

# Interview Transcript

## Carolee Schneemann - Avant-garde Painter & Filmmaker

### Interview conducted 1/18/2019

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: I am a painter, I am forever insisting that everything I do, all the materials and media that I explore are extensions of my discipline and...training as a visual artist, a painter. So that introduces a visceral aspect that film concretizes is for me because after seeing...what could be made of my life that I felt deformed it, which was the case whenever a male friend, colleague, filmed something about me. I always wanted the sharing experience as if it would be revelatory and will clarify my motives, and it was opposite, always opposite. I was fascinated at how my male friends could twist radicalized physicality into some kind of a prurient sexual aspect.

## STAN BRAKHAGE & WOMEN

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: And of course, with Brakhage, it was visionary work. It was amazing work, and he was our closest aesthetic...friend and partner. But with very stressed, conventionalizing aspects of his psychodynamic, which was tortuous and bewildering for me because I was never given...aesthetic authority by Stan, until very, very late. It was like a fluke. So in the early days when I began film, it was an extension of Brakhage's...commitment to nature, and lived...lived experience. When we first knew him, all his work was black and white psycho dramas. They were creepy and wonderful, but it was extremely limited, so Brakhage brought Tenney...and me...to film, to aspects of poetry, to worlds that he would enter because he

belonged. That was his way of having education, was to move in on the artists he thought were most...revelatory and exploratory and influences for him. And I introduced him to painting, to sculpture, to Abstract Expressionism. I brought forward women artists, which were...That was always a tricky place for Stan. And so that's where Sally became a beacon of clarity. And, I would say, entrance of the women's visions equity.

## **SALLY DIXON'S IMPACT**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: But it was always before Sally, you had to go through this male, what would you call it, like, a wall of men? They had the aesthetic determinants. And I'm thinking of, oh...Anthology.... Sitney, Brakhage...They had...cultural authority over which films were really to be valued and which would have to be bypassed. When she[Sally Dixon] first begins to communicate with me, I'm so thrilled and excited and, boy, I fall in love with that woman. And she is so lucid, and experienced, insightful. Flexible, big hearted. And able to take all the slings and arrows of her associates and move within them.

## **SALLY DIXON & CHARLOTTE MOORMAN**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: Charlotte Moorman and Sally Dixon...frame and ignite a new kind of cultural proportion, in which they have aesthetic receptivity and inclusivity. And they single-handedly and uniquely bridged the separation of male and female artists in terms of certain avant-garde activities and principles. And they make situations in which the...separation...of...the complete separation of male and female artists is melted down...Those two melt us into a community of diverse...conflicting and exciting...avant-garde. That's really where it takes its

strength of purpose, was Sally Dixon in film, and making Pittsburgh...have this unexpected...beauty and aesthetic dynamic. And then Charlotte takes New York City artists and brings international ones and merges them also. And they're both...so gracious and graceful, and they do this impossible slugger's work to...get the event, the material, the artist, the theme, the consequence. Sally's work was always in contention and extending...the acceptance, the aesthetic acceptance of the male culture, that was very, very, very limited and harsh.

## **ROBERT HALLER'S IMPACT**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: And, of course, Robert Haller is one of the opening thresholds into film theory and film...practice that is equitable. Also because his partner, Amy Greenfield? Yeah, Amy Greenfield, is a...performance artist, body artist, and she reifies all the principles that Robert was first, in my experience, so helpful with. So, of course, he also sustained Sally's work when they were...demeaning her and trying to get rid of her from Carnegie.

## **DIXON & BRAKHAGE**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: When Sally Dixon was promoting...acceptance of my work and of other women artists, that was hard for Stan. And also he maintained a kind of majestic selfhood in terms of filmmaker...A kind of kingship. So when Sally said she was leaving, my and Sally's impression was that Stan went completely out of control. He said, "You don't dare. You're here to take care of my work and other artists who you've recognized. You have no right to go off on your own. You're not that talented." But she called me about this. And she said, "I really am flummoxed. Brakhage just attacked me for my future plans." And I said "He has no right to do

that. After all you've made possible for this community." and he was, I mean, he's not here to...deny it, but no, he told her she...I mean, this was very typical of this under-layer of a patriarchal presumptuousness....That was there when he would say that Jane was nature and what woman should be. And Sally was a blessing and a facilitator, and that was like God's work for her. How could she possibly think that she wanted to make photographs of her own? And travel and not be in charge of the Carnegie program anymore. No, he was furious and he called me also. And he said, "We have to talk to her. She can't do this." I said, "Of course she can do this. This is what all her work permits her to access."

