

The Encounter with the Gaze behind the Mask

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"Masquerade is not as recuperable as transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constituted as a mask – as the decorative layer that conceals a non-identity."¹

The first impression is of an act of seduction. The sensual smile of her mask coquettishly plays with youthful beauty and an erotic attraction that is underscored by her sequined, richly embroidered dress. A majestic vision that sashays about proudly on high heels, crowned with an imposing feather headpiece: The opening scene of the performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, first performed in 1972, in which Joan Jonas completed the transformation into her alter ego, Organic Honey. At the same time she appeared as an image on a video monitor placed between her and the audience. She presents herself as an "imitation of a Bengal goddess" to the camera, which serves her as a mirror, transmitting her self-absorbed poses to the monitor. Exotic depictions of femininity that correspond to the cliché of the beautiful, sexually available woman – like a Japanese geisha or the image of a courtesan on a fan – accompanied the performance.

The scene changes again, and another performer appears, wearing the same plastic mask as Organic Honey. Both women lie down together under the camera, embrace each other, and roll across the floor in an (auto)erotic game. The video monitor shows details of their bodies in motion as they kiss and touch each other; their fragmented images shifting constantly within the frame. The public saw what the camera saw: detail views and fragmentations of a performance that the artist thus deliberately distanced from the audience.

This brief sequence from Jonas's first video performance already contained *in nuce* all the features that have char-

acterized her work up to the present. The doubled or mirrored female figure is recurring motif in Jonas's stagings of erotic images of women. By using masks and exotic costumes she reveals their femininity as a construction and exposes them as projections. The masquerade proves to be an ironic game with various identities whose ephemerality and ambiguity are exposed by Jonas's performative images.

These impressions are not transmitted directly. Instead, the artist's performances capture us in a complex net of loosely interrelated images, movements, and sounds, to which she gives expression in various ways: through her own voice, machine noises or taped music, dance, painting, moving props, and drawing. In her video performances these images manifest themselves on various levels of perception: as live performance, projection, and on monitors.

I

Joan Jonas's performances cannot be understood in isolation. Rather, they reflect the radical tendencies that were active as part of the conceptual and feminist currents in American art since the fifties: fleeting, time-based, and process-oriented artistic practices that dealt critically with the dialectic relationship between art and life. These performative modes of expression penetrated all artistic fields – music as well as theater, dance, and the visual arts. They signaled a break with the traditions of modernism, by making it possible to experience art as a transaction between the personality of the artist, the object, and the viewing public. In this way, they opposed an open perspective to the modernist conception of the work of art as a formally organized, self-contained mate-

rial object. The body became the most important means of expression for these art forms. They opened up for debate categories like the primacy of the gaze or the integrity of the subject. Performance art drew attention to perception as a contingent, fragmentary experience. In the late sixties and early seventies women artists in particular concentrated on their own bodies and representations thereof as "the Other" – as the object of the male gaze and the focus of self-perception. Finally, performance expressed a critical engagement with the institutions and sites that offered space for such representations.

One precondition for the development of performance art in New York was the creative collaboration of a large group of artists, musicians, dancers, which had already begun to form during the forties.

In music it was John Cage who introduced the human fascination with everyday noises into his compositions. He had the idea "to compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat and landslide."² A non-intentional music that implied to the listener that "the hearing of the piece is his own action – that the music, so to speak, is his, rather than the composer's."³ During this same period the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham was developing new practices in dance that were based on natural and random sequences of movements. Walking, standing, jumping, and the entire spectrum of natural body movements were, in his view, expressive means in dance. The two men were involved in a collaboration that lasted many years whose artistic fruits were extended still further in 1952 at the Black Mountain College when Robert Rauschenberg designed stage sets and costumes. This cooperation and interpenetration of various artistic domains provided important stimuli for the development of the performance art in the sixties that sought to fuse everyday life and art.

