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Joan Jonas, *Mirage*, 1976, scene from the performance which combined film, video, performance, objects, and drawings. Anthology Film Archives, NY. Photo: Babette Mangolte



Joan Jonas, *Mirror Piece 1*, 1969, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Photo: Joan Jonas



Joan Jonas, *Lines in the Sand*, 2002, installation, screen shot of "Pillow Talk", Documenta 11, Kassel. Photo: Werner Maschmann



Joan Jonas, *Lines in the Sand*, 2002, performance, Documenta 11, Kassel. Photo: Werner Maschmann

Cumulus From America: Joan Jonas

from PARKETT no. 70-2004

by Carolee Thea

While new strategies and languages for negotiating artistic expression, critique, and concern continue to evolve, some older models are holding their ground. Performance art, for example, has been a volatile art form in which artists have responded to current concerns. It is a strategy that generates ideas and reexamines the contemporary from new viewpoints. In the sixties, performance was considered a permissive activity for formal and intellectual excursions to reveal new layers of meaning. In the words of RoseLee Goldberg, the curator and historian of performance, "performance art ...retains a tentativeness that allows the obsessions of our cultural moment to seep from the edges." (1) Considered transgressive, performative works counter the familiar, formal and social goals with their assumption of a non-material primacy over the aesthetic. In many cases, the work explored various realities across the divide of high and popular culture while, through enigma and ephemerality, it aimed to upset routine bourgeois thinking.

For several decades, in inquiries using the body gender, sexuality and materials from other cultures, the pioneering artist, Joan Jonas has continued her work, often out of view. At present, teaching media and performance at MIT she has been frequently invited to do exhibitions, mostly in Europe. Recently, however, she was invited to compose a new work for The Moore Space in Miami, Florida and to participate in her first USA retrospective at the Queens Museum in New York City. As well, Jonas' first New York performance in over a decade revisits the myth of Helen of Troy at The Kitchen, a space that since the seventies has been a leader in presenting performance, dance and multimedia visual culture.

In her complex installations that include drawing, poetry, sculpture, film, video, performance and dance, Jonas analyzes and re-synthesizes the action and interaction of the performing body and its transformations. In her own words, "I didn't see a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film or a dance. A gesture has for me the same weight as a drawing: draw, erase, draw, erase—memory erased. (2) A storyteller or rather a picture-builder, she imbricates cultural and mythological epics with personal narrative, video, and other media. In most of her work, as early as *MIRROR PIECE* (1967,) Jonas examines space and perceptual phenomena while merging elements of dance, Japanese Noh and Kabuki, drawing and sculpture.

By employing live projections, single channel video, and asynchronous picture and/or sound sequences, Jonas reveals the manipulative potential of film and video techniques. In her groundbreaking video, *VERTICAL ROLL* (1972,) an interrupted electronic signal causing a vertical roll on the monitor was transformed into a formal device to dislocate space and fracture recorded image. For *WIND*, a 1968 work, Jonas focused on a group of performers moving through a stark, windswept landscape. Her performers struggle over and over with their fluttering coats, battling the gusts. The 16-mm film, silent, black/ white, jerky and sped up evokes early cinema, while its content locates it in late-sixties Minimalism. (The camerawork and editing was done in collaboration with Peter Campus.)

In *SONGDELAY* (1973), another early performance film, Jonas is concerned with stripping down the medium and foregrounding the figure and its ritualistic movements in space.

VOLCANIC SAGA (1987,) begins with rituals of the everyday that the artist links to myths, sagas, and fairy tales. Based on the thirteenth-century Icelandic Laxdeala saga, the work is a narrative reverie, a televisual retelling of a medieval myth about a young woman (played by Tilda Swinton) whose dreams foretell the future. Shot in the dramatic natural landscapes of Iceland and in New York, the performance-based work uses ancient dream analysis as a starting point for a densely textured tale in which the young woman's interpreter (played by

Ron Vawter) hears her dreams and sees their meaning. Jonas employs multilayered digital effects to create a ritualistic dreamscape of the young woman's imagination and desires. The ghostly overlays of otherworldly images and mythical text imbue this work with a haunting beauty.

