

Fleeting Phantoms

The Projected Image
at SFMOMA

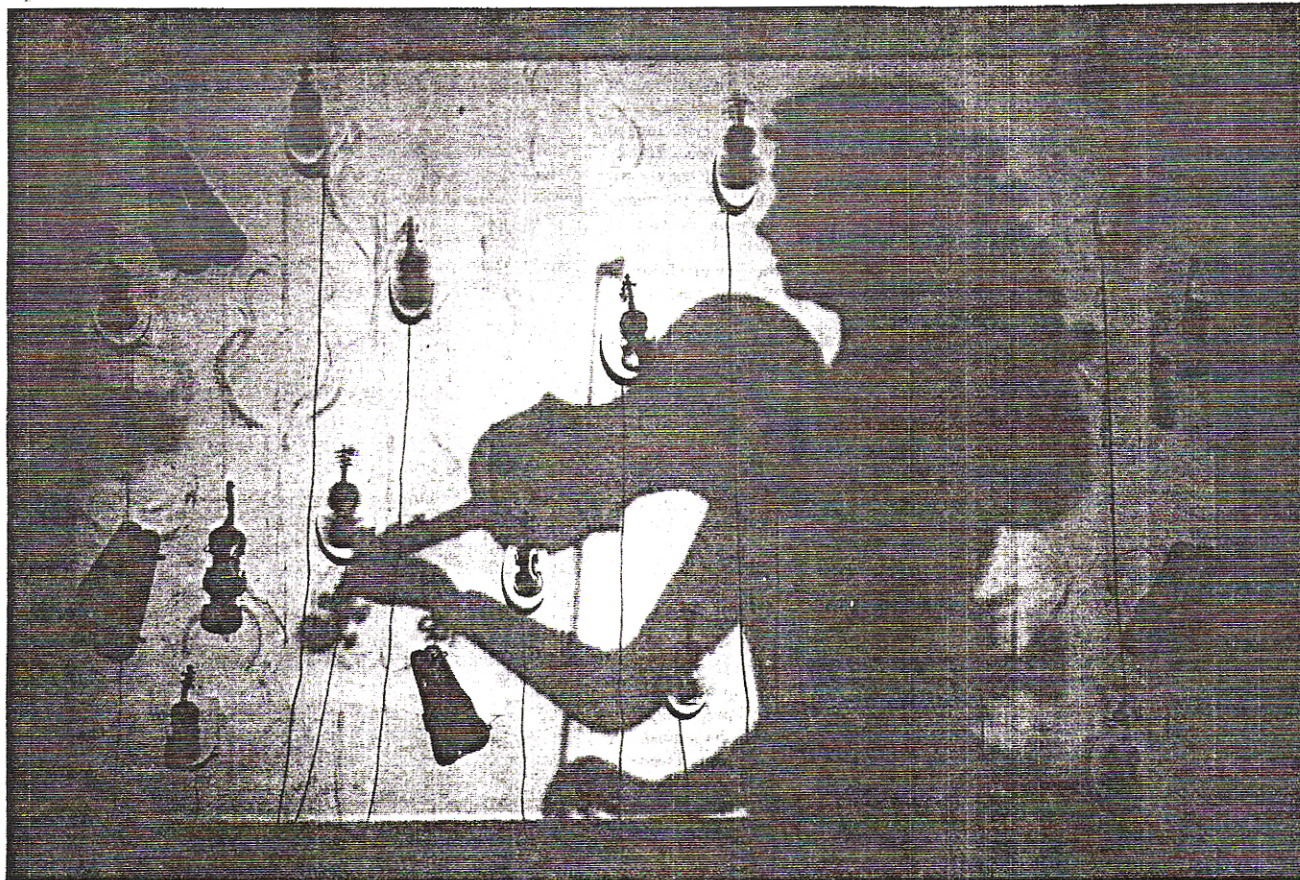
BY TONY REVEAUX

The *Projected Image* is as much a sideshow as a slide show, a Winchester Mystery House of fleeting phantoms where you may not know which way to turn or be sure where you stand from one moment to the next. This is art in which the artists are as much in the dark as you are. It also is art that pulls and pushes and jerks you around as it sparks, smolders and bursts into electric flame and then whimpers back to black. The whirr/click/hum of seen and unseen projectors lays a rushing susurrus beneath the splintered chords of music, voice, violin and an electronic drone that bounces and echoes within the flickering chambers of the eight-plex gallery.