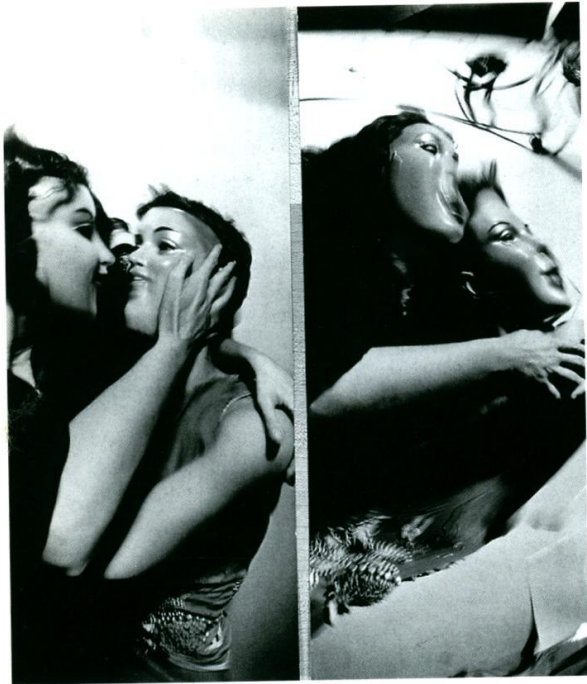
In the fall of 1958 Allan Kaprow initiated his first public performance with *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, in which the public was directly involved. It consisted of fragmentary actions that produced neither context nor meaning, "something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen."⁴ This conscious repudiation of meaning and the combination of artistic and quotidian activities within the framework of a unique action was a feature of the per-



Joan Jonas *He Saw Her Burning* (1982) Videostill: Joan Jonas

formances of many other artists who were working in New York at the time: Red Grooms, Jim Dine, Al Hansen, Robert Whitman, and Claes Oldenburg as well as Yoko Ono and Charlotte Moorman, whose actions became known as part of the Fluxus movement. Their most important medium and theme was the body freed from its traditional context of meaning.

The sites at which performances took place were also unconventional: empty churches, lofts, or gymnasiums. A roller skating rink in Washington provided the stage for Robert Rauschenberg's first performance, *Pelican* (1963); later the New York movie theater Filmmaker's Cinéma-thèque became the platform for many performances, including Robert Whitman's *Prune Flat* (1965) and Rauschenberg's *Map Room II* (1965). The dancers who took part in *Pelican* – Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, and Deborah and Alex Hay – who, as former Cunningham students, not only participated closely in the realizations but also in the design of Rauschenberg's plays, introducing props as moving abstractions. Rauschenberg's vision was to design costumes, stressing their character as objects that the distinction between the props and the dancers' bodies would disappear. Robert Whitman, by contrast, deliberately emphasized the distance between the audience and the stage. In *Prune Flat* he worked with a stage design that evoked the theater and appeared rather two-dimensional. The actors moved about in front of a giant projection on which they themselves could be seen but which also functioned as a projection screen for images and film sequences. In one film



Joan Jonas *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972) Performance: ACE Gallery, Los Angeles 1972, Foto © Larry Bell

scene two girls moved across the screen at the same time as they ran across the stage as live actresses. Whitman also managed the transformation of film images into real images on the stage by introducing mirrors. The limitation of time and space were the central points of reference of this performance. The piece revolved around the relationship between a film that was made beforehand and the deviations and repetitions of a past action that was replayed on a platform in the present. These elements would return a few years later in Joan Jonas's performances, where she developed them further in a variety of ways.

The extent to which Jonas's works, as well as the pieces of other performance artists, profited from motivations provided by other disciplines like music, theater, and dance can be demonstrated by a number of examples. These developments were stimulated by the work of dancers like Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Steve Paxton, and others who had worked together with Cage and Cunningham. But it was the Californian choreographer Ann Halprin whose workshops were the primary influence on this process. She started from "chance procedures, improvisation, move-

ment generated by everyday tasks, use of the voice while moving, playing with words."⁵ Halprin and the dancers of the Judson Dance Group, which was founded later, developed a choreography of improvisations and spontaneous impulses that was based on elementary, repetitive movements. The result was a new vocabulary of expression that sought to escape the narrative or emotional character of standardized modern dance. In the art scene their unusual choreographic ideas fell on fertile soil. Together with the musicians Terry Riley, La Monte Young, and Warner Jepson, they founded the Judson Dance Group in 1962, an artistic community in which, alongside architects, painters, and sculptors, a large number of interested laypersons took part. Their unconventional dance practices stretched the limits in dealing with space and body in a way that had previously been alien to the work of visual artists. Artistic activities and daily life could merge into each other, daily activities and objects were exploited as performance material. The notion of community played an important role, which explains the enthusiastic reaction with which Yvonne Rainer recalled these projects: "What excited me was that we had done it together. It was definitely a social and cooperative group event with a tremendous feeling of solidarity and *esprit de corps*. I think that must have communicated itself to the audience. There was no one person's work that was highlighted or dominated."⁶