## **DIXON PUSHED OUT**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: Well, I think they tried to stop it, and then Haller fought for it and Sally. But I think they threatened Sally's position. I don't know who "they" were. There's always an authority group around. She created this visionary visual intercession of what could be considered seriously. And fortunately, Haller supported...supported her, backed her up, because her position was always...denigrated, just as the women artists were denigrated or at least just marginalized, so that we could never assume...influence or...really entering the aesthetic dynamic. But it happened and it continues to happen.

## **COLLEGE YEARS & James TENNEY**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: I met Jim Tenney through a mystical set of coincidences in New York City. I had a full scholarship to Bard, room, board, tuition because I had a wonderful junior high school teacher who said "Your family won't probably want to send you to college, but you

have to go. So here, write these three names down and never lose them. And when you're a little older, write to these places." And she wrote down Bard, Antioch and...maybe Swarthmore. I could never get into Swarthmore, but...Bard and Antioch were really responsive, and I was given this amazing room, board, tuition to Bard, because my father would not fill out a financial statement. And when Bard asked me why, I really couldn't know, except that it was not the tradition, and only the men went to college. So my dad would send me to typing school. Well, that was harsh, because he was my inspiration. Someone dedicated to work and very... He was a rural physician and he went, you know, with his little black bag and I would run away from home and go with him in the car. So I was...had a scholarship to Bard, and then I was accused of moral turpitude. Whatever that was, I thought "Maybe they mean moral turpentine." But I didn't find out for years what it was. I found out more recently when I was given a lifetime achievement award in the arts. But I was kicked out, but they had to maintain this scholarship, so they extended it to the New School for Social Research. So I could work with Heinrich Blucher and hang out with his wife, Hannah Arendt, and take drawing, finally, from Columbia's School of Painting and Sculpture. In the meantime, I'm in New York City as punishment, and I'm living in a graduate student's...flat...apartment on West 15th Street and Eighth Avenue. Going to these wonderful schools, going to concerts. I'm...commuting on the subway up to Columbia for painting and sculpture, and there's a café around the corner on Claremont. And you go down three steps. And I wanted to go have soup. I was so poor. If I had a cigarette pack, I couldn't have lunch, but I'd figure it out. So I go in there and there in the back, at the back table, is this guy with a lot of hair, eating like an animal. Very contained. And he's different. He's got such a different energy. And I'm watching him eat. And then I leave. I don't eat there. I go there a second...I mean, I go there constantly, and the second time I go there and that guy is there eating at the back table again, crouched over a bowl, and he looks very solitary and...interesting. So I go to the concert on May 19th, of Bach and Ives and Ruggles. And I- sitting down with my- I had long, long hair all up in braids, and I'm reading my French book, and the concert begins, there's applause, and a skinny guy comes in late and, you see, he's very shy and he walks in and he sits down. The pianist comes out to the piano and the skinny guy stands up and moves an aisle around until we're almost just within an aisle between us, side by side. And I think "What's he doing here?" And so we finally meet each other at intermission behind a pillar. That takes a lot of maneuvering. And I say, "Oh, I've seen you before." He says, "Yes, I've seen you before. That's

funny." And I say, "I'm a student at Columbia School of Painting and Sculpture. I'm a painter." And he says, "Oh, I'm a musician. I'm at Juilliard." And I said something like, "Well, that's interesting. I work with, as a painter, using space as time." And he said, "I use time as space." So we thought, that's fun. And we had enough money for one cup of coffee. We split that. Anyway, part of our affiliation is that we're new lovers for each other, and he has his concert review with Herr Steuermann. And he's been practicing Raeburn and Ives for months, and we were in a tiny, horrible dormitory room that has no windows...and a little bed, and we're mostly in the bed and then he wakes up to go for his audition review. He puts on his one jacket, because he's so poor, he doesn't even have gloves for winter, and he goes in for the concert, and he comes back and it seems fast. I said, "How was it?" He says "It was yesterday." We made love through it. We had no idea. And Steuermann is furious, and is withdrawing Jim's fellowship, and will not work with him anymore. So that's how we start out: up the creek.