The Projected Image at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, an invitational assembled by media arts curator Robert Riley, is an ambitious and problematic multimedia exhibition. Eight artists grope and grapple among issues of scale, photorealism and abstraction, duration, rhythm, sound, metamorphosis, narrativity, and sexual and political content. Their four-dimensional constructs have been built from slide and film-loop audiovisual technologies ranging from the machine-direct simplicity of Jim Melchert and Krzysztof Wodiczko to complex choreographies of computer-driven control by Dorit Cypis and Richard Baim, and they share few anchor-points of perceptual expression.

Here, the redefinition of the dialogue between the artist and the public remains a more innovative and important dynamic than the relative merits of the pieces themselves. The confrontation between viewer and object, audience and presentation, visitor and installation—all are called into question. The "silent contracts" of distancing have been violated or abandoned. The wall-hung painting remains in place, and the viewer may advance or recede from it at will; the theater patron's seat is fixed through a discernible duration that ends as clearly as it starts;

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but from your first step into *The Projected Image*, you will find yourself adrift between those two contracts.

Howard Fried's *1970* (1970) commands the portal. The exposed Super-8mm film cartridge projector grinds away above your head as you enter. You halt in front of a column where the TV-size image shimmers unsteadily. In typewritten letters, names (from a

baby book) proceed in alphabetic sequence. The living lint of dust caught in the film gate dances antically. You may stand there until the same name—or yours—reappears, or the influx of other patrons will prompt you to move on.

Melchert's *Changing Walls* (1971) is also a concept loop, but one which treats the projected image as a full-scale entity. The artist is seen painting a screen-size vertical rectangle. When he is done, he rips down the red-painted paper to reveal a white wall,

and then the create/destroy/create cycle begins anew. Using a single slide projector, his action is advanced in disjunctive flashes, like a lighthouse in the night. There is no barrier between the patrons and the plain wall. You could stand inside the image and even move with it—yet, everyone tends to cluster near the projector at the far wall, preserving the distance.

Stan Douglas's *Overture* (1986) is a six-minute film-loop in which the fricative dynamics of



Top: Carolee Schneemann, *Cycladic Imprints*, 1988-1991;
bottom: Dorit Cypis, *X-Rayed (Altered)*, 1988,
at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

realistic, kinesis-kinetic action is self-distanced by the distressed texture and historical antiquity of the Edison Company's nineteenth century footage. A locomotive-mounted camera, hurtling along rickety tracks over precipitous gulfs, could be as vertiginous as a commercial for the new Vortex rollercoaster, except that the safety of a century's time lies in

between. The artist draws the viewer close to the filmpath by positioning a speaker in the projector pedestal; standing very near it, you can hear the recorded narration of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Wodiczko's *New York City Tableaux: Tompkins Square* (1989) is one of the largest pieces, but the simplest technologically. Like the artist's nighttime projections onto the walls of city buildings, which transform them into responsive political monuments, there is no motion or change in the projections here. A cyclorama of four large screens—*The Exercise*, *The Barricade*, *The Guard*, *The Briefing*, with four smaller urban vignettes above—show both black and white people in a tableau of guerrilla actions, with bright and shining weapons in their hands. But here, too, visitors retreat to the far wall, and few walk around the cyclorama or go up to add their own shadow to the frieze. If you pass your hand through the beampaths of the slide projectors—you'll find which ones—the superimposed images of the silvery assault rifles will be interrupted, stripping the figures of their guns. The phantom weapons can be mutually supportive paradigms for both the militant fantasies of the Black Panthers and the reactionary paranoia of

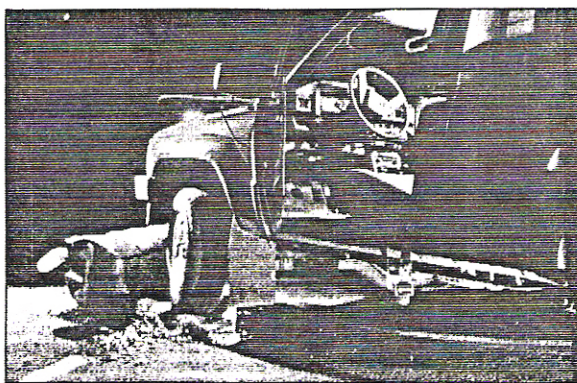
the establishment.