Joan Jonas lived and worked amid this downtown scene in New York, which initiated a radical change in consciousness, both artistically and politically, and was one of the driving forces behind performance art. She herself placed her work in direct relation to this development when she wrote, "(I)n the 60's in New York The Judson Church project opened a way for visual artists like me to go into performance. In the works of dancers – Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, and Simone Forti, in particular – there was an exploration of natural, everyday movement. I began my work, first simply, in relation to the job of moving, or being moved by, props. Slowly over the years I developed more complicated moves with music, sound, mask, object."

The cooperative and experimental character of the Judson Dance Group characterized Jonas's first *Outdoor Pieces*, which were conceived for a performance in the country or in urban situations. They often included a

group of performers whose actions the audience could follow only from a distance. The individual activities of the performances and their interplay were determined by pre-set rules. Their structure followed a simple schema: apart from a few simultaneous movements, everything took place sequentially. Douglas Crimp's description of *Jonas Beach Piece* (1970) (fig. 12-15) can give an impression of this performance practice:

"A single performer walks to the middle of the flat expanse and calls in four different directions: 'north', 'south', 'east', 'west'. Hidden, the other performers answer, establishing points of the compass with their voices. At the most distant point from the spectators, Jonas, naked, runs as fast as possible from dune to dune, bending down, picking up shells, and throwing them. A man appears wearing a large sheet of tinlike armor. As he runs, the tin makes the sound of thunder. A second man chases him and throws stones at the tin. They zigzag through the flats, the sound following them. A woman joins them as they pause. The three form a diagonal across the entire expanse, from the closest to the farthest point. In sequence they clap the blocks of wood together, the sound delays progressively diminishing the closer performers stands to the spectators. In the middle distance, Jonas, dressed in a long, black skirt, Arabic head scarf, and heavy wooden welding shoes, runs across the space to the middle of the mud flat. Her long strides are affected by the weight of the shoes. She empties a red bag of shells and then madly shovels them, throwing shells into the air. Making a flag with the red bag and the shovel, she waves it as she runs off to a dune. At the same time another woman walks a long diagonal path toward the audience. With her head thrown back, a white scarf tied across her mouth, and her arms wrapped around her body, she bends her torso, straightens it, and shakes. Jonas runs toward the middle dune, while other performers crawl in the grass, fragments of their movements visible on the dunes' edges. Blindfolded, they walk out, one by one, wearing black capes that blow in the wind and large blocks of wood tied to their feet. They play an erratic game of hide and seek. Two men hold a rope in a diagonal line, which, from the spectators' perspective, appears to foreshorten into a straight line. Jonas emerges from behind a dune wearing a white hockey mask and a blue silk suit with a twenty-foot train, which the wind blows into an enormous arc. She runs toward a large rec-

tangular mirror lying in the mud. The train becomes wet and heavy, and she lies down and looks in the mirror. While performers stamp their wooden shoes in a mud dance near the rope, a ladder is brought out and placed at the point most distant from the spectators. Jonas sits on top of it, her train blowing in a big arc. She holds a mirror in such a way that it reflects the sun into the spectators' eyes. The other performers run back and forth along the diagonal rope. The two performers holding the rope "capture" the other performers and pull them out of sight. Jonas climbs down from the ladder and runs off. Two performers roll a large metal hoop, in which a third performer is outstretched like the spokes of a wheel, into the far distance. Finally, all the performers gather around the ladder and attempt to set it on fire."⁸

