

Making Art History in Springs: 1975

BY GAIL LEVIN

Ashawagh Hall in Springs often hosts art, but one show in 1975 made art history. For the United Nations' International Women's Year, two artists, Joyce Kozloff and Jean Semmel, organized "Women Here and Now," where Carolee Schneemann performed "Interior Scroll," which now figures in most chronicles of feminist art and performance. Standing nude on a table, Ms. Schneemann painted her body and read parts of her 1974 text "Cezanne: She Was a Great Painter": "Around twelve years old I knew a few names of 'great artists.' ... I decided a painter named 'Cez-anne' would

be my mascot; I would assume Cez-anne was unquestionably a woman." Then she slowly extracted a paper scroll from her vagina while reading from it.

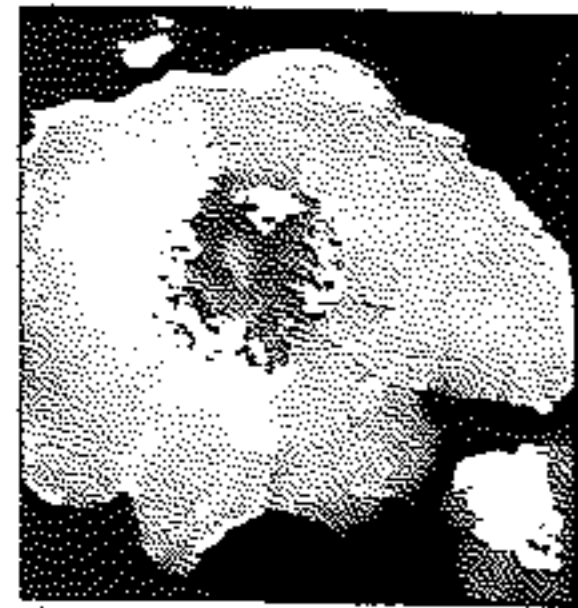
"I didn't want to do it, didn't want to stand naked, but the image had occurred to me in a dream and I had to enact it, to realize the image," Ms. Schneemann recently admitted, explaining that she named her drawing of her dream "Interior Knowledge" because "I thought of the vagina in many ways — physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the sources of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual power." One observer at the time reported "a genuine warmth and sense of excitement" in the crowd that night.

Ms. Schneemann was performing amid major paintings by the two organizers and by Audrey Flack, Miriam Schapiro, Perle Fine, Li-lan, Jane Wilson, Hedda Sterne, Jane Freilicher, Betty Parsons, Leatrice Rose, Alice Baber, Lynda Benglis, Buffie Johnson, Fay Lansner, and Elaine de Kooning, as well as work by three photographers: Anne Schwartz (Sager), Dorothy Beskind, and Tracy Boyd. The artists were not all close in age. Ms. Parsons, for example, was two generations older than Ms. Kozloff and Ms. Benglis.

Ms. Semmel and Ms. Kozloff had started to organize the show only that summer. They found themselves living in East Hampton among the legendary figures of Abstract Expressionism and felt overwhelmed by the "male patriarchy" that dominated both art and criticism. Ms. Kozloff remembers that she and Ms. Semmel "had been talking about bringing the feminist movement to the bastion of male Abstract Expressionism. We wanted to include women of several generations



Carolee Schneemann performed "Interior Scroll" at Ashawagh Hall in Springs in 1975. The piece is now considered a benchmark in art history and is included in numerous texts on feminist and performance art. *Anthony McCall*



Looking to other islands for garden inspiration

C3



Summertime, and the moussing is easy

C10

who were residents." Ms. Semmel avers that "We were in the belly of the beast," referring to the dominance of Abstract Expressionism in East Hampton.

Propelled by their feminist beliefs, they succeeded in raising the money to rent Ashawagh Hall and to print a small brochure with a checklist, getting the art critic Jeanne Siegel to write a brief text. Ms. Semmel recalls that they even approached the de Menil family, known for its art patronage.

Ms. Kozloff recalls designing the posters with "press type" and then attaching them to trees in Springs.

The two ringleaders were new to the scene. Ms. Semmel, who by now has owned a house in Springs for more than 30 years, was renting Elaine de Kooning's house on Sandra Drive. Ms. Kozloff was in another rental. Not yet part of the close-knit art community, they were not afraid of being ostracized. Be-

Continued on C5

FOR THE BEST OF TIMES

Hampton Jitney™ RIDE THE LEGEND™

HamptonJitney.com 631-283-4600

Making Art History in Springs: 1975

Continued from C1
cause they decided to limit the number of artists in order to show larger and more significant works, they angered some local women artists who were not invited. Yet their project inspired active interest from Miriam (Mimi) Schapiro, long a resident artist, who began her career working in an Abstract Expressionist style but by then had shifted to making feminist art. She knew absolutely everyone and was helpful, but preferred the show to be their project. Ms. Semmel says that while she and Ms. Kozloff knew that they "were trying to change things, we didn't think of ourselves as actors in history. Mimi did." Later she told Ms. Semmel, "You'll be important."

