

Nude in Museum was alive, and kicking!

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By Richard Burgin
Globe Correspondent

Joan Jonas loped onstage at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts Tuesday night completely nude.

A terrible silence fell over the medium-sized audience—mostly students with a smattering of gray-beards—and I braced myself for what seemed certain to be, if not a shocker at least something more dramatic than the pseudo-psychedelic title of her performance, "Organic Honey's Vertical Roll."

I laughed. It was a stifled sound in that reverential hush; humor, I soon learned, was to play no part in the evening's somber presentation. Ms. Jonas stood there like a figure out of Andy Warhol's Garden of Eden.

Her single prop was a small circular mirror which she rotated slowly around her body, as if she were discovering herself for the first time and was in considerable awe. Meanwhile her shadow and the rotating mirror were reflected in the background. For two minutes it was an arresting spectacle. Unfortunately she continued her ritual, slowly turning and turning, much longer.

She was televised during her pilgrimage about the stage; and her image was shown in another mirror of sorts, a TV screen, which acted as a counterpoint to the live performance, a distortion or different interpretation of it, and finally, as a commentary on the artist's preoccupation with various modes of seeing things.

There was more than nudity, narcissism and the nobility of Joan Jonas's physique, however. At divers times during her hour-long video-live show she could be seen jumping up and down like a cheerleader, howling like a deserted dog, drawing connecting lines on a blackboard and ordering her assistant to set two tops spinning. This made me nostalgic for my childhood's Christmases in an age before exorcism went public. The performance was not without dialogue. Ms. Jonas read a lesbian love-letter which, she made plain, had been addressed to her, then added a generous helping of saccharine verse. And she hammered at her mirror, although she was, alas, unable to break it.

One other portion of her struggles with identity ought to be singled out. To the tune of Montego Bay bistro Muzak, Ms. Jonas



Joan Jonas in her performance "Organic Honey's Vertical Roll" at the Museum of Fine Arts.

(Photo by Donald C. Preston)

appeared onstage dressed in the spangles of a sleazy cigarette girl. She bore a tea tray that was really a mirror. I thought of John Lennon's "We make her paint her face and dance." No doubt she intended to

convey the idea of woman dehumanized by a male-imposed vision of female sensuality. It was, I thought, like most, of the evening, a singularly meaningless event—though secretive enough to

make us incapable of pinpointing its essential emptiness.

Joan Jonas' performance is but another example of what the Seventies seem to be producing en masse: banal aberrations.

"Every sin is a collaboration," Stephen Crane tells us. Therefore, I feel obliged to identify her cohorts, who were Babette Mangolte, camera-operator, and assistant performer Suzanne Harris. At the

end of it all I found myself drained. Laughter had left me long since. Bring back the Marx Brothers' school of artistry. In these dreary but very serious days, nihilism at least should be comic.