Like Whitman and the members of the Judson Dance Group, in her early works Jonas concentrated on treating the props and performers equally in the staging, which required a reevaluation of the relationship between subject and object, public and performers, action and space: "(P)erformance is not in a space separate from the ongoing activities of daily life. My own performance came from trying to transform and communicate this experience to my audience – my community." An important aspect, which had already crystallized in these early works, was Jonas's desire to establish distance between herself, the performers, and the public. In doing so, she was concerned to make the audience aware of the contingency of perception: "(D)istance flattens circles into lines, erases detail, delays sound. The mirror reflects light over distance. Working with the flat expanse of distant space I was trying to work with the absence of depth over distance, in a sense to displace the idea of the space or what happened in the space." In her *Outdoor Pieces* Jonas presents the landscape as a surface, turns it into a picture, and in this way makes a theme of the ambivalent relationship between reproduction and reality in the context of a postmodern society that increasingly equates reality with what it sees on the (television) screen. This practice is based on the idea that perception by means of a pictorial medium – either through our sense of sight directly or by means of a technical apparatus like a video player – is contingent and unstable. The identification of the image is a cerebral process that works with preexisting ideas. By intervening in the process of perception through alienation and fragmentation, Jonas attempts to

disturb these preexisting images and attributions of meaning, thus de-synchronizing moving objects, landscapes, and props by means of spatial distance. She pays particular attention to the representation and reception of the body. It is the living body that is subjected to this fragmentation and de-synchronization. Or, to cite Douglas Crimp, "there is no centered self from which the work can be said to be generated or by which it can be received. Both performer and spectator are shown to be decentered, split." The determining image or epitome of this split and contingency is the "image of woman", the mask behind the mask, which, as will be shown, merely conceals a nonidentity.

Jonas's critical engagement with the definitions and representations of "feminine identity" and self-perception is closely related to the circumstances that characterized her development as a feminist artist.

The surroundings of the Judson Dance Group offered women artists favorable conditions in which to position themselves and their work within a new context that was not ideologically burdened. It is significant not only that women represented the majority within the open and liberal structure of the Judson Dance Group but even more so that they had equal status alongside their male colleagues and took on creative leadership in many areas. This was extraordinary in the social circumstances of the early sixties, and it was closely related to social and political changes that began to happen within the recent art scene in New York in particular. These concerns were considered a kind of philosophical imperative for the cooperative artistic work of the Judson Dance Group, and the approaches that derived from the collaboration of Rauschenberg, Cage, and Cunningham provided the aesthetic basis.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the works created as part of the Judson Dance Group concentrated on a critical assessment of images of the body, equal rights, and the representation of gender identities. In particular, the dissolution or blurring of gender roles – something that had previously been prevented by an incompatible perception of the moving body – was the starting point for groundbreaking performances. One of these early Judson projects was *Word Words* (p. 50), choreographed by Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton as part of

Judson *Concert #3* in January 1963. It consisted of a ten-minute performance in which Rainer and Paxton came on stage almost naked and in complete silence. Both made the same movements, separately at first and then repeated them together. Their unaffected dance, the repetitive structure, and the fact that they performed the same movements together drew the audience's attention away from the difference in gender and toward the movements of their bodies and the interaction of their choreography.⁹ Another performance that dealt critically with sexual coding was *Waterman Switch*, a piece in which Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris slowly encircled the rigging loft completely naked, accompanied by Lucinda Childs, who was dressed.¹⁰ One female critic described the performance as "chaste as a handshake. [...] Unsensational and unsuggestive, its attempt to shock seemed, oddly enough, only touching."⁽¹¹⁾ Because the performers offer their naked bodies for view without falling into the stereotypical patterns for such performances, they offer no screen on which to project a voyeuristic gaze. Rather, these choreographers present an image of the body that seeks to communicate a "neutral" human expression. Sexual difference as an aspect of establishing identity fades into the background. This procedure has its powerful effect precisely because it fundamentally calls into question the social strategies that serve to produce and maintain identity. In the sixties the body was not only at the center of artistic interest but was also a theme of cultural and political debates that revolved around personal self-determination. People demanded the liberation of institutional and state regulation, of racial and sexual discrimination, and of bourgeois prejudices about sex and drugs. Performances that introduced the body as an artistic means or explored connections between bodily needs and taboo behavior were perceived as alienating or even threatening. When the artists made themselves the theme of their work, they were taking a considerable physical and psychological risk, and their motives were often misinterpreted as narcissistic or neurotic.

