

# RESPONSE TO A REAPPROPRIATION REQUEST

**Carolee Schneemann**

*I*n a letter to the artist, dated January 23, 2013, Danish choreographer Mette Ingvartsen wrote: "On May 29th, 2014, it will have been exactly fifty years since you premiered your performance *Meat Joy* in Paris at the Festival of Free Expression . . . . I would like in collaboration with you and the performers you were working with in 1964, to make a reconstruction of *Meat Joy* . . . to understand better what precisely was going on in this period, and also what the exact questions were within the performing arts scene. Today reconstructions and the interest in the past have become a trend in the European dance scene. And even though I have been very resistant and critical towards this trend, thinking that art is not there to conserve and repeat history but rather to reinvent and develop itself, I think that these specific questions deserve a reactualization . . . . What I would like to do, through interviewing you and the other participants about the performance, is to figure out how we together can re-actualize the performance that was made fifty years ago. In that sense it is an homage to the original performance but also an interest in how looking at it again might allow us to think differently about the issues it addresses today. I have a feeling that this particular performance would transform completely by being redone with older bodies . . . ."

*Schneemann's reply is published here.*

*(Editor's note)*

Dear Mette,

Thank you for your very thoughtful, engaging letter with its unexpected proposal to consider re-presenting *Meat Joy*.

Unfortunately, or inevitably, most of my splendid participants are dead. Others are somewhat incapacitated, or they are completely overwhelmed with their own work, or have disappeared into the desert or mountains and I cannot locate them.

Insofar as I was able to Google your work, I am impressed by the way you have extended principles of movement in an outreach to very varied participants. The dilemma with using obviously older performers is an interesting one. Somehow it is

never made culturally very clear that by the time you're in your sixties or seventies, people have lost flexibility, mobility, and the sort of ecstatic sensuality that is best communicated by young bodies, which are obviously flexible and mobile.

Older/aged performers physically embody distractions that have not been codified within Western culture. Obviously, men typically lose their hair, usually women's hair will thin and if you look closely you will see there is often almost a bald spot at the top of their heads. Women's breasts have moved down towards their waists and are wrinkled; men's breasts usually acquire a layer of fat as does their stomach—that ripped statuesque torso has normally lost its definition. Female upper arms almost always have a flabby layer. Many men's do as well. Viagra is so very popular because in order to still fuck with an adequate erection, most older men require it! If women in their sixties and seventies remain genitally viable—desiring, lubricating, and muscular—the venus mound has nevertheless put on a layer of fat. The dilemma for older sexually active women is that unless they are in a dedicated marriage, it's very difficult to find an erotic partner. For both sexes, their knees will be intensely wrinkled, and unless they exercise consistently ankles weaken, their feet are often invaded by arthritic disturbances.

We never wonder why old people walk around in slippers and flat shoes. They are content to miss our raves, dancing parties, pot-smoking celebrations . . . Why do we conventionally see them curled up with their books and a dog or cat?

The exquisite ballerina who is eighty, the irrepressible mountain climber who is ninety, the sixty-five-year-old Hollywood star surrounded by lovers . . . What do they represent? An exceptional displacement of reality, a fantasy of younger people who can never imagine they will become old, and the kind of physical adventure that process will entail. Popular culture only introduces subjects of aging or old age as anomalous, sorrowful, or ridiculously optimistic.

Mette, do not try to recreate *Meat Joy!*

My thoughts for your sensuous outreach of work would be to explore the possibility of choreographing with a retirement community, an old people's home. The cultural surround intensifying my sensuous rituals was motivated in contrast to the endless brutalities of the Vietnam War. My propositions of ecstatic connection were in reaction to a government shaped by assassinations and militaristic aggressions. The inherited cliché of "sex, love, and rock and roll" has survived the dark undertow, the anguish and anxiety to which a younger culture defined its alternatives.

But my sustaining insight on age and desire refers to the conversation of Proust and Madame de Noailles when she was eighty: P: Mme, tell me if you can, how does it finally feel to be old enough to be released from the pangs of desire? Mme N: Darling, I have no idea . . . Perhaps there is someone older you could ask.

I am not a fan of “redo” or “reconstruction,” which has become such a current tradition. Radicalize your own images, sensations, and beware of over intellectualization . . . a kind of entrapment of intuition, uncertainty, and creative will. Well, I had no idea I would have such a full response to your lovely proposal; your thoughts on *Meat Joy* are very precious to me. I’m thrilled that the choreography of 1964 is still within your performing considerations. Thank you so much for that. As for the present tense, I’m overwhelmed with new work . . . I like to look back, but I’m not going there. What do you think?

With all best wishes,

Carolee

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CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN is a painter who extended visual principles into live action and installations. Her early choreography was for the Judson Dance Theater. Her films include the self-shot erotic *Fuses*, *Meat Joy*, *Water Light/Water Needle*, and *Viet-Flakes*. Her publications are *More Than Meat Joy*, *Imaging Her Erotics*, *Correspondence Course*, as well as *Cezanne, She Was A Great Painter*. She is the subject of a new feature-length documentary film, *Breaking the Frame*, shown as part of *Views from the Avant Garde* at the New York Film Festival 2013.