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MODERN WOMEN

WOMEN ARTISTS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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was to separate the female body from eroticism: "I felt it was important to use the female body to create art. I knew that if I did it naked, I would really change how the (mostly male) audience would look at me. There would be no pornographic or erotic/sexual desire involved—so there would be a contradiction."⁷ EXPORT directed video documents of her early actions, which were performed live several times for an audience and then never again. The videos captured the durational aspects of her actions more accurately than photography could.

In 1974 I helped launch MoMA's ongoing video-exhibition program under the umbrella of the Projects series, and among the first works I featured were several early black-and-white videos documenting actions by Rebecca Horn, Friederike Pezold, and Gilbert & George. These early exhibitions shared a gallery with an old technological favorite, Thomas Wilfred's *Lumia Suite, Opus 158* (1963)—with one work showing in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Together with MoMA's projectionists, I learned how to open playback decks and unstick jammed cassettes.



By then playback equipment had become relatively simple to use; three-quarter-inch cassettes were easy to distribute; and in due course portable video cameras, although still hefty, were able to record in color. Emerging video artists, wanting their work to reach the widest possible audience, sold their tapes to universities, libraries, and museums in unlimited editions at modest prices. MoMA began acquiring artists' videos in 1975, after seriously considering the responsibilities entailed in video preservation.⁸ Our original video advisory committee members included the innately inquisitive and supportive trustee Blanchette Rockefeller; I remember her at a reception, sitting on a bench next to Bill Viola, thoughtfully asking him to please explain his video work, which he eloquently did. Video was the first new medium to be added to MoMA's collection program in more than forty years; among the first works acquired were *Now* (1973), by Lynda Benglis, and *Vertical Roll* (1973), by Joan Jonas.

Originally associated with Minimalist artists, Jonas began by making sculpture before moving on to dance and video. What attracted her to performance was the possibility of mixing sound, movement, and image into a complex composition; she felt she wasn't good at making a single, simple statement, like a sculpture:

I brought to performance my experience of looking at the illusionistic space of painting and of walking around sculptures and architectural spaces. I was barely in my early performance pieces; I was in them like a piece of material or an object

3. VALIE EXPORT (Austrian, born 1940), *Hyperbulie*, 1973. Video (black and white, sound), 6:31 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

that moved very stiffly, like a puppet or a figure in a medieval painting. I didn't exist as Joan Jonas, as an individual "I," only as a presence, part of the picture. I moved rather mechanically. In the mirror costumes in *Wind* [her first film, of 1968] and *Odd Lou* [her first "action"], we walked very softly with our arms at our sides as in a ritual. We moved across the space, in the background, from side to side. When I was in other "Mirror Pieces" a little later, I just lay on the floor and I was carried around like a piece of glass.⁹

Jonas was greatly influenced by Jack Smith's midnight events in his SoHo loft, at which he would mill around, pass out joints, and assemble a costume from heaps of clothes piled up on the floor, vamping in different personas. No one could quite distinguish, during those protracted evenings, between his life and art, where one ended and the other began; the time-based works by Smith, and by others, were excruciatingly long, and it was not uncommon for viewers to doze off, or go out for a short walk and then return. This elongated sense of time reinforced an impression that Noh theater had made on Jonas on a trip to Japan in 1970, and she subsequently developed for her own performances an alter ego called Organic Honey (from a label in her kitchen), whom she imagined as an electronic sorceress, a conjuror of images (no. 4).

These images began as reflections in mirrors, with Jonas studying her own face or parts of her body in a detached manner. When she added video to the performance, a live camera linked to monitors provided greater control and revealed hidden details, with a continuous series of shots explicitly choreographed for the camera and close-up details of the live action fed to monitors arrayed on stage. *Vertical Roll* was a performance that later became a single-channel videotape, but both versions take advantage of early video's specific qualities: the granular black-and-white image; the flat, shallow depth of field; the moving bar of the vertical roll (a flaw that vanished

with digital TV sets); and video's live, simultaneous image. In the video version, the vertically rolling close-ups of Jonas's face and sensual satin dress move in counterpoint to the brash clang of a spoon hitting wood, creating a feeling of discontinuity that remains a key preoccupation in her work to this day.

In her next performance, *Twilight* (1975), Jonas gradually and impassively removed her clothes and, holding a small mirror, slowly scrutinized her body—a boldly transgressive act. At the work's first performance, at the Anthology Film Archives, Jonas varied her use of the theater's projection screen, rhythmically playing it the way percussionists play drums: as a conventional screen, depicting images of erupting volcanoes; as a scrim, with shadows cast from the action behind it; as an opaque wall, bathed in white light; as a vertical, rather than horizontal, field.

Twilight evolved into *Mirage* (1976/2003, no. 5), the last in a series of performances that deal with simultaneity, featuring multiples of the artist—the real version, on stage; the live video version, shown on one monitor; and different prerecorded actions, shown on another monitor and also projected on the screen. One prerecorded video, made as a kind of diary, showed a sleepy and disheveled Jonas facing a camera to say "good night" and "good morning" every day for a year; onstage the artist quickly drew sketches of the sun and moon, depicting a constant flow of night into morning into night. *Mirage* later became a fixed installation in MoMA's collection; viewers walk around the gallery, discovering connections between six videos and a series of props (a Mexican mask, ten-foot-long aluminum cones), which are dramatically lit and placed to evoke the original stage.

In 1975 I met Anna Bella Geiger, who arrived from Rio de Janeiro with a series of new etchings and videos. Geiger belonged to the postwar generation that came of age as Brazil exploded with political and economic ambitions. She was barely twenty at the time of the first São Paulo Bienal, concurrent with the founding of Rio



4. Joan Jonas (American, born 1938). *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. 1972. Video (black and white, sound), 23 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Florsheim Foundation, Joanne Stern and Barbara Pine

4. Joan Jonas (American, born 1936). *Organic Honey's Head Telepathy*. 1972. Video, black and white, sound, 21 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Florence Foundation, Joanne Stern and Barbara Pine



5. Joan Jonas (American, born 1936). *Mirage*. 1976/2003. Six videos (black and white, sound and silent), props, stages, photographs, duration variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Richard J. Massey, Clarissa Alcock Bronfman, Agnes Gund, and Committee on Media Funds