Not all of the women invited agreed to participate. While I was researching Lee Krasner's biography, Ms. Semmel told me of Krasner's curt refusal to join the other women, which evidently had been sufficiently wounding that Ms. Semmel had not forgotten the slight. It wasn't that Krasner did not support Ashawagh Hall and showing locally; she had produced a poster for the Springs Artists' Exhibition there in 1974, only a year earlier.

Rather, Krasner was still fearful that she would be marginalized as a woman artist, particularly in a community where she had long been interacting with her male colleagues, showing with them also at Guild Hall, and earlier at the artists-run Signa Gallery. As early as the summer of 1960, Krasner's New York dealer, Howard Wise, had advised her not to show in all-female shows: "I really don't see the point in a show of work by lady painters. Who cares about the sex the painter belongs to, when it is the painting that counts? And I doubt that you are ambitious to be known as a lady painter, even the best lady painter. There are so many of them, and as such they are not held in particularly high esteem." Wise told Krasner to wait to participate until a women's show would be organized by "some very important organization such as the Museum of Modern Art," but of course that didn't happen in her lifetime.

Ms. Kozloff, who knew Krasner socially, recalls that she was assigned "the unpleasant chore of calling her" about being in feminist shows. "I had to screw up all my courage for that. . . . I can recall her answer when I phoned about Ashawagh Hall, in her inimitable raspy voice, 'I don't want Women's Lib in East Hampton!'" To Krasner, East Hampton was an oasis where she had long found acceptance and showed with her husband, Jackson Pollock, as well as other men, such as Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, and Robert Motherwell.

Krasner recognized the need for a feminist movement, but felt no affinity for feminist art, or anything with labels, for that matter. In 1972, she commented to the art critic Barbara Rose, "I don't suppose I know what's meant by 'feminine' subject matter, any more than I understand what's meant by 'masculine' subject matter."

Ms. Semmel and Ms. Kozloff saw the situation differently. "We needed to be seen as separate to establish identity," explained Ms. Semmel. "We were fearful of all-women shows too; they could be the kiss of death." Yet while they recognized the need to function in the mainstream, they realized that to

achieve that goal, radical action was necessary. This was the moment when there was a huge amount of discussion about what feminist art was. Was it Buffie Johnson's "big vaginal flowers," Ms. Kozloff's or Ms. Schapiro's Pattern and Decoration, or Ms. Semmel's realistic nude self-portraits that defied convention, refusing any longer to be the object of the male gaze and inventing her own point of view?

Ms. Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" was one of the evening performances on Aug. 29 that also featured Lil Picard, whom some have dubbed "Gertrude Stein of the New York Art Scene," and an avant-garde choreographer and dancer, Frances Alenikoff, who presented "a dance trio spoofing stereo-

typed femininity." Other events included the filmmakers Silvianna Goldsmith, Rosalind Schneider, Martha Edelheit, and Dorothy Beskind, who showed her film of the late Eva Hesse working in her studio.

The evening made its impression on The Star's art reviewer Phyllis Braff, who remembers that "It was totally mobbed. Reaction was very energized, attentive, and everybody came with a sense of passion and interest. It had the feeling of buzz and spectacle."

Gail Levin has a house in Bridgehampton. She will speak about her latest book, "Lee Krasner: A Biography," on Aug. 12 for Fridays at Five at the Hampton Library in Bridgehampton.

LUNCH
The **Lobster Roll**
Restaurant
"The Original" Est. 1965

"The Undisputed king of seafood cuisine."
- NY Daily News

Paul's All-Inclusive Daily Specials

- Hot Lobster Rolls
- Lobster Roll Sliders
- "Puffers" aka blowfish
- \$6 Cocktails
- Full Childrens Menu w/FREE Beverage
- Andrea's Homemade Desserts
- Plenty of Outdoor Seating
- New Gluten-Free Menu
- Pet Friendly

"Once you've been here, you're hooked... delicious lobster rolls and fried puffers."
- Zagat 2011

Find us on Facebook
Lobster Roll Restaurant
Amagansett

Follow us on Twitter!
twitter.com/lunchlobroll
www.lobsterroll.com

1980 Montauk Highway (route 27)
Midway Between Amagansett & Montauk
631-267-3740
Open Seven Days

