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# ARTS EXCHANGE







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**PERFORMANCE as  
METAMORPHOSIS**



Roberta Nelman

Joan Jonas, *Mirage*, 1976; performance at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

**The Art of Joan Jonas**

*Jeanne Silverthorne*

There's been a lot written about Joan Jonas as video artist—which, by the way, she prefers not to be called; she chafes, understandably, at the implied limitation—and about her performances, but nothing much has been said about the imagery that pervades all her work. One after another commentator sidles away from the issue, including Jonas herself. She once ended a summary in *Drama Review* of the seven most important years of her career with the remark that "It is not possible at this time, however, to give the subject of my imagery full consideration." And I now begin to understand

why. There's a curious circularity to Jonas's images that ties up the tongue, unfortunately for the gut, which would be eloquent if it could.

Hearts, moons, suns, butterflies, triangles, circles, cones, and X's, which have appeared throughout her pieces, and which were no less in evidence at her recent Philadelphia exposure at the Institute of Contemporary Art (Dec. 4, 1976—Jan. 5, 1977), are trick symbols in their very simplicity. Let me begin by repeating what Joan Jonas was kind enough to tell me they are **not**. They are not specific, there is no one-to-one correspondence of emblem and meaning,



and, if they are psychologically revealing, she said, that is beside the point. As to what they are: first of all, the triangles, cones, circles, and chiasmata are basic drawing units, according to Jonas; secondly, they are magic shapes, but, again, connotative rather than denotative. Her sketches assume a cabalistic look but not a cabalistic message. She is interested in myth and ritual and draws her material from *The Golden Bough*, among other sources. And she has always been fascinated by magic shows. So far, so good.

But the problem is that if it is necessary, as Jonas herself points out, to root these images in a larger framework in order to deflect any charge of their gratuitousness, then what is the connection between these two reasons, drawing and magic, and how does that connection fit in with Jonas's larger design? Well, part of the answer is illusion. The other part is, I think, metamorphosis. They may sound like the same thing, but they are not. Obviously, both drawing and magic have to do with illusion, hence one connection between them. But they are also both agents of metamorphosis: drawing is the transformation of meaning into signs, as the artist transcribes experience or ideas, and signs into meaning, as the viewer absorbs and re-translates, a kind of passage from quick to dead, *ad infinitum*. It's hardly surprising, then, that Jonas spends so much time scrutinizing movement. The hearts that she drew for her *Stage Sets* were not stylized valentines but biological, with ventricles reaching out for context, pumping hearts, vehicles for circulation, renewal, for transformation from the carbon dioxide-filled to the oxygen-filled, in short, for metamorphosis. The circular rays of the sun or moon outlined on one wall and of the pyramid on another were energetic representations of life-giving, influencing centers, just as Jonas herself is a radial point, who as artist converts inanimate to animate. Not content with showing us the illusion of change as the light behind a plant in "Good Night, Good Morning" affects its size and appearance, she presents a substantive change by displacing it with a floral-patterned kimono. The plant literally comes alive, dancing with the motion generated by the wearer.

Which brings us to the distinction one must insist on when talking about illusion and metamorphosis. Illusion is "unreal, deceptive or misleading," it comes from the Latin *illudere*, "to mock or play with." There is no suggestion of falsity, of deception in the definition of metamorphosis; it involves a real, if magical, alteration. On the other hand, metamorphosis hints at a process, flux, whereas illusion is usually fixed, an accomplished trick. We might try for an hypothesis as follows: if illusion equals false but fixed, and metamorphosis equals true but unstable, then truth equals ambiguity. And here we arrive at the point of Jonas's art. If it is impossible to fix the truth, then the best one can do is either present the unresolved conflict or exhibit the positive and negative in a deadlocked confrontation. As such, working with the information provided by Jonas that one of her uses of the triangle is as a sym-

bol for woman, we can read the conclusion of "Glass Puzzle," in which a postcard of a pyramid is held in front of a woman whose several previous positions have made triangles out of her arms and legs and have created triangular shadows and patterns on her leotard-clad body. This body, in turn, had been contrasted with that of Jonas herself, dressed in loose pants and blouse, the draping of which, as she took the positions the second woman was to copy, was also predominantly triangular.

The tension, then, between illusion and metamorphosis, movement and stasis, deception and reality, surface and depth, mantling and revelation, between



Joan Jonas, *Stage Sets* (detail), 1976.

what Jonas called the "clear and opaque magic of material" is the explanation for the particular images that recur in her oeuvre. She uses images which are absolutely basic, primary, as if to signal that she is trying to get at the simple truth; but these same images are so basic as to invite a myriad of associations, too complex ever to be fixed, because the truth never is simple.

