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If there is a premiere artist working in video and performance today, it is Joan Jonas, whose mysterious, ambiguous, complex *Mirage of Phantom Knot* filled Anthology Film Archives with aficionados of the medium two times each night last weekend (May 20-24). From the first bars of a plaintive English ballad sung on tape in summer-night-on-the-porch style by Jonas and friends to string accompaniment, the hour-long performance moved through some twenty tightly woven segments in several media without a break in flow, despite radical shifts in mood.

The elements that make all Jonas' performances and tapes absorbing and energizing works of art are present in *Mirage*, at the same time that the work seems to mark a decisive shift in emphasis. In terms of familiar elements, *Mirage* relied heavily on sound—on hoarse whispers and angry shouts into long metal cones, on song, on dogs barking; on video works that created ambiguous image spaces, sometimes by using vertical roll; and Jonas herself, making gestures, performing acts and assuming body postures full of unarticulated significance. As in her last performance at the Archives, Jonas also made extensive use of the projection screen, which can be changed in height and width by remotely controlled motors to alter the performance space itself.

"Since I started to do performances in the late sixties, I've been concerned with changing the audience's perception of space," Jonas said. "In an early performance at Allan Saret's loft, I was on the floor below and the audience saw the whole piece reflected in a mirror through a hole in Saret's floor. I worked a lot with mirrors then. They flatten space, and so does video, so when you use mirrors, or video, you have another kind of space to work with visually."

"During that time I also got involved with distance, which also creates flatness, and I did a piece on Jones Beach in 1970, where I was a quarter-mile from the audience. It was also one of the first performances where I used sound in relation to space as a basic element, although I had been working with sound in relation to image in film. I used wooden sticks to make sound, and the distance was great enough so that the image and sound

and attempted to translate my outdoor ideas into a film called *Song Delay*."

One of Jonas' first videotapes was *Vertical Roll*, an acknowledged master work in the medium. It was a tape in which she used the normally disturbing ele-

they look on me."

"It was on a trip to Japan when I bought my first Portapak and started to work with video. While I was there I got very interested in the Noh plays. I saw a lot of Kabuki too, but the Noh plays really influenced me, especially the sense

cones used in *Mirage* are made of galvanized tin, so that they alter the timbre of sounds made into them and mask the intelligibility of speech. "I see a cone as a funnel," Jonas said, "and that means a lot of different things to me, like something that gathers in as well as



Joan Jonas

ment of a vertically rolling video image to create a hypnotic, sensuous image flow which forces the viewer either to struggle with the rolling image—to resolve what would normally be there—or to yield to the flow. The tape involved the use of rich fabrics, masks, and a wealth of objects, and a powerful range of ordinary sounds, amplified or displaced in context so that they became eerie and exotic.

"My families all collected objects," Jonas said, "and I used whatever was available, and I used my self. I was involved with how video worked, what I could do with it, how it worked visually. From the beginning, my concern has always been primarily visual. When I use clothes in my tapes, for

of time. I think that the Noh and the Kabuki theaters put together probably contain every idea for theater that you can think of. And when I got back, Jack Smith was doing his performances, and his timing was more like Japanese than American, and that was very important to me then. So when I made *Vertical Roll* in 1972, I was involved with those ideas. I was also trying to get away from minimalism, and that was why I got into using objects and masks. The masks were also to help me get past the fact that I wasn't a trained performer, so I didn't have to use my face."

Like a number of Jonas' recent pieces, *Mirage* involves the use of long, slender cones, both as visual

sending out, something feminine. Whenever I do a piece I open myself up to whatever I'm working with, like a funnel. I first used the cone in a piece at the Kitchen three years ago, where I constructed an elaborate set which narrowed at the back, like a funnel, and I used a cone as one of the objects."

In *Mirage*, Jonas initially uses several cones at different backstage locations to funnel toward the audience the voices of two women (herself and Christina Patoski), engaged in a loud, angry, accusatory, nagging series of exchanges. She uses a cone again in a similar "argument" with herself, rushing intensely from one end to the other, as if to catch the full impact of her own accusations and

small platform/stage she uses for the piece. She backlights the transparent screen to reveal Patoski arranging a rank of cones against the Archives' back wall. And the cone/funnel image appears in startling silent footage of an active volcano, with massive, fiery eruptions, lava flows seemingly a few feet from the camera, and walls of steam rising as walls of lava pour into the sea.

The volcano also embodies one extreme of the wide tonal swings of the piece, signaling a distinct shift from Jonas' earlier work which was, like most performance artists', cool and even in tone. "When I start work on a piece," Jonas said, "I have certain ideas in mind. I wanted this piece, really, to be about changes of mood. And about energy, about different kinds of energy." Accordingly, the work alternates intense passages with cool ones. Jonas plays a videotape, made with a fixed camera, of a white room with French doors, through which we see her pass to a window. As she opens the window, we hear dogs barking, a familiar sound pattern in her tapes. She opens and closes the window, looks out, comes back, returns to the window, and so on, wearing an embroidered silken kimono. It is a layering of space, sound and texture typical in her work.

As the tape plays on the monitor, Jonas sits on the platform so that the "stagelight"—a single, small monitor on one corner of her platform—throws her shadow on the white projection screen. The effect is as if her shadow were a reflection, watching us even as we watch her on the monitor. The silent watching of the audience is repeated again in other parts of the performance. Again, in other "cool" passages on the monitor, on the screen and on the platform, Jonas draws in chalk on a blackboard in simple, repetitive patterns.

Besides the use of explicitly intense tonalities, Jonas also presents another shift in that, for the first time, she is *funny*. The nagging, angry exchange at the beginning is presented as so much ado about nothing that it becomes funny. One of the chalk drawings involves a circle of double lines, like an *I Ching* diagram, each pair of which she crosses, but one. Just before the image fades out, her hand appears to dash back, as if just remembering, and crosses the last line-pair, creating a visual joke with an almost oriental quality. Again, she includes a videotape in which she taped herself first thing

every morning and last thing every night, as she found herself at the moment. Each time she reaches toward the camera to say "Good night" or "Good morning," and turns it off, so that the tape works, at one level, as a comic piece.

But *Good Night/Good Morning* also embodies a more basic aspect of *Mirage*. It is a tape, Jonas says, "in which I wanted to break my masks. I'm going through changes, and allowing them to come out." This "allowing the changes to come out" is one of the essences of performance art, an aspect which holds each work in the present and identifies it solely with the artist at a given moment in the artist's life. It is Jonas' ability to transform this immediacy in formal terms that makes *Mirage* a significant work of art. ●