

# Feminism and the body in art



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Modernism is described usually as a movement and a tendency to provoke reflection and an individual character. During this period, art was seen to be set in its ways and people wanted to expand with new ideas and not stay in the lines of colour and structure. This movement was a representation of alternative modes for literature, art, photography and film. Its intention was to find new hidden meaning in human kind and use them to the best of their ability in experimentation. 'I feel therefore I exist.' (Internet Archive Jean Jacques)

The Oxford English Dictionary refers to postmodernism as 'a style and concept in the arts characterized by distrust of theories and ideologies and by the drawing of attention to conventions.' (Internet Oxford Dictionary) Post Modernism didn't seem to have a theory, it was what it was, which meant it had smaller narratives and people gained the knowledge to do something with it. This is also portrayed in what was thought to be the start date of post modernism as no one really knows when modernism ends and postmodernism starts, what it does illustrate is cultural thinking and the way we live, what came with this is the reaction to what people thought modernism was. People rejected the thought of perfection but wanted design and purpose.

Known for her conversation on bodies, sexuality and gender Carolee Schneemanns work is fundamentally characterized by research into visual convention. Schneemann focuses on the body as an individual and its relationship in general. Schneemann's family was largely supportive of her enjoyment of freeness with her body. 'As a child, her friends described her as " a mad pantheist", due to her relationship and respect for nature'(Kate Haug

p114) 'Schneemann cites her earliest connections between art and sexuality to her drawings from ages four and five, which she drew on her father's prescription tablets' (Linda Montano p135)

Carolee Schneemann started her art career as a painter in the late 1950s. Neo-Dada was something that had become an accruing characteristic in her work, adopting box structures coupled with expressionist brushwork. These were shared with Robert Rauschberg using heavy textural characteristics. 'Schneemann described the atmosphere in the art community at this time as misogynistic and that female artists of the time were not aware of their bodies. These works integrated influence by artists such as Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne and the issues in painting brought up by the abstract expressionists.' (internet archive Jane Harris) Schneemann chose to focus on expressiveness in her art rather than accessibility or stylishness. Still describing herself as a formalist, unlike other feminist artists she didn't want to distance herself from male-oriented art history.

Schneemann acknowledges that she is often labelled as a feminist icon and that she is an influential figure to female artists, but she also notes that she reaches out to male artists as well. Though she is noted for being a feminist figure, her works explore issues in art and rely heavily on her broad knowledge of art history. Though works such as *Eye Body* were meant to explore the processes of painting and assemblage, rather than to address feminist topics, they still possess a strong female presence.

Revolving herself around sexual expression and liberation Schneemann decided not to revolve around victimization and repression of women.

'According to artist and lecturer Johannes Birringer, Schneemann's work resists the political correctness enforced by some branches of feminism as well as ideologies which feminists claim are misogynist, such as psychoanalysis. He also asserts that Schneemann's work is difficult to classify and analyze as it combines constructivist and painterly concepts with her physical body and energy.'(Kristine Stiles p3) 'In her 1976 book *Cézanne, She Was a Great Painter*, Schneemann wrote that she used nudity in her artwork to break taboos associated with the kinetic human body and to show that " the life of the body is more variously expressive than a sex-negative society can admit." She also stated, " In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women; giving our bodies back to ourselves." She preferred her term " art historical" (without the h), so as to reject the " his" in history' (Bonnie Marranca Review)

While Jo Spence being a surliest and a feminist started her art life working on documentaries, which was very motivated by her political views. Spreading her working life across various camera projects, including being the founder of Hackney Flashers in 1974. After being diagnosed with cancer, Spence became particularly fascinated with the doctor patient relationship 'Passing through the hands of the medical profession can be terrifying when you have breast cancer.'(Jo Stanley article) Spence decided to document everything that was happening to her through photography, a piece taken while she had a mammograph done truly showed the brutality of her illness as she put her whole body under the scrutiny of one machine making her an active subject in her work.

After a lumpectomy, Spence decided to undertake the holistic approach to cancer and underwent various Chinese medicine treatments, as she felt no need for chemotherapy or radioactive drugs. She also decided to use photography as a healing drug putting the emotion and passion into her work as she felt like cancer was able to take everything else. Through phototherapy she managed to capture the relationship between the doctor and the patient, her feelings towards cancer and the powerlessness as a patient. All of this was a need for Jo Spence to portray as not only a patient but a feminist. She was particularly interested in the perception of the breast as substance of desire, a medium for nourishing babies, and finally in her case of breast cancer, as a possession to be installed in the hands of the medical institution. This is what has really inspired me with her work, and her experience during her suffering of cancer. 'This is demonstrated in her photo of her breast, marked with pen " the property of Jo Spence?" where she appears to question her rights over her own body, using the breast as a metaphor for women's struggle to become an active subject.' (Bonnie Marranca Review) She puts no limits on her work and covers many social issues while her own pain.

Jo Spence really makes me think about the body as a subject rather than an object. Thinking about the body and what it is used for, you never expect it to be destroyed by such an evil mass and this is what Jo Spence looks at. I think Spence has a certain power over her work and having such a raw quality which she uses to her best advantage, this is something I can only hope to achieve in my future work. After looking at her work I can only appreciate her time going through her ordeal of cancer, as I have only been

a witness to what cancer can do no one can fully understand it until you go through it. Spence using photography captures the story but what can't be told.

1. Internet Archive The Confessions Of Jean Jacques Rousseau Now For The First Time Completely Translated Into English With Out Expurgation Volume II" [internet] [accessed 15. 11. 2009] [http://www.archive.org/stream/confessionsofjea012146mbp/confessionsofjea012146mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/confessionsofjea012146mbp/confessionsofjea012146mbp_djvu.txt)
2. The Oxford Dictionary, Oxford University Press 2009 [internet] [accessed 15. 11. 2009] [http://www.askoxford.com/concise\\_oed/postmodernism?view=uk](http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/postmodernism?view=uk)
3. Journal Haug, Kate (1998). An Interview with Carolee Schneemann (1) P 114 (accessed 20. 11. 2009)
4. Montano, Linda (2001). " Interview with Linda Montano". *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (accessed 20. 11. 2009)
5. Morgan, Robert C. 1997. " Carolee Schneemann: The Politics of Eroticism". *Art Journal* 56 (4): pp. 97-100 (accessed 20. 11. 2009)
6. Harris, Jane (1996). " Review / Carolee schneemann <http://www.plexus.org/review/harris/schneemn.html> (internet) (accessed 20. 11. 2009)
7. *The Art of Transgression*. Jo Stanley, editor. Routledge. 1995 (accessed 20. 11. 2009)
8. Stiles, Kristine (2003). " The Painter as an Instrument of Real Time". *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Project* (accessed 22. 11. 09)

9. Murrain, Bonnie (1999). Book Review: Bodies of Action, Bodies of Thought: Performance and Its Critics p20 (accessed 22. 11. 09)
10. Bonnie (1999). Book Review: Bodies of Action, Bodies of Thought: Performance and Its Critics p41 (accessed 22. 11. 09)