## **BRAKHAGE & TENNEY**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: In the meantime, Jim says, "My best friend is coming from Colorado. He makes films and I've done music with him, and we both went to South Central High." And it's Stan Brakhage, he's a little older than Jim, and that's his... They have a profound friendship. They're the only aesthetically advanced and...different, different kids at that high school. They've been an inspiration to each other all through the high school and beyond. And so we start sharing our work and communicating it. And Stan is...in an indeterminate aspect of his sexual identity. So all the gay guys, Willard Moss, filmmakers in New York, Warhol, we meet all this realm of gay artists through Stan very early on. And...it becomes the basis for a remarkable cultural history that's going to sustain us.

## **DIXON'S EFFECT ON THE CULTURE**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: Culture is...phobic. Over...It's phobic and suppressive of nature and the ecstatic and the sacred, and those are all issues that Brakhage and Tenney and I share. And Sally, of course. So Sally becomes a sieve. Like a wonderful aesthetic sieve through which we begin to be able to admit interest in formulations and friendships that haven't...risen in the male film hierarchy.

## **INFLUENCE ON BRAKHAGE**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: It's going to be twenty-five years when he's finally at MoMA, and he doesn't know I'm in the audience, and Stan is going to talk about his influences and how important the influence of painting has been for him. And I'm there with my little ears...twisting up like, "Oh, you know where you learned about painting, right?" And he says, "I owe...my visual concentration and my appreciation for nature and painting from Carolee Schneemann." And I'm like, "Oh!" I just collapsed in my chair. Oh, it's a packed, full, wonderful audience. And I never expected that because it's towards the end of his life. Stan always is saying "Jane is natural. Jane is nature. You're...an aesthetic construction, you're...a set of assumptions." But hey, man, I brought you all the contact with de Kooning and Pollock and Klein...and Impressionist women painters. But Stan, as you know, also was very passionate. Certain women make it through his aesthetic and they become...sort of guardians of the closed gate.

## **CREATING FUSES**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: Well, in order to make Fuses, I had to borrow cameras. And I borrowed...Stan's Bolex when he was around, a little wind up, not a little- a big one. My first footage was out that window, which was covered in ivy and had handmade woolen curtains that have subsequently been eaten by moths. But my very first shot was my cat in the window with the green ivy, that's in the film, and...All the guys who lent me their cameras...they had a way that I've written about where...they'd loan me their cameras as if I was going to bleed in them and that they wouldn't come back okay. But they came back okay, without their knowing that they had been strapped to light fixtures from the ceiling and kicked off the bed and...A wind-up Bolex for an erotic film...was something I hadn't anticipated, but, fortunately, I welcome collage and interference and unpredictability. But it was Brakhage who originally got me sending footage to his lab in Denver. Oh, and then I had to have a letter from a psychiatrist going with each hundred foot of raw material because the FBI was looking for porno and porno was anything...such as Fuses was, because there was no precedent. When I was working, people concluded it was either porno or science. For a woman to...be able to clarify pleasure and sexuality, it had to be porno or science, so...Fuses was censored even in the '90s in Texas...Where was it? In El Paso. There was a wonderful filmmaker, avant-garde, there who programmed my films. And Fuses...somebody called an authority at the University of Texas El Paso and said "There's a porno film being shown." And the regulators or police came and they didn't know what part was porno. So they arrested the guy on the projector who's getting like \$2 an hour, and they took the projector and the film, and they just sort of gathered everything up and took it away. Brakhage was...resentful that Fuses was, in a way, speaking back to Window, Water, Baby, Moving, where I wanted...the female energy to contain both the imagery and the technology. And, of course, that opens up a whole realm of women photo- selfies, kind of, and women photographing their lived experience. But Brakhage actually begins that permission with Dog Star Man. And that happens after he's been staying with us, that he...accepts the power of an ordinary configuration that is not grandiose, that involves the male vulnerability. And I think that's something so powerful and unique, where he uses himself as a source of...dissension, struggle...Vision was the constant metaphoric energy language we were drilling with. Drilling, drilling with an eye transformation, e-y-e. And the eye and how that could...gain power and inclusivity from looking at reality and not contriving it.



## **WORKING WITH DIXON**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: You know, Sally was so present and focused and warm. And identified with...with...the filmmakers and the work in a completely devotional and coherent way. Unusual. You didn't have to play with her ego or her staff or commitments to other things. It was "OK, I see what you're doing and it's of value." And then Haller was, oh...like another electrical conduit making this possible.

