

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77006
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Press Release

Exhibition

Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People

May 22–November 1, 2026



Mary Ellen Carroll, *No. 9 (My Death is Pending...Because.) Night of Destruction with Fireworks Demolition Derby, 2017* (production still). Video. Courtesy the artist / MEC, Studios. Photo: Michele Asselin.

HOUSTON, TX (February 9, 2026) – Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is excited to announce *Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People*, the first major museum exhibition to survey over four decades of work by acclaimed conceptual artist Mary Ellen Carroll. The exhibition charts the import and impact of Carroll’s exploration of some of the most urgent issues of our time, including environmentalism, architectural and technological infrastructure, immigration, and urban legislation, as well as the artist’s engagement with questions of sexuality and gender, identity and being.

Press Contact

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Mary Ellen Carroll works across various mediums including performance, photography, architecture, writing, video, public art, and policy. In no way comprehensive, this list attests to what is often described as the multidisciplinary and heterogenous nature of their work, its tendency to incorporate modes of working we traditionally associate with other fields such as law; anthropology; and social,

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Mary Ellen Carroll, *indestructible language*, 2006/2021-ongoing. Installation view at the Schoolhouse, Glasgow (October 2021-ongoing). Courtesy the artist / MEC, Studios. Photo: Dougie Lindsay



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Federal*, 2003 (still). Twenty-four-hour two-theater movie (color and sound). Courtesy the artist / MEC, Studios.

political, and natural sciences, as well as the artist's use of a wide, though highly specific, range of materials.

At the heart of Carroll's practice is one fundamental question: What do we consider to be a work of art? This question emphasizes the expansive and exploratory nature of their approach. Often highly collaborative and research based, Carroll's work develops over years of planning and coordination. Process is central in the making a work and encompasses every aspect of its materialization—from its initial conceptualization in writing to the labor that goes into its making. Carroll tends towards an aesthetics of seriality, repetition and distributed media, and exposed the often-invisible inner workings of institutions (including museums). Yet, while Carroll's work often adopts the dry, deadpan documentary tactics typically associated with conceptually oriented art, it is also rife with critical wit, poetics, and pleasure.

Carroll's work tests the elasticity of art and its institutions. But the artist's scrutiny of bureaucracies, their policies, procedures, and administration, is not limited to arts organizations. Carroll has taken aim at governmental agencies, zoning ordinances, intellectual property, and climate conferences. They have rotated a post-war home 180 degrees, proposed putting rabbit ears on a Confederate monument to transform it into a functional wireless transmitter, dropped, exhumed, and buried a stolen 1987 Buick Regal in the middle of the woods in upstate New York, and trademarked the word "NOTHING," all of which attests to their capacity to bind criticality and humor.

Since 1988, Carroll has developed a card catalogue index of ideas and potential works organized by subject. This index comprises the artist's notes, research, and instructions for realized and potential projects and includes subject headings—which number in the thousands—such as "boredom," "pleasure," "taxes," and "nothing," among many others. Six of these subjects serve as thematic sections within this exhibition: **DOUBLING**, **CLIMATE**, **POLICY**, **MEDIA**, **SOVEREIGNTY**, and **BEING**. These subject headings reflect key and enduring concerns in Carroll's work and emphasize the centrality of language to their larger practice. These sections trace the interrelationship between Carroll's larger series—such as *My Death is Pending... Because*. (1986-ongoing), *The Doppelganger Tapes* (1983-ongoing), *prototype 180* (1999-ongoing), *FEDERAL* (2003), *indestructible language* (2006-ongoing), and *PUBLIC UTILITY* (2008-ongoing), among other major projects and lesser-known works.

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Installation view of *prototype 180* at Arthur Ross Architecture Gallery, Columbia University, New York, 2011. Photo: James Ewing.

For their landmark, multifaceted project *prototype 180*, Carroll spent years attempting to acquire a post-war home in the Sharpstown neighborhood of Houston. The artist's original proposal for the piece, written in 1999 after sitting in traffic on California's 405 freeway, lays out its contours: "To make a conceptual work of art whose process will make architecture perform in this age of the political, and to treat policy as a ready-made." The property Carroll eventually purchased, which abuts Bayland Park, has been transformed multiple times over the years including (though not limited to) the rotation of the house in 2010, its subsequent use as a laboratory for students, and the eventual unbuilding of the structure in 2017. The exhibition includes video documentation of the rotation and unbuilding of the house, photographs of its exterior, fragments from its original structure, planning documents, as well as clothing worn by the artist (designed by Thom Browne). *prototype 180* remains a legendary intervention into urban policy in a city absent of zoning regulations and reveals the ongoing nature of the artist's work, or what Carroll refers to as its "intentionally durational" nature.



Mary Ellen Carroll, *Late*, 2005 (detail). Silver gelatin prints. Image and work courtesy the artist / MEC, Studios.

Another ongoing series is *My Death Is Pending... Because*. (MDIPB) (1986-ongoing), which includes (in no particular order) individual works in the form of an Illy brand coffee tin containing the artist's deceased father's ashes; two photographs of a 1985 Buick Riviera crashed into the side of a Munich museum; a video of Carroll—clad in a polar bear suit—climbing a defunct smokestack in Memphis, Tennessee, and dumping half of said ashes down the pipe; two identical photographs of musician Jose Feliciano taken from the inside cover of his 1969 album *alive alive-o!*; a video of the artist driving and destroying the 1985 Buick in a demolition derby in 2017; a 1986 screenprint depicting the contours of Carroll's rear-end made with donated sperm; and any number of ephemera related to these works and others. The artist often describes this series as being governed by a Rube Goldbergian logic, invoking the early twentieth-century cartoonist's famously absurd machines. Under Goldberg's mechanics, a chain of events moves propulsively through a convoluted and haphazard path designed to complicate simple tasks while eventually, however inefficiently, achieving an intended function.

