the female body. (12)

This passage points to the cinematic production of the "sex object" Schneemann positions her work against. She defines here a "sex object" that is projected on to film through the visual language of patriarchal desire with the purpose of consumption/spectacle/climax/ejaculation. Schneemann demonstrates how language, desire and images combine in the multiple manifestations of the word projection: the film's projection intermingles with the projection of male desire. For Schneemann these combined projections do not accurately portray the female human body, they deform it.

Despite the fact that much of Schneemann's early work includes her naked image, her films and
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Fuses holds at its very center an implicit challenge to the successfully subverts the triad male gaze of dominant cinema. As was previously discussed, intent to examine the avant-garde, Fuses offers an example of an alternative cinema that could effectively remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'. While it was not Mulvey's (23) Mulvey believes alternative cinema's resistance to the tri-subjugation of the female image into its camera into its female image is thus always represented as passive in classical narrative cinema. Mulvey notes mostly the model and the muse, not the author or artistic visionary. Both Mulvey and Schneemann reaffirm that up until the late 1960s and mid 1970s women were observation that women were permitted to be an image but not the producer of their own image. as bearer, not maker, of meaning.” (22) This observation reflects Schneemann's previously cited woman is "a Laura Mulvey posits in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that within patriarchal culture woman is "a signifier for the male Other" and that in this role of signifier she is "tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning." (22) This observation reflects Schneemann's previously cited observation that women were permitted to be an image but not the producer of their own image. Both Mulvey and Schneemann reaffirm that up until the late 1960s and mid 1970s women were mostly the model and the muse, not the author or artistic visionary.

Mulvey constructs the spectatorial gaze as a male gaze that objectifies a female image. This female image is thus always represented as passive in classical narrative cinema. Mulvey notes the need for alternatives to this Hollywood narrative model, an alternative that would "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics.” (23) Mulvey believes alternative cinema's resistance to the tri-subjugation of the female image could effectively remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'. While it was not Mulvey's intent to examine the avant-garde, Fuses offers an example of an alternative cinema that successfully subverts the triad male gaze of dominant cinema. As was previously discussed, Fuses holds at its very center an implicit challenge to the desirous gaze, offering an active, desirous female gaze back to the audience both on screen and in the production of the film. In Fuses, Schneemann suggests a definition of the erotic that is absent in most contemporary images concerning the body, a definition of the erotic that is representative of the unconstrained, fluid experiences of pleasure, that some may link with the term jouissance (13). An editorial on Schneemann's work in an underground New York City weekly written from the late 1960s defines the erotic as "that which somehow moves you out of yourself ... You are no longer you, just as in moments of orgasm, climax, highest of the highs, you are more and less than yourself because something or nothing is affecting you too much." (14) This definition of the erotic greatly contrasts the same author's view of porn as something "fraternal, comforting, allowing you to remain you and look at something else." (15) A distinction is made here between something removed from oneself and something that has the capacity to undo the boundaries of the self in the face of an overwhelming sense of pleasure. This definition of the erotic indicates the presence of an experience that exceeds the limits of an individual's discursive position, or again, something akin to the idea of jouissance. Through this definition, a distinction between "sex object" and "erotically willed subject" is revealed.

In Fuses, Schneemann does not offer direct stimulation for a voyeuristic audience. The film's sexual imagery is intercut with shots of her cat (who she acknowledges as the voyeur of the film), with shots of a flaccid penis, Schneemann running on a beach, her lover driving in a car, abstract textures, colors and forms, all evoking the sensuous but not the sexually objectified. B. Ruby Rich describes Fuses as "a devastatingly erotic, transcending the surfaces of sex to communicate its true spirit, its meaning as an activity for herself and, quite accurately, for women in general." (16) In her description of Fuses, Rich observes how the film exceeds the limits of structured cinematic codes, acknowledging Schneemann's direct challenge to the dominant forms of representing women erotically in film. The film displays a boldness, curiosity and enthusiasm around both the desires and pleasures of sex from a female perspective. The film celebrates the representation of erotic experience as a worthy subject of cinema. The pleasures of sex are diffused throughout the film, subverting our expectations of the mechanics of heterosexual sex. As a heteronormative vision of sex in dominant cinema does not seriously take into account female pleasure, and at best provides a very distant approximation of the complexities of female desire, Schneemann's vision of sex is potentially more accommodating to women. (17) Fuses proffers a filmic space where the sexualized female object turns into a willing subject deriving pleasure from actively creating her own erotic cinematic image. Schneemann is not posing for the desire or pleasure of a male audience. Rather, her desire in making the film was both as an intimate exploration of herself and to open up the boundaries that North American culture imposes on sexual pleasure. Aware of the taboo power of the erotic female image, Schneemann employs it as a means of celebrating and liberating female pleasure from a dominant male gaze. (18) Through this erotic self-portrait, Schneemann creates a new language, a new economy of visual representation.