As if to warn or guide us, she placed to the immediate right of the entrance to her ICA environment a bright red, yellow, and blue toy butterfly visible behind the transparent center of a tall rectangular mirror from which the silver backing had partially come away. Not only is the butterfly the very symbol of metamorphosis, but, at first glance, the tableau seemed to represent the triumphant moment of its emergence from the chrysalis of the

mirror. A closer look made it clear that this brilliant creature was after all also a mechanical toy, on wheels, in fact, not alive, a mere painted thing as much a prisoner in its glass case as any of its mummified kin in a lepidopterist's collection. The point is the same one that Spencer, incidentally another circular artist, made in "Muiopotmos: or the Fate of the Butterfly." In the contest between Pallas and Arachne for artistic supremacy, Pallas embroiders a "Butterfly... that seem'd to live, so like it was in sight," and Arachne yields her victory. But after a careful rereading of the poem, it is not at all certain that Pallas's tapestry, though more faithful to

which, by now, will seem familiar.

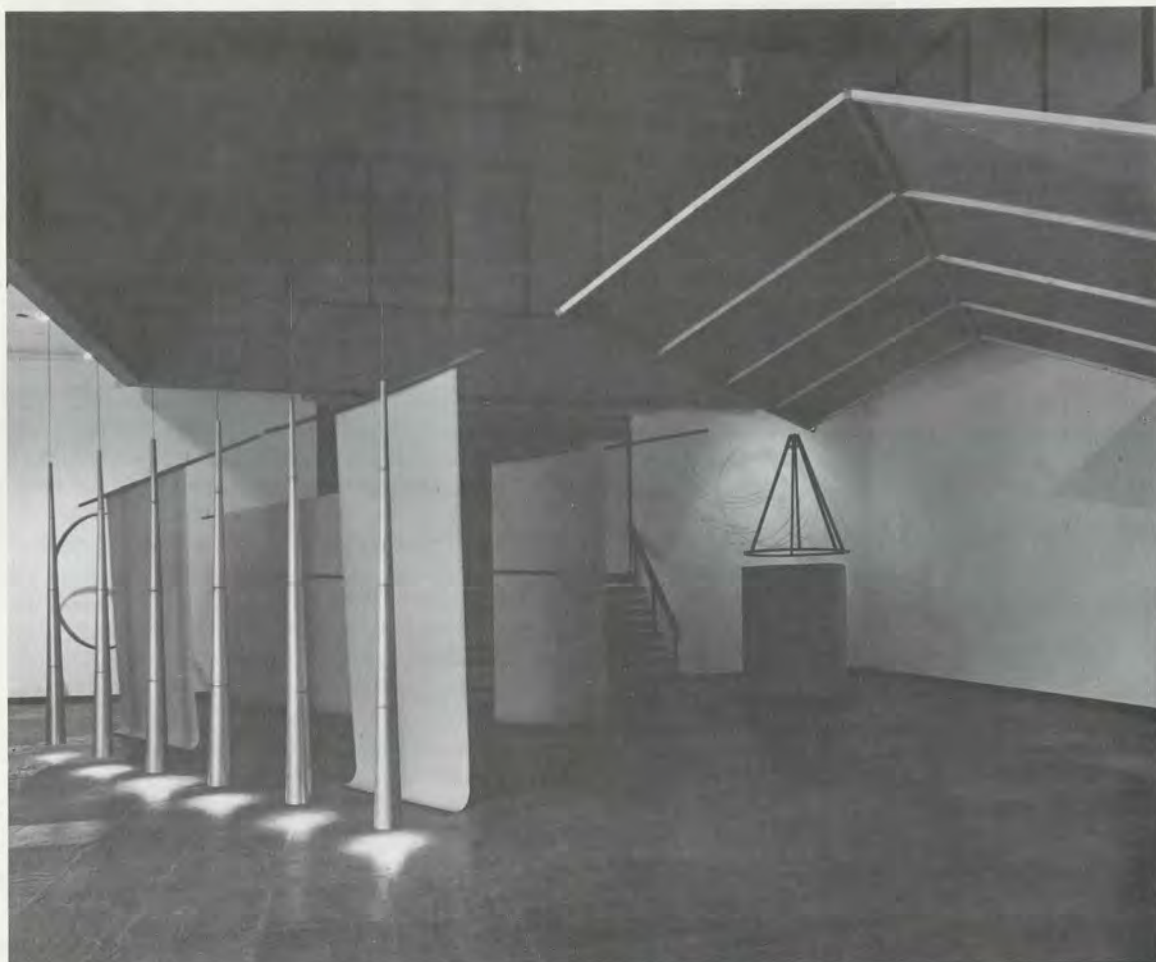
Likewise, in the videotapes, "Left Side, Right Side" and "Vertical Roll," there are two contrasting methods of handling movement. In the first, after dividing her face in half and marking one side of the axis with a circle and the other with an X, Jonas presents a series of views of her face to the camera, each view separated from the next by a blackout. The sequence is echoed in "Visual Telepathy," where the intermittent face is seen always in half shadow. This is suggestive of nothing so much as the diurnal nature of existence, and since Jonas's face in both instances heralds the return of visibility, of light, there's an inevitable association of it to the sun and/or moon. The different placements of her head, chin up, chin down, full cropped, right profile cropped, etc., are like the different placements of these two bodies in the sky, high or low, east or west, according to the day and season. In addition, these are, cleverly, imitations on video of the operation of film—frames of frozen images which if speeded up would provide the *illusion* of motion. The blackout periods do get shorter and shorter, but they never cease to cloak the shifts, and finally we never see the movement, only the arrival. It is like a graph on which a certain tendency has been plotted when the coordinates have been marked, but the curve has not been drawn. Nevertheless, our reaction is Bergson's to Zeno's dissection of the arrow's flight—we intuit what is missing.