In the final public performance of the Judson Dance Theater, *Concert #16*, in the spring of 1964, Robert Morris together with Carolee Schneemann presented the performance *Site* (p. 53), whose critique of modern conceptions of the artistic subject and the pictorial tradition that was so closely tied to conventional definitions of gender seems paradigmatic in view of the aesthetic and emanci-

pating innovations of the performance art of the sixties. This example also elucidates where Jonas's performance methods relate to existing approaches and where they – sometimes critically and ironically – point beyond them.

In this performance Robert Morris appeared entirely dressed in white, with work gloves and a close-fitting, flesh-colored mask. He stood before a white box the size of a room, from which the taped sounds of a pneumatic hammer could be heard. To his right lay three panels, painted white and lying one on top of the other. He set one of them up a few steps away; he removed the second one from the stage, returning a few minutes later to remove the third with a single motion to reveal a reclining odalisque. Her upper body was resting on white pillows; her skin was covered from head to toe in white makeup that matched her surroundings. She represented a facsimile of Manet's *Olympia* – a central work in the history of art, which Morris treated in this performance as a kind of found object. Throughout the performance she remained motionless while he moved the panel back and forth, creating a moving, white spatial sculpture from the panel and the body of the odalisque.¹²

Several aspects seem significant in this constellation of performers. First, the way in which Morris made an image from the living body of a woman – in the provocative pose of a courtesan, though the provocation was immediately undercut because she looked like an image. Second, the fact that he himself appeared with a mask that made him anonymous as an actor and thus called into question his traditional status as an artist. As Henry M. Sayre has noted¹³, Morris's mask did not simply express a recognition of a willing loss of identity vis-à-vis his artistic work. Rather, by means of the mask he eliminated his own personality and thus the decisive element that until then had essentially determined the definition of artist and artwork. The view of a subjective, unique artistic vision that presumes the artist-subject as genius, was revealed by Morris to be a myth. Not least their direct reference to a master of modernism like Manet clearly revealed Schneemann's and Morris's interest in demolishing that myth.

Similarly, Morris was also working with the space, which he divided into an internal, hidden area and an external, visible one. Consequently, the viewer's desire to discover something special in the interior of his white box was only

apparently satisfied – by the view of the performance artist Carolee Schneemann presented naked, as a visual quotation from art history. Precisely because her body became an image, a quotation, Morris made something ordinary out of something mysterious: Schneemann's body was turned into a nude, fixed in a pose that may expose the female body but revealed nothing more than the stereotyped surface of "woman as image." She too wore a mask – the mask of "femininity" as an object of the voyeuristic gaze. Schneemann consciously stuck to her role in order to make the equation of "femininity" and pose itself the theme of the performance. Jonas too took comparable images as a starting point, in order to problematize the ambivalent relationship between the status of woman as image and her status as subject, as artist. This self-dramatization in a masquerade of erotically charged female images using the means of performance and video is the focus of the following remarks. They show the extent to which Jonas goes beyond merely problematizing this ambivalent position and how in the performance her body breaks through the conventions for representing "the feminine".

II

In the performance *Mirror Check* of 1970, Joan Jonas emphatically placed her own body in the center of her work. During the piece she stands naked before her public. She turned her gaze on herself, using a small hand mirror, which she moved around her body in slow, circular movement. What she saw was details, close-ups, fragments – her own body in pieces. The viewers, in turn, could not see these details, perceiving her body instead as a unity. What Jonas was calling attention to in the performance was the futility of perceiving one's own body as a "whole" – and thus the incompatibility of the subjective perception of the body with the gaze at this body from outside.

In 1972 *Mirror Check* became the introductory scene for the video performance *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* – a variation on *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. An important aspect of this piece was the video sequence in which Jonas once again presented her body on stage in a fragmented way. The images, which were made to roll by manipulating the image frequency, showed her head, which seemed to be beating against the edge of the

screen; her legs, which leapt on the edge of the image; her hands rhythmically pounding it; and close-ups of her stomach, torso, face, and mask. In this video performance Jonas substituted the video camera for the mirror. The camera, too, broke up the space, reflected and fragmented images of the body, and played with the idea of narcissistic perfection that ultimately proved to be an illusion.