Pioneering feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, E. Ann Kaplan, Annette Kuhn and Mary Ann Doane wrote about what David James has called the hyper-exposure of sexualized female imagery within cinema at the emergence of the feminist film movement (19). Through this erotic self-portrait, Schneemann creates a new language, a new economy of visual representation. performances critique the standard framed sex object. Her representation of female sexuality in Fuses does not adhere to any particular code of mainstream film or art. Her image is not contained by an identifiable male gaze. She does not portray the filmic image of herself as submissive or performing to please the audience. She is part of a sexual union, represented equally amongst two desiring subjects. The camera does not privilege one lover's point of view or pleasure over the other.

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Pioneering feminist film critics such as Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, E. Ann Kaplan, Annette Kuhn and Mary Ann Doane wrote about what David James has called the hyper-exposure of sexualized female imagery within cinema at the emergence of the feminist film movement (19). This early writing moved away from examining films containing erotic female bodies, irrespective of who made the films and what sort of politics informed them. Sexualized female images were seen as objectifying on all accounts. Taken to its extremes this line of thinking hinted towards a removal of the sexual female image from cinema. Rich locates this problematic turn in feminist film theory as an “overvaluation of the production aspect of cinema” and a “misassumption that cinematic representation is embedded at the level of production and, once there, remains permanent and inviolable.” (20) The crucial point to take from Rich is that such an analysis reinforces the view that, “[w]oman is absent on the screen and she is absent in the audience.” (21) The paradox here is that in negating or suppressing the female image from cinema, these theories silenced and disempowered women from being active participants in the filmmaker/spectator dialogue even more. Women were becoming critical of the dangers of objectification but at the risk of removing a female imaginary from the screen. This paradox still rests uncomfortably on the minds of feminist film theorists; however, erotic self-portraiture suggests a mode of production that through its self-conscious actualization of the female erotic challenges the dangers of objectification in dominant cinema.

Laura Mulvey posits in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that within patriarchal culture woman is "a signifier for the male Other" and that in this role of signifier she is "tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning." (22) This observation reflects Schneemann's previously cited observation that women were permitted to be an image but not the producer of their own image. Both Mulvey and Schneemann reaffirm that up until the late 1960s and mid 1970s women were mostly the model and the muse, not the author or artistic visionary.

Mulvey constructs the spectatorial gaze as a male gaze that objectifies a female image. This female image is thus always represented as passive in classical narrative cinema. Mulvey notes the need for alternatives to this Hollywood narrative model, an alternative that would "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics.” (23) Mulvey believes alternative cinema's resistance to the tri-subjugation of the female image could effectively remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'. While it was not Mulvey's intent to examine the avant-garde, Fuses offers an example of an alternative cinema that successfully subverts the triad male gaze of dominant cinema. As was previously discussed, Fuses holds at its very center an implicit challenge to the desirous gaze, offering an active, desirous female gaze back to the audience both on screen and in the production of the film.
The dual function of image and author explored by Schneemann in Fuses forces a reconsideration of the male gaze. As Fuses does not work in a conventional narrative, the gaze thus functions differently from that of its narrative counterpart. Fuses subverts the three types of gazes outlined by Mulvey (that of the camera, the male actor and the male spectator) (24) in favor of an integrated plurality of gazes. The gaze of the characters looking at each other in Fuses does not privilege a male gaze over a female or vice versa. Similarly, the gaze of the camera in the film—controlled by Schneemann filming Tenney or Tenney filming Schneemann—does not allow for a single identification within the film. David James notes in his examination of the film that; 

Schneemann made her own vision, one that addresses the phallocentric imbalance ... Thus reproduction of gender in power relations in the profilmic or in the control of the apparatus was avoided, as was phallocratic distribution of roles—the male as the scopophilic subject and the female as the object. (25)

Schneemann's filmic language opposes the spectatorial male gaze by providing a polyvalent unidentifiably gendered gaze of her and her partner. This opposition is further reinforced by the uncertainty of who or what you are viewing when watching the film.

While Mulvey's article is a germinal and historic account of sexism in narrative systems of cinema, the proliferation of her conception of the male gaze has produced some problematic discourse that disavows the production of meaning occurring at the site of spectatorship. Equally problematic within discussions of the gaze outside of Mulvey, is the restriction of spectatorship to male spectators. A double negative appears, discouraging women from having agency both at the level of production and reception. My negotiations with Mulvey's influence on feminist film theory lead me to question what is lost or marginalized when female desire, sexuality and bodily experience are not considered in critical feminist discourse, spectatorship and film practice. I believe it is the loss of embodied experience in theory that is the most problematic aspect of this double negative.

Reviewing the characteristics of erotic self-portraiture, I would like to argue that there is an additional gaze that Mulvey does not include in her discussion. Mulvey's omission of this gaze I believe is for a good reason as it would say rarely exists in narrative cinema, which was her primary focus in the article. The additional gaze I wish to discuss is not direct but rather implicit within the production process. It is a gaze produced by the filmmaker when visually altering the film through hand processes. This gaze, located in the production of the image, is enabled by the filmmaker physically altering the image. In doing so the filmmaker is implicating her body in the realm of film production. This additional, tactile, meditational gaze has liberating possibilities for the feminist artist and spectator alike.