The installations by the two women artists are the most spatially and sculpturally complex, and are powerfully expressive assertions of sexual identity. Carolee Schneemann's *Cycladic Imprints* (1988-1991), a textured wall more than two stories high, is deep and timeless—a shifting, layered panorama of universal womanhood where the primordial symbols of the female torso—from antiquity to contemporary nudes—and the curves and volutes of the soundboxes of stringed instruments are interpolated in knowing and witty counterpoint.

Cypis's *X-Rayed (Altered)* (1988) is a beguiling

and unnerving walk-through cubist self-portrait of sexual recognition and identity. This installation also is the most intimately confrontational. If you happen upon the small room as the timer begins its twenty-minute sequence, you first pass through a theatrical curtain upon which a toy theater is being projected. Everyone moves back to see it. Then, a deconstructed ornate frame, which jags over walls and ceiling, is filled with another image and everyone moves away to see that screen as well. When the gimbal-mounted projectors on one of the tower pedestals plays shifting trapezoids of the nude Cypis on that wall, the women look straight on—while the men step back and then move closer. As the third wall fills with landscapes, family portraits and images of anatomy, the audience—herded by light—collects in the proper corner from which to view the balance of images. Cypis's disclosure and reexamination of her "cellular mortal self" choreographs the "gaze"—from herself, the camera, and the men and women of the audience—in a unique interactive dialogue of projection and reflection.

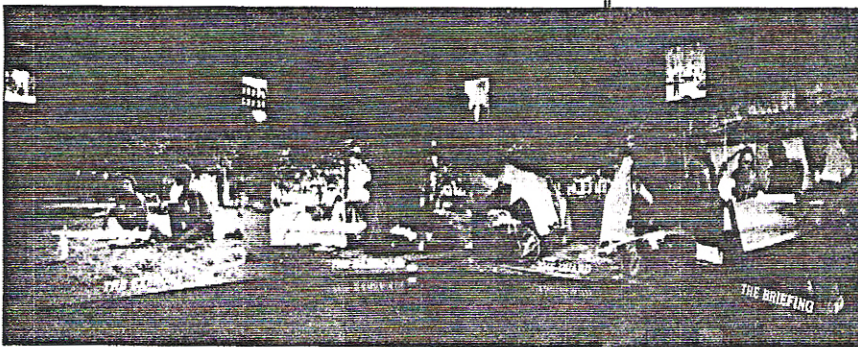
As Cypis's multifaceted room is folded in upon itself in penetrating analytical introspec-



James Coleman, *Charon (The MIT Project)*, 1989, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

tion, Schneemann's *Cycladic Imprints* vaults upward in a theatrical volume of space, toward a conceptually infinite direction ahead. Mounted on the projection wall are an array of old violins, motorized in swinging, jiggling sashays, as Malcolm Goldstein's audiotape fills the air with a rich collage of string sounds that complement the rattle and clatter of the bowless automations. You can go to the wall and look at the jumping violins: solemn and festive, a pawnshop-as-amusement park. On the wall, flash frames reveal painted figurations that echo the nipped-waist silhouettes of stringed instruments—and the feminine form. Schneemann has gone straight to the primal visual recognition of the form, to

man's *Charon (The MIT Project)* (1989) are the only two installations that resemble the traditional slide show in a theatrical "box," although their strategies of narrative and formal elegance surpass tacit familiarity. Baim's multi-image visual poem is an organic progression of color, texture and definition that traces the arc of industrialization through time. His processed, screened and masked images begin as worn rubbings of collapsed ruins and rise to a complex mosaic of the electronic age. Meanwhile, Coleman's fourteen allegories are separated by stygian darkneses that accentuate the bright scenes that both parody and celebrate the visual styles of industrial corporate communications, fashion



Krzysztof Wodiczko, *New York City Tableaux: Tompkins Square*, 1989, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco.

challenge passivity and complacency with recognition and confrontation.

Schneemann's universal, large-scale view and Cypis's nautilus-like reflective journey-from-within provide significant and well-chosen polarities of feminine consciousness and sexual identity. But the question remains: why were issues of sexual content solely the domain of the two women artists and none of the men?

Richard Baim's *Turn of the Century* (1989) and James Cole-

and interior design. Accompanied by the voice of a white male broadcaster, the stories have a distanced, existential anomie that recalls the radio plays of Joe Frank. *The Projected Image* is an extended exploration of how we can approach and confront all these images as well as what the artists have created with them.