In this work Jonas was referring to Lacan's theory of the mirror stage. This reference is revealing, because it allows for the possibility that by confronting the structures that determine our gender identities we might be in a position to recognize and destabilize identifications that are ideologically, and only apparently "biologically", determined. On this basis, one can produce new, transitory identifications that elude the compulsory forms of a lasting identity. By observing herself in the mirror from behind a mask, Jonas demonstrated the function of the mirror stage at several levels: in the mirror only a constructed identity is visible – identity proves to be a fiction. The moment at which she removed the mask is like an act of disenchantment. Jonas's sober gaze and her unaffected movements revealed the erotic promise of the figure Organic Honey to be a deception. At the same time, Jonas's own face appeared like a mask of the ordinary that eludes communication with the viewers and thus any possibility of identification.

In *Vertical Roll* Jonas made this aspect the focus by replacing the mirror with video technology and exploiting new means of fragmentation and de-synchronization. In a sequence that the public could follow only by means of the monitor, because the artist acted behind a wall, Jonas put on the black, sequined costume of a belly dancer: "In a belly dancer's costume I jumped in and out of the bar of the vertical roll like frames in a film going by. This out-of-sync dysfunction of the television – the rolling pictures – presented on the screen parts of my body, never a whole." Jonas is concerned not least with interfering with television's function as a modern apparatus for the production of images and to undercut its means of producing them by making reference to erotic representations of "the feminine".

With these fragmented images, Jonas returns to a common subversive practice in twentieth-century art: the

artistic reproduction of fragmented bodies. At least since the time of the surrealist movement, these trends have expressed mistrust of the humanist ideal of a subject that conceives itself a unity. The starting point for this critique is the narcissistic figures who feel compelled to use the mirror image to reassure themselves that they have an *entire* body. Fragmented images of the female body in particular have a subversive function, because they are no longer available as projection screens and thus deliberately frustrate any possible fulfillment of identification wishes. Moreover, this method of getting to the bottom of existing "truths" (in this case the idea of the "entire" body) by dissecting them proves to be *deconstructive*.

When Jonas dissects the image of her own body into fragments and then sets them into motion by means of video technique, she does not put on stage the destruction of her (female) body but rather uncovers the structures that underlie this illusion.¹⁴ These fragmented images of the body disturb the illusion of a "female sexual identity" that cannot be used "to represent something 'authentically' feminine, which – because it is impossible – cannot be depicted".¹⁵

III

In addition to fragmentation and de-synchronization, the mask and masquerade function as a leitmotif in Jonas's deconstructive approach to "feminine" identity. As has already been shown, in the opening scene of *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* the artist transforms into her alter ego Organic Honey: "Wearing the mask of a doll's face transformed me into an erotic electronic seductress. I named this TV persona *Organic Honey*."

Jonas thus evokes images of a seductive female body – by means of sequined, glittering material, feathers, make-up, fans, and other set pieces of erotic femininity like the mask. Jonas has remarked on this: "The particular mask of *Organic Honey* created a persona that seemed to be distinctly someone else. A mask here altered body language – I could add an erotic tone. I imagined playing roles like an electronic sorceress or a dog. I howled. I sang. I danced. I explored the place of women in history as outsiders – healers – witches – storytellers. The video monitor's screen or the projected image was another

mask for the construction and deconstruction of persona."

Jonas's self-presentation in the mask of an erotic seductress is consequently not a confirmation of or identification with the feminine role as the object of the male gaze. Rather, she problematizes in this way her ambivalent double function as subject and object of her artistic work. In her masquerade she consciously makes use of conventions of representation that present woman as the object of desire in order to call these images into question by leaps and distortions. Jonas thus radicalizes the connection between the traditional function of the "woman as image" and her position as subject, as an artist, and she also makes its precarious position evident by depicting herself in fragmented ways. The confrontation with the fragmentary views of her body reveals the split in the artist as subject: perceiving herself simultaneously as an active subject (conceived as male) of the gaze and as its passive object. When Jonas uses her own body as an artistic means, she draws our attention to this ambivalence whose inner tension is released in the erotic self-presentation.¹⁶ Unlike Schneemann, who as Manet's odalisque made us aware of her ambivalent status as woman and artist by consciously imitating this modernist conception of femininity but did not subvert it, Jonas employed the multilayered expressive possibilities of performance to overcome their status as images. She showed her body in motion in order to literally jump out of the image, as in *Vertical Roll*. The decisive aspect is that she was not, like Schneemann, frozen in her eroticizing masquerade. Rather, the views and movements of her body dropped out of the role of feminine self-representation and presented them as mere set pieces of an ephemeral construction. By doing so, she refuses the "feminine" pose and prevents her body from being captured in an image and thus turning into an object.