The principal structuring element of Jonas' work has been the simultaneity of live performance and video imagery; by switching back and forth and shifting the gaze, one mode or object supplements the other. Borrowing narratives or poems, objects, cameras, bodies and movement, the artist creates a patchwork of the esoteric and mundane to reveal symptoms of the present.

Continuing to accommodate a widening inquiry into familiar patterns of narration, in 2002 Jonas created a work for "Documenta 11" based on an epic poem in confrontation with the disjunctive tensions of our postcolonial world. While much of the artwork in Kassel concentrated in a documentary mode, a significant number of artists sought ways of translating the moment into the kinds of languages necessary for shaping the production of new and different forms of knowledge to complement the contemporary upheaval of received realities and ideas.

In that work, *LINES IN THE SAND*, the artist took as her starting point "Helen in Egypt," an epic poem by H.D., the Imagist poet Hilda Doolittle. The canonical Helen myth, based on the tale of war fought at Troy for a woman stolen from the Greeks, has for centuries been preferred over a lesser-known version in which Helen remained in Egypt the whole time and never set foot in Troy. The true cause of the war was thus disguised by a more romantic, appealing and palatable idea that dissimulated the actual reality of a brutal war.

In H.D.'s poem, Helen continually questions the reality of her own myth, and Jonas questions the cause of wars in general. In the case of Troy, Jonas surmises that the likely reasons for the war could be found in the more mundane ongoing tensions between Greece and Troy over access to trade routes in the Black Sea.

More material for the weaving of *LINES IN THE SAND* was found by Jonas in H.D.'s writing sessions during her analysis with Freud, (as recorded in her book, *Tribute To Freud*,) in which the poet examined with Freud, aspects of her "peculiar" experience of writing on the wall while recuperating in Corfu from her divorce from the poet Richard Aldington. In her performance, Jonas entwines the performative act of wall-writing with the Helen myth, while also incorporating a text from yet another culture. Within this text, as a play within a play, the artist inserts the ancient Irish epic, the *Tain*, a tale embedded in the larger hero-cycle of Cuchullian. Building her own narrative, she incorporates a multilayered reality alongside the Helen myths—a shadow of a shadow. For example, in the segment titled *Pillow Talk*, a newly wed Irish king and queen are in bed discussing which of them has the most possessions. Their often humorous dialogue echoes the trade wars between Greece and Troy while demonstrating how personal arguments over possessions begin at home. In drawing these two myths together, Jonas enacts the political and the personal while intimating the contemporary.

The performance aspect of Jonas work embroils us in the mirror world of vertiginous realities. Jonas develops her own emblematic and striking visual and theatrical vocabulary by synthesizing ritualized gestures and objects like masks, costumes and mirrors. The back-and-forth of the artist drawing on the ground or walls with chalk attached to a branch, and performers in masks and costumes enacting stylized dance-like repetitive moves, contrast with the monitors projecting a glut of oversized imagery which includes; digital patterns, shadows, sarcophagi being pulled by trucks (in a reference to Egypt as a postmodern Las Vegas.) and audio contrasts between Erik Satie and rock music. Combining past myths with the present, Jonas juxtaposes time and idea to create more tensions for the viewer who, meandering through a set comprised of monitors, drawings and objects, gradually untangles the web.

Paralleling the interactivity of modern life, as in the play of virtual reality or cyberspace, Jonas' work offers the illusion of constant movement and refocus, as an implied action between gazer and other, to create restless motion in a fragmentary dream. As a participatory game, the artist's work involves us in ways that are subliminal, challenging and assaulting. Yet, within her systematically constructed grounding, the multi-layerings gain directness, as their intensity and uniqueness transport us through time and place.

Finally, *LINES IN THE SAND*, plays out a kind of scenario in an intelligible format and political

language that attempts to highlight the political upheavals in contemporary society. While Jonas' signature contribution is ephemeral, it enhances re-cognition of ideas that intellectuals and artist, both inside and outside the "advanced" economies, continue to grapple with.

1. *RoseLee Goldberg, Performance: Live Art since 1960 (New York: Harry Abrams, 1998, p.11.*

2. *Joan Jonas, Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum/Eindhoven:Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983 p. 137*

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