

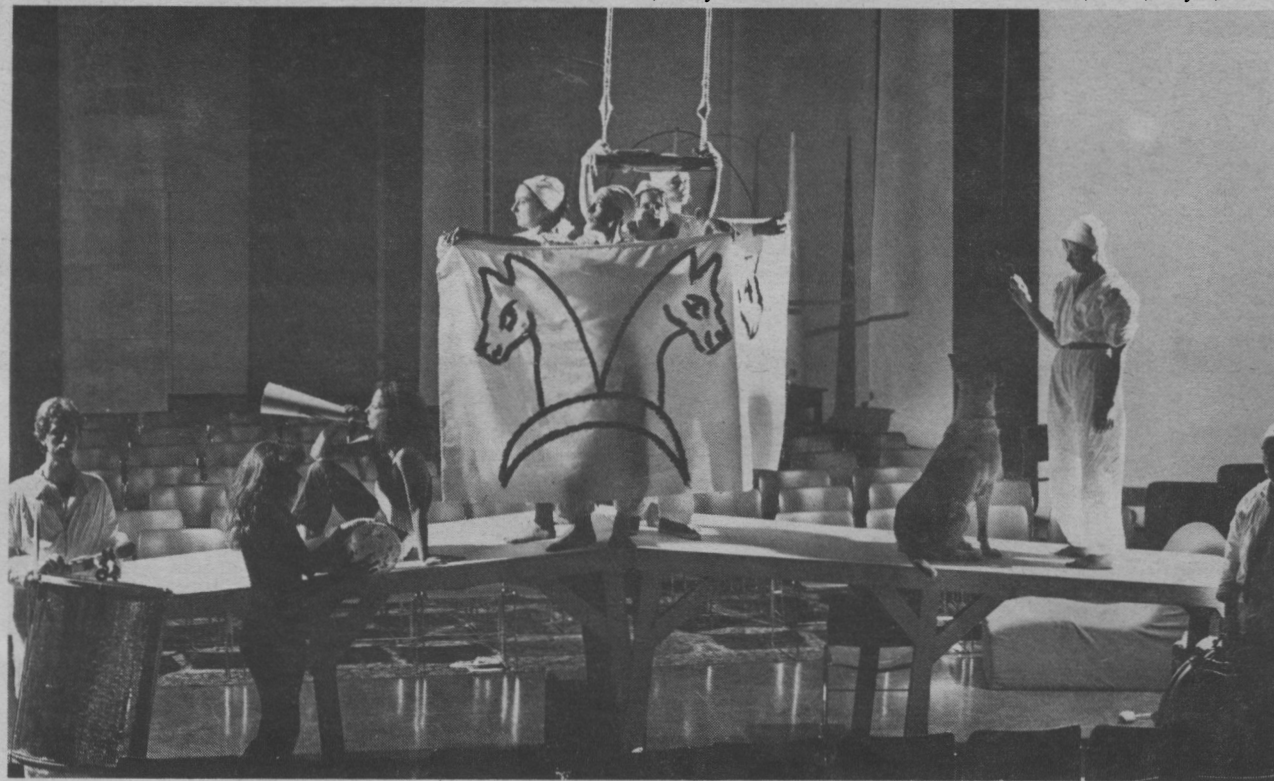
JOAN JONAS' FUTURISM

Berkeley / **Mary Stofflet**

The advantage of arriving nearly late for the world premiere of Joan Jonas' *Double Lunar Dogs* is that I couldn't get a seat. As a standee on one of the many ramps at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, I was able to look down, across and up at the action with relative ease. *Double Lunar Dogs*, the last in a five-week retrospective of performances by Jonas, was designed to take advantage of the museum's multileveled, jagged interior space, and succeeded to such an extent that it was often impossible to keep track of simultaneously rising and falling bodies on half-a-dozen surfaces and not one, but two projections of filmed interplanetary scenery.

By now the Jonas vocabulary is familiar, although she embellishes and magnifies nearly every aspect of it in the new work. The result is a richer fabric of layers — more people, more props, more technology — but not necessarily a more intense experience. The elements which were haunting in *Mirage* (ART-WEEK, June 7, 1980) — a mask, a sound, a shamanistic drawing and, most of all, the poignant solitude of the artist as she struggled to control these elements — are reduced, in *Double Lunar Dogs*, to the strength of so many sketchy squiggles which are overpowered by the grandiose scale of the piece. As I did during *Mirage*, I asked myself, *Why* is she doing this? By way of an answer, nothing emerged beyond Jonas' obvious fascination with utilizing the museum's interior space as much as possible, and this on a scale that outdoes many off-Broadway theatrical productions. (The piece was originally planned for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.)

As she did in previous work (*The Juniper Tree*, for example), Jonas turns to a literary source in *Double Lunar Dogs*, but rather than rely on folklore (Grimm Brothers in *Tree*), she chooses futuristic fables. The story of *Dogs* is based on Robert Heinlein's *Universe*, and there is a plot (we are all in a space ship and the dogs are loose in the corridors above, waiting to get us); but it is incidental to the effect of the piece. The set is elaborate in the lower floor gallery but does not contain all the action. A punk band plays later from an upper level, the dogs/villagers run up and down the



JOAN JONAS: DOUBLE LUNAR DOGS, performance, at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. Photo: Benjamin Blackwell.

ramps from one overhead area to another, and in one of the final sequences, Elsie Ritchie, who plays Jonas' double, is thrust toward the ceiling on the platform of a Ballymore, a mechanical device dear to the hearts of acrophile preparators. Seldom have so many resources of a museum been employed in full view of the public. But then, that was part of the underlying collaborative concept of *Double Lunar Dogs*.

The cast of characters includes the artist, dressed in a white-fringed red jump suit, her double (dressed differently), Paul Cotton, who at one point stands atop a balloon-laden platform spouting occasional platitudes of scientific and historical wisdom (this is Paul Cotton at his least interesting), six or eight dogs/villagers who travel en masse and sometimes end up writhing about in center stage like the suddenly reactivated cast of the *Raft of the Medusa*. Jonas and her double behave with considerable detachment throughout, although they do take a break from painting dog faces on plexiglass to engage

in a tug of war under the center stage ramp while Cotton indulges in an athletic, flash-lit tantrum directly above their heads.

There are touches of humor. While Jonas wears a spangled mask and sets on a swing, the dogs/villagers try to convince her that six sparklers are the universe. Later she describes what seems to be an imaginary adolescence as a dog, before she was "chosen to join a gang of dogs training on the moon to help humans who were lost in space."

With a prodigious quantity of people, props, lights, film, live music, flashing lights, live dogs (yes) and four floors of unobstructed space rising above her, Jonas succeeds in producing the illusion, as she described it, of "a spaceship that has been traveling for hundreds of years in which everyone has forgotten where they were born and where they were going." *Double Lunar Dogs* is unpleasantly reminiscent of *2001, A Space Odyssey*, an experience that most people remember for its overproduction and tedium. □