## **STRUGGLES OF FEMALE ARTISTS**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: That's what strong creative women had to do was dance around the edges that had been put up to give us...modest...entrance...into the culture, but we were not ever to assume that we could really have authority or change it. That doesn't happen until the struggle in the seventies, just even to get rid of Mrs. and Miss, m-i-s-s. When Ms. comes in to represent neutrality, the world around us goes crazy. "These women are insane! What do they think they're doing? We don't care if they're virgins or not." It was, I mean, just to...assault...the conventional thresholds made huge amounts of fuss and smoke and ire, but now we don't see it. So Sally had this beauty and grace and self-determination and self-conviction of what she could facilitate. And of course it was appreciated, but constrained. She mustn't take credit for her own...gifts...that they had to be turned over to male aesthetic principles, and then she was good.

## **CULTURE OF CURATION**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: As an artist, when I have someone in a position to really facilitate and...oh, I hate this word, but valorize my work, I fall in love with them, absolutely no question. But that doesn't mean it's a sexual love affair. In fact, it usually isn't, but it's highly...energized and sensuous and pleasurable, and facing issues together is delicious...consequential. Even though, as we see now with artists like Barbara Rubin and...dozens of women artists who were active in the '70s...'60s, '70s, '80s, that it might take thirty years to make a space within male constraints. A need to dominate, they need to dominate. They need to...be the force field, and they're good, I mean, most of the powerful male artists I know, not all, also control their galleries and their collectors and...The male artists who are most successful are idealized by male culture, they're youngish, they look strong, they're self-determined, and they're the ones who have a consistently powerful aspect of work that is rewarded. And that could never happen for Stan. He was in a new formulation, new material. And living the life the way he thought it had to be, which was managing without income often, managing with crazy jobs, believing in, oh...maternity, like, that's what women-That's what women do. They fulfill your future. And that's what Sally was doing aesthetically and morally. So there were constraints about how responsive she was to many artists. Well, that was also what I loved about her, that she really could see a world that was congenial and vibrant for us. And I saw it...sustain itself in her photography, which I thought was significant and needed...appreciation, deserved it. And this is a shock that Ricardo wasn't really appreciating because she was also working for his job and his sensibility. Her writing was wonderful. And not much of her writing was printed in in a fully focused way. You know, it should have been central to...the Anthology Film notebooks and such things. And it wasn't, was it? Being with Sally, you know, it was just such a pleasure. She was...so warm and loving and open and smart, and she's what you would want for your best girlfriend, and we had everything to talk about: art, life, and she had family. I wouldn't do that. I just had to make the work.

**MOTHERHOOD & ARTISTRY**

**00:27:38:13**

CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: The mother is there to be used, to be suckled, to...Even if you have to dry her out, she's there...to provide for her offspring for their future. She is not in any way ever...to exceed...for herself, without making problems, which the children can expect from her. And I know this from being in college with friends, kids at Bard, particularly the women, if they had- if they wanted to be artists and their mothers were artists it was the psychological convention to be furious, furious. "How dare mother think that painting in her studio is more important than listening to my battle with my girlfriend?" Or, you know, as I was raised, it was to reproduce. "If you didn't want children," my dad said, "well, you are a monster." I guess I'm the runaway monster. And growing up in a farming community when a kid liked you, like the little boys would say, "I want you to breed my children when we grow up!" On the school bus, he'd say that. Mother is always...a surrogate...At least in my life, I've never known...a woman really being rewarded well, and honestly, for her aesthetic depth. It has to happen. There are always exceptions. My godmother was my inspiration and help. Hannah Arendt, I mean, all the women writers from de Beauvoir, my huge library of feminist texts takes the patriarchal, grabs it at its crotch, and pulls it all apart. Examining...the depth of envy, the depth of envy of birthing and...female...depth of envy of female orgasm, female pleasure. The variousness of our physical experiences. That's what the culture wants to bury, abuse, dominate, overcome. So when you're a young artist, you're facing this wall of closure.

## **FRIENDSHIP WITH DIXON**

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN: So meeting someone like- like Sally, who has made a door into the wall, it's exhilarating and it's a very special bond. She was a delicious person, with her Christmas tree, with her lover, with her sexuality, with her family. She was nourishing, but she had a resolve where she was not sacrificial, although now I'm not so sure about that, given the configuration with Ricardo. Or if there was any way...not to be sacrificial, but still to have your

sense of achievement and...She was happy. She made good decisions for herself. You know, she was able to feel...the depth of creative necessity and appreciate its rigor. And, without any ego interference, invite me to do more. Or to frame it powerfully and well. So I'm interested to know how other women artists, other women filmmakers, worked with her. If it was as...enthraling and inspiring as it was for me. Yeah.