The Projected Image through May 5 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Van Ness Ave. and McAllister St., San Francisco.

Carolee Schneemann

An Artweek interview

BY PAULA TIN NYO

Artweek You mentioned the naive exuberance you had when you entered the New York art scene in the sixties. How would you say the shocked response to your work actually affected the work?

Carolee Schneemann In order to keep the essential pleasure of the body, you have to fight off all these demons of negation and separation, and they're just everywhere, and they're there around anything they can possibly grasp. I mean, right now, they're about age—like "you're too old to behave this way," but I want my naive messianic energy because that's what helps me to stay angry in proportion to being able to keep my pleasure and attack my culture. Otherwise, you drown: they suck you under. It's tricky. I used to do it by having a primary relationship that I could really trust, and it centered me, and it was the truth. Now I have to do it without that ...

AW What is the role of healing in a feminist approach to art?

CS I guess I really feel that art heals us or confirms us, that the life of the imagination is essential to the organism, and that it's the direction of the imagination that's constantly trying to redress those profound conflicts and contradictions. And, of course, in Western culture, our art usually manifests the contradictions and becomes a kind of handmaiden to them, because it can't have that overview of what the transformative correction or repositioning of value would be. Which is why structural analysis and feminist analysis come together at this moment and make such a rich dismantling of inherited esthetics and those embedded stereotypes.

One thing about healing that I do know I can be effective in is in workshops. I do workshops about process, about where your motive is, and they always involve some kind of unearthing of what is interfering with how you want to make what you want to

make. It's not a theory either; it's a group of people who have agreed to go into this process.

AW You seem to exude positivity in your work. Whatever the patriarchal culture has injected into you, whatever has been your own experience, you want to make it into something positive.

CS Well, that's what I'm able to represent—if you look at an immediate culture as a kind of puzzle where people have different aspects that they can examine and present and, we assume, fulfill. But it takes a long time to realize what your position is. Sometimes I think I'm only used to resistance.

AW You've juxtaposed archaic images of humans and animals in some of your works, such as *Fuses*. How do

these references inform and support your work?

CS Those images are found after the fact. First, I do something where I don't quite know where it comes from, but I follow an instinct to try it or manifest something, and if I'm really lucky I get a bonus that says this already existed. Not only did it already exist, but it comes from a totally different spirit of the body, and the body as part of an integration of the cosmos—sacred sexuality. I mean, from cultures where those words don't even exist. Those archaic threads are consistent with an expressivity of form that I recognize. I'm building a vocabulary with them, and then I have to present them and test them and see if anyone else in the culture recognizes this.

AW You mentioned that *Interior Scroll* originally took the form of a dream image, and then a drawing. Can you talk about your decision to perform it?

CS I did it first when I was a guest at a banker's house with my boyfriend in East Hampton. And someone said, "Oh, isn't it nice you're out here on your little holiday! We're having a big arts thing next Saturday. We'd love you to do something." And, you see, part of the tone of that complacent, easygoing, summer, getting-together-of-artists rankled me, but I couldn't let them know that. I didn't want to do anything at all, and then I thought, gee, it would be really nice to be part of this group of artists, but I knew it would be pretty summery, so that's when this mean streak ... (laughs) It's very aggressive, you know, it's very aggressive. You do something like that, you're going to take over the whole focus. Part of me must know that. The other part is scared, and doesn't want to do it; the other part says, go for it. Then there's the third part that says, I really don't know very much about this, do you mind if I go swimming. So I always go around with these voices in my head, not always, but when there's a piece. There was also this need to make the inside the outside. To really manifest the vitality of the body and to re-situate female sexuality as a key in accord with my creative process to where it comes from and where it goes.

AW To what extent do you script your work?

CS It's completely scripted. There's a very tight order and then some of the parameters are loose so that the structure comes back over and over again, but it allows the configurations to release themselves and break apart.

AW Do you have a responsibility as a performer when you use nudity to anticipate an erotic response from your audience?

CS You're putting out your body as an exploration and what you get back is quite unpredictable and uncontrollable. For instance, in the middle of *Meat Joy*, when that man came out and tried to strangle me, and people thought it was part of the performance, that was not my responsibility to deal with it. Also, when you think about your responsibility, at least for me, it's too inhibiting.