The use of abstract, non-photographic images in Fuses frees the viewer from any one conclusive reading, allowing creative free will to produce multiple connections and inferences. For example, the continuous flow of patterned, viscous, red paint blackened and baked on to the celluloid can suggest a variety of associations for the viewer depending on how they read this combination of colors and texture sensually. The extreme close up of skin and bodies outside of a gendered referent also affects how the viewer reads the sex acts being represented. These filmic manipulations produce a literal blurring of boundaries between photographic and abstract images or between abstract and experimental formal tendencies. By adding and taking away from the images, infusing them with collaged and painted responses to the existing footage, the filmmaker is able to express desires and visions unmediated by the camera. This gaze creates an awareness of the artifice of the medium and the camera and distances the audience through the acknowledgment of such artifice. At the end of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey argues that to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics" can remove any satisfaction gained by the 'male gaze'. (26) Fuses succeeds in doing this through its pluralization of gazes and its hand manipulation of the film. 

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Schneemann's visually expressed pleasure in Fuses gives permission to see and be seen. (27) This is both the permission to see a female nude outside the realm of the 'sex object,' the permission to see her genitals up close, her pleasure, and the permission to see Schneemann as the erotically willed subject creating her own self-image. Schneemann sums this argument up well when she states: "I establish my body as a visual territory ... The body may remain erotic, sexual, genital, but it is as well volit; written over in a text of stroke and gesture discovered by my creative female will." (28) What is important to emphasize here is that the body is seen as an active, image-producing, erotic will. She is not a sex object but a willed erotic subject.

My enduring response to Fuses includes a deep respect for the lucid honesty of the work, its unconventional formal techniques and its attempt to disrupt moral codes and taboos. Kristine Stiles notes that Schneemann "has altered ways of seeing by refusing to accept the patriarchal world of autonomous objects and experiences and by insisting on a new method of sight that asserts the contingency of, and fuses, bodies and things." (29) The contingent nature of the at times indistinguishable bodies in Fuses reveals Schneemann's refusal to remain within the static roles of active male seducer and passive female receptor. The impression one is left with through the film is a blending of parts and acts, movements and desires, into a blur or fusion. 

At a surface level, Fuses presents explicit images of Schneemann's lovemaking. However, the
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Born Woman. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996. p. 165). Simultaneous interaction with one another. (Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement. The Newly encompassing 'the whole spectrum of pleasure and enjoyment, sexual and otherwise' (Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers. Helene Cixous: Live Theory. New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 118). The word jouissance is a difficult concept to describe outside of French and is best explained as imposing on filmstrips including painting, dying, tinting, collaging, scratching, baking, exposing to stock by hand as well as all other techniques of hand manipulation that experimental filmmakers impose on filmstrips including painting, dying, tinting, collaging, scratching, baking, exposing to the elements etc.

The attempt by Schneemann to re-infuse the sexual image with ecstasy may be a welcomed addition to the contemporary vernacular of the erotic in art. Perhaps as artists, theorists and supporters of the sexual body we must actively encourage the inclusion of the ecstatic in visual production as a welcome alternative to what for many of us is the plasticized spectacle of mainstream images of sexual pleasure and the female erotic form. The censorship of Schneemann's work contrasts with the ability of her male contemporaries to position the female nude any way they pleased. This contrast exemplifies the importance of accessing, legitimizing and exploring alternative forms of representing the erotic female nude. Female and male artists interested in exploring the erotic would benefit from contemplating the project laid out by Schneemann throughout her career.

Notes


3 Ibid., p. 321.


5 My use of the term hand processing involves both the literal processing of exposed raw film stock by hand as well as all other techniques of hand manipulation that experimental filmmakers impose on filmstrips including painting, dying, tinting, collaging, scratching, baking, exposing to the elements etc.

6 While the parameters of erotic self-portraiture were constructed specifically with Fuses in mind, I realize finding other films to fit such particular conditions may be restrictive, thus I recommend the definition I have offered as a guideline. My interest here is to not set up additional, exclusive categories for analysis but to produce a more inclusive examination of what is considered a feminist film.

7 James, p. 31 7.


9 Ibid.


12 Schneemann 1991, p. 28.

13 jouissance is a difficult concept to describe outside of French and is best explained as encompassing 'the whole spectrum of pleasure and enjoyment, sexual and otherwise' (Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers. Helene Cixous: Live Theory. New York: Continuum, 2004, p. 118). The word represents the 'enjoyment of rights' of an individual; economic rights to pleasure, sexual rights to pleasure, political rights to pleasure and it represents these rights as occurring all at once—in simultaneous interaction with one another. (Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement. The Newly From Woman Trans Refr Wmn Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1996 p. 165).
14 Fabricant, Joel et al. Editorial. KISS. 1.6 June 23, 1969, p. 3.
15 Ibid.
16 Rich, p. 27.
17 Or in the very least, indicates that there are alternative forms in which to experience and represent sex.
20 Rich, p. 72.
21 Ibid.
23 Ibid, p. 47.
24 Ibid.
25 James, p. 318-319.
26 Mulvey, p. 47.
27 Juhasz, p. 70.
28 Schneemann 1991, p. 28.
30 Schneemann 1979, p. 32.

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