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Fifty years since Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964)

A review of this iconic, historical performance, its reiterations and influence in performance art history

HARRIET CURTIS

Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* was first performed at the Festival de la Libre Expression in Paris on 29 May 1964. Later that year it was also performed at Dennison Hall in London and the Judson Church in New York. The piece involved nine performers: four men and five women. The performance score noted that the participants be divided into the following roles: two lateral men, two lateral women; a central man and woman; independent man and women; and a serving maid. The careful structure of the performance moves from a dinner party setting – with the performers sitting at a table, applying make-up and engaging in polite conversation – to gradually unfolding scenes of joyful reckless abandon, with the participants performing on the floor and in gradual states of undress, finally in feather and fur-lined bikinis and underwear. In retrospect, the piece offers a deconstruction of daily routine and the possibilities of freedom from repression that might be directly linked to the sexual politics of the 1960s. In my contemporary interaction with *Meat Joy*, I look to the layered narrative of the piece as it has resurfaced in art and performance histories, and been consistently re-engaged by artists, curators and scholars. This work offers an insight into the changing modes of engaging with historical

performance art through documentation, by tracing its influence on other artists and works, through re-performance, and articulations of missed opportunities with the 'live'.

In one section of video documentation of the performance, the four female performers are seen pedalling their legs in the air in a synchronized fashion, to the pop tunes of Millie Small's *My Boy Lollipop* (1964), and are then carried on the backs of the male performers. The participants huddle together in a tight circle, the women in the centre while the men link arms around the edge to huddle closer. Eventually they topple, playfully falling on top on one another in a pile, stretching out their limbs. Remaining horizontal – a mass of bodies intertwined – they await the arrival of the serving maid, who carefully 'dresses' their bodies with raw chicken carcasses, mackerel and sausages. The performers tenderly fondle and embrace the raw meat, stuff it into their underwear, writhe on the floor or with each other, all to the sound of The Supremes' *Baby Love* (1964). Eventually paint is introduced to the performers' bodies. The performance is erotic and playful; at times the performers are childlike, tender and then rough (the juxtaposition of which is somewhat unnerving). As the paint covers more and

more of the performers' bodies and becomes slick and slippery, the action appears more frenzied, bodies less distinguishable. The women are then dragged by the arms and legs towards a pile of shredded paper in which they all roll, leap and play.

In Schneemann's own words, '*Meat Joy* has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent; a celebration of flesh as material; the flesh of the performers – bound in plastic, covered in paint – and the animal flesh of the raw fish, chicken, sausages (2002:61). 'Its propulsion', she states, 'is towards the ecstatic, shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon – qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent' (61). Viewing the piece through photographic and video documentation, I share with her the sense that, indeed, any moment the piece could evoke a number of (complementary or contradictory) affective responses. This is compounded perhaps by the multiple bodies present in the performance, and the simultaneity of couplings and re-couplings; animal and human flesh, male and female, live and dead.

In my own research – focused primarily on the visceral food- and body-based performances of US artist Paul McCarthy – *Meat Joy*'s focus on the sexual liberation of the 1960s has provided a counterpoint to McCarthy's

abject solo performances of the 1970s (Curtis 2014). While *Meat Joy* looks to the liberating sensuousness of the bare body, the joyfulness of flesh and meat as the fruits of the earth, in McCarthy's work meat is always consumable and always in damaging excess. Food substances – notably, raw round meat, sausages, ketchup and mayonnaise – rather than sustaining the body, always disrupt it, cake it, smother and choke it. As Cary Levine has written, *Meat Joy* was 'visceral, communal, celebratory, and authentic', whereas McCarthy's performances – such as *Hot Dog* (1974), *Meat Cake* (1974) and *Sailor's Meat* (1975) – were 'private (masturbatory), deranged, and detached' (2013:120).

Meat Joy remains an important historical counterpoint to later body-based works that engage with the juxtaposition of human and animal flesh, particularly funny and often disturbing performances that highlight the connection between the consumption of images of (often female) bodies, and food consumption. In Suzanne Lacy's feminist video piece *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* (1976), the artist parodies an instructional cookery show, guiding viewers through the locations of various joints of meat by holding them up against her own body. She gradually becomes more animal-like herself, growling and baring the oversized sharp teeth she wears throughout. Both McCarthy and Lacy perform within the restrictive frame of the video camera, alone, and the proximity of animal and human flesh produces a critical tension that forces viewers to consider the compromised position of bodies in contemporary culture. In *Meat*

Joy, Schneemann re-routes this tension through the possibility of a joyful celebration of bodies, intermingling and overwriting each other continuously.

Meat Joy consists of an intimate layering of choreographed moments and seemingly chance encounters; erotic but also absurd. In one moment, a fish is dropped by the serving maid into the mass of bodies and lands, with a firm slap, onto the torso of a female performer, who winces slightly on its impact. She rolls on the floor with the fish firmly placed between her legs in an ecstatic pseudo-masturbatory or dream-like sequence. The tone is of something in transition – abject, surreal, but also transformative. Indeed, *Meat Joy* 'evolved from dreams that Schneemann recorded in a journal over four years' with a focus on 'the states of sensory orientation she experienced in the transition from sleeping to waking' (*Meat Joy*, 2002). The performance evoked the transition and transformation of bodies but also of colours, textures, light and sounds. Sounds of the Paris streets, 'the cries and clamorings of rue de Seine vendors selling fish, chickens, vegetables, and flowers', were played in parallel with the pop tunes, 'displac[ing] the songs' recognizable continuity', thus creating a disorienting sensory experience (Schneemann 2002:62).

