

# Joan Jonas and Cultural Biography

Berkeley / Mary Stofflet

Retrospective exhibitions are familiar enough — the past two years have seen comprehensive surveys of work by twentieth century names such as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Philip Guston and even Marsden Hartley. When the artist has been dead for many years, as in the case of Hartley, a revival of interest may accompany such an exhibition; when the artist is living, he or she is often shocked to see the output of decades brought together for the first time. The public, in turn, may be enlightened or depressed to view the continued explorations or solidified continuations of such an artist. A retrospective of an artist who concentrates on video and performance art initiates new reflections.

Consider the current retrospective of performance, video and installation work by New York artist Joan Jonas at the University Art Museum in Berkeley. Jonas' work, as represented in this show, covers a period of less than ten years. All of it is temporal, so there is no possible way to linger in the galleries, returning to and comparing new and old favorites. The works that don't hold up well cannot be bypassed by walking faster, but must be endured by the audience until the final scene. This means that Jonas' work is subject to a sort of scrutiny which rarely occurs in a major exhibition of painting or sculpture. Some of her work suffers as a result.

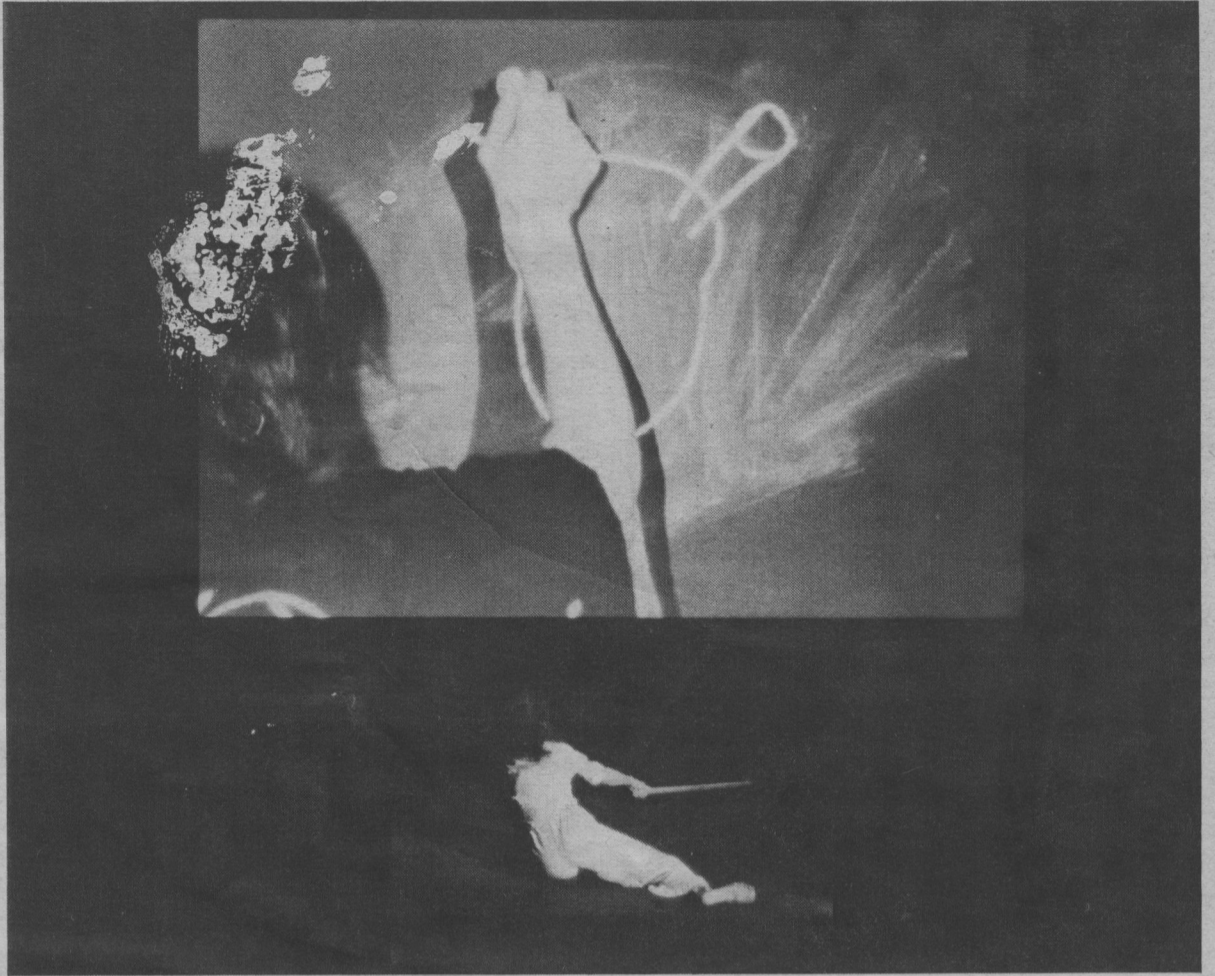
As the exhibition will be presented until June 29, at this writing I have seen the following: four videotapes (*Vertical Roll*, 1972, *Disturbances*, 1974, *Glass Puzzle*, 1974, and *I Want to Live in the Country*, 1976); one performance, *Mirage*; and an installation consisting of the remains of what I took to be the previous night's performance, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*. Near the video monitor are seven aquatints produced at Crown Point Press — large, emblematic drawings of sun, heart, rainbow and other forms that the artist creates as part of her performances, in this case, *Mirage*. How is one to fit all of this together and develop a cohesive viewpoint of Jonas' work? It isn't easy. It is easy to say, oh, yes, her work has been very influential, for you can see traces of it in many video and performance pieces by other artists. Since many of the spinoffs seem, to me, to be more memorable than the originals, this line of reasoning goes nowhere. What does emerge is a body of work which, in the early 1970s, was concerned with autobiographical matters and an exploration of the female psyche, and has moved on to material based on folk sources and archetypal figures, using elements of spatial definition, time definition and repeated sounds to build experience.