As Kathy O'Dell has shown, clothing and masks are an important way for Jonas to establish distance between herself and the public (mirroring, projection, and lighting serve the same purpose). This distancing ironizes the associations of her pseudonym, Organic Honey, "for what she hides, as she hides behind this mask, is the problematic tendency of the viewing subject to reduce gender to 'organic,' 'natural' meaning."¹⁷ Jonas thus consciously refers to the equation of woman and nature,



Joan Jonas *Funnel* (1974) Performance: University Art Museum Berkeley
Foto © Benjamin Blackwell

whereby the name Honey also alludes to her availability as a sexual object. Mary Ann Doane has alluded to the subversive function of the masquerade in the context of the naturalization of "the feminine": "The masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic."¹⁸

In Jonas's work, the mask functions as a deliberate deception, as a mystery. The historical identification of "the feminine" with the enigmatic, the inexplicable, plays an important role in this. Or, to cite Doane again, "In this sense, the hieroglyphic, like the woman, harbours a mystery, an inaccessible though desirable otherness. On the other hand, the hieroglyphic is the most readable of languages. Its immediacy, its accessibility are functions of its status as a *pictorial* language, a writing in images. For the image is theorized in terms of a certain *closeness*, the lack of a distance or gap between sign and referent. [...] And it is the absence of this crucial distance or gap which also, simultaneously, specifies both the hieroglyphic and the female."¹⁹ Feminine identity can thus only appear as an image, as representation, that is not preceded by any "natural" existence.

In her play with masquerade and clothing, Jonas is concerned with demonstrating that her sexual identity is enigmatic and volatile. In her outdoor performance, *Jones*

Beach Piece, she appeared in a long skirt, Arabic head scarf, and heavy wooden shoes – a costume that she exchanged during the performance for a hockey mask and a blue silk suit with a long train. In *Funnel* (1974) she wore first a white satin suit, then in another scene appeared in a red *shadri* (an Afghani full-length veil), her face and body mysteriously covered (p. 65). At the end of the performance she appeared in a blue silk blouse in the nineteenth-century fashion. Her clothing in *Mirage* (1976) was also made of white satin. An important feature of this performance was a Mexican mask – a male face with a rigid, melancholy look and narrow, open lips. At first, Jonas placed the mask on her face, then took it off, lay down on the floor with it, and observed it with a loving gaze (p. 56). Then she placed the mask back on again and stared into the audience. This play with sexual identities was also a theme in *He Saw Her Burning*, a video performance from 1983, in which she put on a mask with a male face in order to cover her own facial features (p. 59). Even so, the almost transparent structure of this mask allowed Jonas's physiognomy to shine through and thus suggested a new face that seemed masklike and also communicated a lively play of facial expression that did not have its own identity.

She has explained this practice in a commentary: "To be without expression was the style of performance art. I used the mask as a way of exploring female identity. This instantly took away facial expression and my identity. Masking both concealed and revealed possibilities of representation that may not otherwise have been possible for me."²⁷ Jonas was not searching for "better" roles or counterproposals to traditional images of femininity. Rather, she was putting her own "femininity" on stage, dramatizing her erotic effect, and not concealing her ingenious play in this masquerade.

When Jonas puts on masks, wraps herself in the veils of clichéd feminine roles, she separates that which is defined as "feminine" from her body and locates it in the realm of artistic production. What is there behind it to discover is not an enigma but the direct, unvarnished gaze of the artist into the camera. The deception behind this sober unveiling is proof of the effectiveness of Jonas's strategy. The important realization lies in the experience that hidden behind the mask there is only another mask. Or, as Doane has put it, "Masquerade is not as recupera-

ble as transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constituted as a mask – as the decorative layer that conceals a non-identity."²⁰

In her later performances Jonas once again concerned herself with the mechanisms of representation and turned her attention to narratives that already have a subversive structure inscribed within them. Fairy tales and sagas provide her with symbolic images of femininity whose psychological differentiation interested her: "With the fairy tale I was once again looking to see what roles women play and how they are represented. Again it is an exploration of the self. The story becomes the mirror of my projections. I look for how the stories reflect basic human psychology and behavior, while laying bare the hidden taboos."