Similarly, the history of *Meat Joy* – documented, re-performed and celebrated in written accounts – consists of a layering of sensual and cerebral fascinations that have changed along with scholars' self-reflexive engagements with performance art more generally. *Meat Joy* was arranged as a particularly sensory and sensual experience, encompassing both

the performers and the audience. In 1964 the audience 'were seated on the floor as close to the performance area as possible', the proximity of which 'heightened the sense of communality' (61). Is it possible then for scholars of art and performance history to review this historical and now iconic performance piece or to cast contemporary perspectives back into the bodily past, having only ever engaged with the work through photographic and film documentation, written accounts and the artist's notes?

Some scholars have explicitly engaged this tension between live performance and documentation by pointing to the historical and geographical impossibility of their presence. In 1997 Amelia Jones announced her position as a scholar of historical performance and body art having studied iconic works from the 1960s and 1970s – including *Meat Joy* 'entirely through its documentation' (1997:11). Rather than posit her absence as an obstacle to overcome or as one of the unavoidable failings for those – such as myself – studying historical performance art at a distance, Jones argues that neither documentation nor the live event 'has a privileged relationship to the historical "truth" of the performance' (11). Indeed, while I was also absent for the 1964 performance – as well as its re-enactment at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2002 – the means by which the work itself has come to be present provides a necessary framework for thinking about how scholarly engagements with the work have changed over time.

Writing in 2002, after watching the re-enactment of *Meat Joy* at the Whitechapel Gallery as part of 'A Short History of Performance,

Part 1; Anna Dezeuze similarly concedes that the performance 'was only known to [her], as to almost all present', through documentation (2002). This re-enactment offered audiences the chance to see *Meat Joy* presented live and 'in the flesh'. For Dezeuze 'Here, finally, was the opportunity to see the work for [her]self' (2002). *Meat Joy* was re-performed as an experiment, an alternative historicizing process and mode of revivifying performance art of the past. It was also among the more well-known pieces to be re-performed in the programme. Lesser-known or barely documented works – such as performance group Bernsteins' *Death to Grumpy Grandads* (1973), an hour-long laughing marathon blending improvisation and audience participation – were also re-performed, but served perhaps a different purpose (in order that they not be forgotten).¹ Like *Death to Grumpy Grandads*, the re-enactment of *Meat Joy* in 2002 modelled an engagement with performance art history that could re-emphasize the comic and sensuous elements of the piece that might have faded in its documentation.

The year 2014 marked fifty years since *Meat Joy* was first performed. In January 2014, this milestone was marked in another performance journal – *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* – with the publication of Schneemann's response to a proposed re-performance of *Meat Joy*. Schneemann points to the diminished or absent bodies of the original performers, noting that performers in their sixties or seventies 'have lost flexibility, mobility, and the sort of ecstatic sensuality that is best communicated by young bodies' (2014:8). For the 2002

re-enactment Schneemann employed younger performers for the main roles, while she performed as the serving maid, 'benevolently' watching over the action of the performers, who at times – Dezeuze perceives – 'looked like a bunch of awkward, giggling teenagers messing about' (2002). In 2014 Schneemann's focus on the aged body and senior sexuality brings the narrative of *Meat Joy* back to the bodily memories and impressions of the piece, but also the significance of *Meat Joy* as reflective of a particular cultural moment that has since passed. She advises against the re-performance of *Meat Joy*, but instead encourages the radicalization of individual images and 'sensations', celebrating the diversity of subjective engagements with works, and warns against 'over intellectualization' (2014:9).

Similarly, a review of the now canonical *Meat Joy* must not only take into account the imagery, materials, actions and processes, but also the modes of documentation, dissemination and re-performance that have added layers of interpretative and contextual meaning to its history. More broadly, the positioning of *Meat Joy* as a landmark work in art and performance histories and its re-emergence in contemporary consciousness encourage and celebrate the possibilities of a continued sensorial engagement with the world. By reviewing *Meat Joy* as an historian – absorbing and scrutinizing its images, performance score and the means of its reiteration across art and performance histories – positioning myself also as a spectator of the piece becomes more complicated. Problematically perhaps, my experience of visceral art and performance

practices remains primarily at an historical distance from events as they occurred in the 1960s, 1970s and even the early 2000s. Schneemann's most recent intervention in *Meat Joy*'s history, however, urging the radicalization of spectators' images, thoughts and feelings, is a reminder, for me at least, to persist with the often difficult task of deciphering the corporal connections with performances of the past, through engaging with documentation that endures.

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¹ Bernsteins were an artist group comprising Anne Bean, Peter Davey, Malcolm Jones, Jonathan Harvey, Chris Miller, Brian Routh and Martin Von Haselberg.