## We intuit what is missing...

In "Vertical Roll," there is a segment in which a woman's face turns slowly but continuously in close-up. Her profile, on a diagonal, gradually takes up most of the screen, slowly rotates to face us, finally achieves the diametrical profile and sinks diagonally out of sight, again like the moon in its graduated phases of waxing and waning. Throughout, the action is punctuated by the band of a vertical roll and a rhythmic clapping. This time, although the movement is presented as it happens, the sense of discontinuity is paradoxically stronger than in "Left Side, Right Side" or "Visual Telepathy." When Beckett's *Watt* watches of an evening the passage of the full moon through a two-barred window, it is as if he were watching it on four different nights, one during which the moon is a quarter moon, one a half, one three-quarters, and only one full.

The identical antithesis exists between "Good Night, Good Morning" and "May Windows." In the former, Jonas sums up the piece by turning two bare bulbs on and off individually, once after she says good night, once after she says good morning. The after-image of the bulbs lingers on the screen for a second in both instances. The second set of bulbs is red. Although the two sets are separated by only a few seconds, one can easily imagine the passage of a whole day. In "May Windows," however, the camera records unwaveringly for the last minutes of the tape the shifting, so subtle as to be imperceptible,





Joan Jonas, *State Sets*, 1976; an environment created for the Institute of Contemporary Art.

of light through a window, so subtle, actually, that the video camera cannot distinguish it. The only indication we have that time has not altogether stopped is the persistent background noise.

The disappearing booth—what could be a less equivocal reference to illusion? And yet, Jonas invited her audience to find as well as lose itself in this part of her environment. Presto, she set up another metamorphosis. The booth, inconspicuous on the outside, except for a red skeletal pyramid suspended directly over it, was hung with red plush curtains on the inside, in part because, as Jonas said, insides are red. In front and slightly to the right as you entered was a mirrored column with a mirrored niche containing two stones, one a smooth heart shape, the other rough and possibly triangular. On the floor to the left was a tall paper crown painted with stars and circles in red, blue and yellow. The immediate overwhelming sense was indeed of a missing person, the abdicated ruler who has left the trappings as well as the key of existence, his crown and his heart, behind, and perhaps also there was the sense of a disguised presence, a presence once large enough to wear the high crown, now shrunk or concentrated into the hard rock of a small heart—distilled, maybe. So that under the pyramid that legend has it keeps things alive there was only evaporation and petrification? Not exactly. There was also the viewer's own reflec-

tion in the mirrors; one walked into a *tete a-tete* with oneself. And the crown on the floor seemed to issue a mute invitation to self-coronation, to pick up and put together the head and heart and assume the kind of power to conjure that Jonas as sorceress-artist wields.

Jonas herself seemed ready for another metamorphosis when I talked to her. She mentioned that she was growing tired of one of her own mediumistic devices—video. She felt a need to simplify, to break through the clutter of the hardware that had helped her grow. Yet, from the evidence of her work so far, one expects that she will find a new tool for creating illusion and that the need to break through will be balanced by a new distancing as well—it seems a dialectic absolutely necessary to her art.



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