The frame of the performance *The Juniper Tree* (1976) was established by the Grimm brother's fairy tale of that title, in which two famous female figures appear: the good mother and the evil stepmother. Jonas portrayed both characters, putting on masks and costumes to slip into these different roles. The good mother wore glasses and a simple, monotone overcoat. The evil stepmother was her erotically charged counterpart, with a gypsy mask, high heels, and blood-red lipstick, whose appearance signaled sexual activity and self-confidence – and thus danger. Jonas was particularly interested in the dark, uncanny side of this female figure³⁰ – not least as the embodiment of a desire that is taboo and demonized in the patriarchal pictorial tradition. It is particularly remarkable that in this particular case Jonas introduced the masks as a way of making it clear that the assignments of the roles were ephemeral: as the "evil stepmother" she changes masks constantly in order to express her changing moods.

Thus, in her adaptations of fairy tales and sagas Jonas referring directly to her earlier – non-narrative – performances, like *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. Here the artist cites a wide variety of depictions of "femininity", thus surrounding herself with an abundance of contradictory images of women in order to elude definitive attributes of "the feminine". Fragmentation, masquerade and de-synchronization follow the same concept as a method of performative deconstruction: they reveal to us the

integrity of physical unity as an illusion and thus make us aware of the dissolution of identity and categories like gender that establish identity. By using her own body to blur the attributions of identity. Through her use of images in constant motion that interact with the characteristic props – mirror and mask – Jonas interferes with the viewer's potential wishes to project or identify, and this allows her to overcome the traditional status of the "woman as image" in order to define her own parameters for an artistic self-representation.

- 1 Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (September–October 1982): p. 81
- 2 John Cage, quoted in Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York 1988), p. 123
- 3 John Cage, quoted in Goldberg, *Performance Art*, p. 124
- 4 Allan Kaprow, quoted in Goldberg, *Performance Art*, p. 130
- 5 Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore 1999), p. 53
- 6 Rainer, 1999, p. 59
- 7 Jonas: "There was also the desire to work outside the conventional spaces of museums, galleries, and theaters. The point of view of the audience was questioned. I step in and out of my work in order to direct the perception."
- 8 Douglas Crimp, ed., *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California; Eindhoven: Stedelijk Museum, 1983), pp. 27–28
- 9 A critic remarked on the performance: "After the first surprise, the nudity makes no difference at all. [...] The dancing impressed itself upon the spectator as the significant aspect of the whole thing. At the end, the performers might as well have been wearing fur coats for all the difference their lack of apparel made." Quoted in Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago and London 1989), p. 117
- 10 See Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art and Life", in Gary Sangster, ed., *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object; A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA since 1950* (Cleveland, Ohio 1994), p. 44
- 11 Jacqueline Maskey, "Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris", *Dance Magazine* (May 1965): pp. 39–64
- 12 See Jill Johnston, "The Object", *Village Voice*, 21 May 1964, p. 12
- 13 Sayre, 1989, pp. 72–73
- 14 Jonas: "I like to reveal the mechanics of the illusion"
- 15 Sigrid Schade, "Der Mythos des 'Ganzen Körpers': Das Fragmentarische in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts als Dekonstruktion bürgerlicher Totalitätskonzepte", in: Ilsebill Barta et al., eds., *Frauen, Bilder, Männer, Mythen: Kunsthistorische Beiträge*, Berlin 1987, p. 243
- 16 Kathy O'Dell, "Performance, Video, and Trouble in the Home", in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Metuchen, N.J. 1990, p. 148
- 17 Doane, 1982, pp. 81–82
- 18 Doane, 1982, p. 74
- 19 Doane, 1982, p. 81
- 20 Jonas: "I became interested in the literally devouring female in the story – or frightened by this representation. And this interested me, as it suggests our own hidden selves."