The title of this exhibition, *Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People*, emphasizes the equally irreverent and incisive nature of Carroll's work and is drawn from famed comedian and rabble-rouser Lenny Bruce's 1965 autobiography of the same name. Like Bruce's caustic societal critiques, Carroll's work

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Rebecca Matalon and Mary Ellen Carroll prototyping scaffolding for *Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People*, 2025. Photo: Tasha Gorel.

addresses our most pressing issues with wry intellect, unflinching candor, and a tricksterism that traffics in, and ultimately reveals the underpinnings of physical, social, economic, and ideological structures.

Mary Ellen Carroll previously exhibited at CAMH in 2009 in the group exhibition, *No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston* which included facets from *prototype 180*. As part of this exhibition, they also hosted the first mayoral debate of that election cycle within the Museum's Brown Foundation Gallery. *Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People* marks the artist's return to the space and reflects the Museum's commitment to fostering long-term relationships with artists.

"Carroll is that unique kind of artist who continually reminds you of the power of art and artists to inspire radical change, in ourselves and the world," notes Senior Curator Rebecca Matalon. "This exhibition reconsiders their work and the questions it raises about identity and intimacy, about objects/ideas and their afterlives, and to think differently about emphasizing the pleasures and intimacies that might also come from conceptually rigorous work. It has also allowed us to think critically about the role institutions can play in implementing models for sustainability in the arts."

As part of the exhibition, CAMH is working to reduce its carbon footprint as well as minimize waste. These efforts honor Carroll's long-term engagement with environmentalism and include the use of industrial scaffolding as an armature for the display of works as well as a partnership with the New York-based sustainable fine art logistics company Buoy Fine Art Services. The exhibition architecture was conceived and designed by the artist and Juliana Ziebell and makes use of the overall volume of the Museum while also emphasizing the recursive and iterative nature of Carroll's work by allowing viewers to see works through, between, and in relation to each other.

This exhibition highlights the multifaceted work of an artist who has demonstrated deft institutional critiques of art and used their artwork to interact with and question the politics and policies surrounding social, physical, and ideological structures. *Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People* offers the occasion to reconsider Carroll's work and the value that political and social activism informed by humor and play might offer contemporary critical practices.

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Pedro Alejandro Hernandez, *Portrait of Mary Ellen Carroll*. Image courtesy the artist / MEC, Studios.

Mary Ellen Carroll: How To Talk Dirty and Influence People is organized by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and curated by Rebecca Matalon, Senior Curator, with Yiran Chi, 2025-2026 Rice University Curatorial Fellow.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue co-published by CAMH and Dancing Foxes Press and designed by Teo Schifferli, and featuring new scholarship by exhibition curator Rebecca Matalon, art historian Pamela M. Lee, and historian of science, D. Graham Burnett; reprinted and/or expanded interviews between Carroll and Hamza Walker and scholar David Joselit; as well as poetry and prose by Iman Mersal and Kathryn Scanlan.

About Mary Ellen Carroll

The work of New York-based conceptual artist Mary Ellen Carroll (MEC, studios) engages the disciplines of architecture, public policy, film/media, and technology. Carroll's body of work spans over four decades in a range of media that transcend genres. Fundamentally, the work investigates a single, fundamental question: *What do we consider a work of art?* It is dedicated to a social and political critique that explores the interactions of subjectivity, language, power, and knowledge.

Carroll is the recipient of numerous awards and honors including from the Guggenheim Foundation, Pollock-Krasner Foundation, American Academy in Berlin, Rockefeller Foundation, Rauschenberg Foundation, Graham Foundation, and most recently the American Academy in Rome. Carroll received an MFA from the School of the Art Institute Chicago (1989) where they studied time-based arts, filmmaking, and architectural history, and earned a Bachelor of Science degree from University of Colorado Boulder. Teaching, lecturing and public presentations on architecture, art, and public policy are an important part of Carroll's work and have occurred at the DIA Art Foundation, Columbia University, American Academy in Berlin, Rice University, Yale University, among others.

Carroll's work is in numerous public and private collections in the US and abroad and has been exhibited at institutions including: the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; the Institute of Contemporary Art, London; Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich; the Renaissance Society, Chicago; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; Johann Jacobs Museum, Zurich; Prospect.3, New Orleans; Busan Biennial, South Korea; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; MoMA-PS1; MUMOK, Vienna; Arthur

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Ross Architecture Gallery at Columbia University; Alserkal Avenue, Dubai; among other venues. This is the first major solo museum exhibition of the artist's work.

About Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH)

Established in 1948, CAMH is one of the oldest non-collecting contemporary art museums in the country, and is internationally known for presenting pivotal and landmark work by artists recognized as the most important of the 20th and 21st centuries. CAMH's mandate is to be present, to connect artists and audiences through the urgent issues of our time, and to adventurously promote the catalytic possibilities of contemporary art. CAMH's programming, both in and beyond the Museum, is presented free to the public, and advocates for artists' essential role in society.

Support

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Teiger Foundation

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CAMH Mission

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, in the heart of Houston's Museum District.

Hours

Wed 11AM-6PM
Thu 11AM-9PM
Fri 11AM-6PM
Sat 11AM-6PM
Sun 11AM-6PM

Admission is always free. For more information, visit CAMH.ORG or call 713.284.8250.



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