Jonas was once a sculptor, yet she constructs her

## Photographic Content, Sculptural Form, continued

in numerous other prints: people's names, linking them with the object shown, figure prominently in the titles — *Gail's Place*, *Jeff's Hats*, *Duke's Tulips* or *Still Life at John and Mary's* — but the people are conspicuously absent. In such prints, Carson avoids the element which might be most interesting in a visual sense, thereby exploiting the fine line between the enigma of provocatively mysterious objects and the near-abstract of rigorously simplified formal shapes.

In some sense, that aspect of Carson's work occupies a common ground with Kakuda's sculpture. Carson's prints become more interesting as a concern for abstract shapes and patterns supersedes the presentation of recognizable form. Conversely, Kakuda's sculpture becomes richer as it increases in complexity, avoiding the element of predictability which can occur in the repetition of shape or color. Kakuda's elemental shapes work best when they are part of a larger, more complicated system of sculptures that can be seen as modulations of light and shape, rather than as a group of precious little objects. Carson's prints also quickly go beyond representation into a more provocative and cerebral arena. □



JOAN JONAS in *Mirage*, performance, at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. Photo: Benjamin Blackwell.

pieces, especially *Mirage* and *I Want to Live in the Country*, with the dedication of a seventeenth century painter — layer upon layer of visual and aural sensations simultaneously assaults the viewer, leaving the impression of a rich but unsatisfying experience. The lack of immediate satisfaction comes, I believe, from a deliberate ambiguity on the part of the artist. During a recent public lecture at the San Francisco Art Institute, Jonas remarked that she "didn't mean my images to be that specific, so I don't like to explain. It is interesting to me that people see differently. It all changes depending on the situation and who is looking at it."

That, of course, can work two ways. Bored with ambiguity, the viewer can dismiss the whole subject. I tried this but *Mirage* came back to haunt me. It contains typical Jonas elements: a long cone used as a

megaphone, an oar and a tug-of-war object, a TV monitor next to the platform stage, a chalkboard, an expanding downstage movie screen and a mask. The most readily identifiable source of departure is Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen*, a film about Haitian voodoo and the large mystical sand drawings produced by its devotees. Jonas makes similar drawings on the chalkboard, on the platform and, via film, on the screen behind her. During the performance, Jonas expends a lot of energy moving and jumping about, making noises and chants, miming activity while perched on top of the monitor. You don't know quite what it is, but there is *something* going on here which makes *Mirage* hard to ignore.

The same sensation was apparent to me upon first viewing the color videotape *I Want to Live in the Country*, 1976, several months ago (*ARTWEEK*, January 26, 1980). I knew then that it had unrevealed secrets, and I wished to see it again. This time, Jonas was there to explain: "Each segment was a journal which made sense in itself. I was rebelling against the formal art historical stuff I had shot in the city. It was a dialog with myself, a contrast of static studio camera and lyrical (Super 8) country shooting." So, she uses art history. I had guessed that. She also uses Borges, the Brothers Grimm, E.J. Bellocq, reggae music, noh and kabuki theater and anthropological reports from a variety of cultures outside of New York City.

While Jonas has commented on the fact that her work is no longer deliberately personal, it *is* in the sense that she draws upon the whole array of knowledge available to any group of people who have received a sound liberal arts education in this country since 1960, and have the means and curiosity to elaborate upon it. Jonas has created a sort of megalautobiography, one that could, and does, refer to a whole group of people. When I first saw *Mirage*, I felt that Jonas' borrowings were dishonest, particularly the drawings. Further reflection has assured me that my view was too harsh. The drawings are borrowed, it is true, yet they are produced by Jonas in a complex cultural milieu of her own making which mirrors the many-leveled, internationally-oriented glut of cinematic, literary, musical and theatrical information available in a variety of depths to those who want it. Future artists are sure to select from such multifarious offerings and return to specificity.

The world premiere of Joan Jonas' performance *Double Lunar Dogs* will take place in Gallery B at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, on Friday, June 20, and Saturday, June 21, at 8 pm. □



JOAN JONAS in *Mirage*, performance at the University Art Museum, Berkeley. Photo: Benjamin Blackwell.