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Joan Jonas: The Mirror Staged

Eclectic amalgams of text, dance, song, video and visual imagery, Joan Jonas's performances reflect the reintroduction of the self into '70s art. Last year's retrospective traced her development from self-imposed narcissism in the early work to the theatrical extravagance of recent productions.

BY HOWARD JUNKER

All the things I do seem to be signs or emblems against outside forces, like I was thinking of warding off the evil eye. They are a way of surviving, maintaining one's personality . . . not one's personality, one's existence.
—Joan Jonas

Joan Jonas's work is usually discussed in formalist terms; in fact, the artist herself insists upon this approach, as in this statement written in 1975:

When I survey the seven years of my work against that background of performance in the Sixties, I realize that those specific concerns with movement and temporality are not my concerns. My own thinking has focused on issues of space—ways of dislocating it, flattening it, turning it inside out, always attempting to explore it *without ever giving to myself or to others permission to penetrate it.*[1]

On the surface, at least, Jonas's performances do appear to be counterphobic rituals designed to prevent "penetration." With exhausting discipline, she stacks together interludes and incidents of dance and drawing to form barriers against both pain and interpretation. Still, performance also seems to grant her "permission" to attempt the most literal, if highly stylized, form of acting out, of delivering repressed material to consciousness. So that in their deeper structures Jonas's performances are cathartic fore-plays in which she drives herself towards release or, as she puts it, purging. Her work thus possesses a galvanic charge; through sculptural images and poetic gestures, she fights to express a frozen terror and rage. Her prototypical utterance is a howl, sometimes doglike, sometimes musical, but always melancholic—sound that refuses articulation, that begs and yet refuses to be recognized as anguish.

Jonas's pieces are methodical, often laborious. They proceed at a relentless pace. Her editing is sloppy. She continually lapses into catatonic repetition, but limits each performance to about an hour. She has no virtuosic moves: she can't really dance, sing, tell stories or draw. She can allow herself this awkwardness, however, because, as a genre, performance exults in its inability to achieve perfection. Still, Jonas is a cunning *faux naïf*, for she remains extremely sensitive to formal and art-historical issues and has assimilated many of the advanced tactics and attitudes of her time: Judson dance, Post-Minimal process, video, autodocumentary, improvisation, feminism, living sculpture . . . .

Jonas's emergence as an artist coincided with the terrible collapse, shame and loss of energy that devastated the nation in the early '70s—a time of confusion, when old categories and visions no longer made sense. Schizophrenia, popularized by R.D. Laing and LSD, seemed a creative response to the madness of the world; paranoia, popularized by Richard Nixon, seemed merely sensible.

Painting and sculpture had been subjected to such prolonged self-scrutiny that the free play they once allowed seemed reduced to the narrow strictures of an academic exercise. Performance suggested itself to a number of artists as a possible new format, a bastard child perhaps, but one whose lack of definition offered easy entry and an escape from the weight of history. Most importantly, it seemed to offer a way out of the formalist impasse—the impersonal, self-critical decorum in which, at one extreme, artists no longer executed their own work. Performance seemed to allow a reinsertion of the self, a chance to dramatize the artist in action.

Though it often seemed merely ephemeral and lacking in ambition, performance was well suited to a "disposable" society; it was valuable, in Samuel Butler's words, precisely "because it should not be good enough a week hence to prevent people from going on to something else." Indeed, many early performance artists—Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim—have now retreated to the relative security of environments or object-making, while many younger performance artists—among them Laurie Anderson and Julia Heyward—have gravitated towards flip, upbeat formats like stand-up comedy and punk rock.

Jonas, however, continues to mount

***Upside Down and Backwards,* 1979, first performed at Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Photo courtesy University Art Museum, Berkeley.**

Joan Jonas (with Peter Campus): Wind, 1968, black-and-white film. Castelli-Sonnabend.

performances that remain true to her fundamental grimness. Her most recent work, *Double Lunar Dogs*, first presented in her retrospective last spring at the University Art Museum in Berkeley,[2] appeared to be a Busby Berkeley spectacular, an attack on depression. Still, the intensity masking the fragmentation masking the despair remained.

In the mid-'60s, Jonas worked with the Judson dancers, that group of performers assembled around the central figure of Yvonne Rainer and credited with the invention of post-modern dance. Having studied sculpture at Mt. Holyoke and the Boston Museum School, Jonas found dance to be a "relief." "The materials were so different," she recalls. "I felt I could do anything I wanted to do. The way I approached making pieces was also influenced by Imagist poetry [which she was also studying], just by the way Pound *talked* about it."[3]

Jonas's early works remained faithful to the Judson rejection of illusion and technique in favor of ordinary behavior, like walking or marching, set to everyday sounds. Her role, she recalls, was passive: "I didn't want to be a persona or an active personality. In one piece, I was stiff as a board; my body was carried from one place to another."

In these works, her characteristic prop was a mirror, which she frequently deployed as a large slab or shield to

In her early works, Jonas's distance from the audience was stated in literal terms: she kept them a quarter-mile down the beach, high on a cliff above the performance, even across a river.

protect herself from the gaze of the audience. In later works she would stare out at the audience from behind a mask, a veil, a chadri, a pane of glass, or through a video monitor . . . terrified but defiant, threatened by the audience, but at the same time seduced by their attention, their tacit approval.

In early works, Jonas's distance from the audience was often stated in the most literal terms: onlookers were kept a quarter-mile down the beach, or high on a cliff above the performance, even across a river. One performance, in artist Alan Saret's loft, took place in a five-foot-deep pit, the performers' activities occasionally reflected to the audience by mirrors at floor level.

During the early '70s, Jonas would frequently perform for an audience of one—artist Richard Serra, with whom she was living. "When you're a child," Jonas explains, "you put on little acts. My stepfather used to do all these magic tricks, and I always believed every one of them. I couldn't do them, but I would dress myself up in a costume and pretend. And [with Serra] I could do all that stuff. He made me feel it was worthwhile."

In 1970, visiting Japan with Serra, Jonas saw Noh and Bunraku theater; they acquired a video portapak. Jonas discovered that she could fragment her images by using video's horizontal and vertical rolls: "Video gave me a way of making pictures on a small scale. I could play more easily with it, and yet it was just as distant from the audience." She also used video as another distorting mirror/mask interposed between herself and the audience.

Video was first incorporated into Jonas's performances in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972; later known as *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*), with which the mature phase of her career began. "I wanted to do a solo," she recalls, "to allow myself to incorporate objects I liked, family things I'd been left by my grandmother." In the 1972 version of *Organic Honey*, she struck her own mirror image with an heirloom spoon: "I wanted to destroy all those things from the past," she explains, "or myself in the past."

The key sequence in *Organic Honey* was, however, a section originally presented in 1970, when it was called *Mirror Piece*. Jonas entered, planted her feet, slipped off her kimono, and began to examine herself with excruciating intensity in a hand mirror, which she spiraled down and around her body so as to inspect even the soles of her feet. Full frontal nudity, the artistic possibilities of which had been thoroughly explored in the late '60s, was not the issue; nor was this an example of defiant feminist-exhibitionist body art. It was, rather, a private moment of introspection, the kind which sometimes precedes but rarely constitutes a performance. It was also a radical assault on Jonas's own inhibitions, an attempt to strip herself of her past.

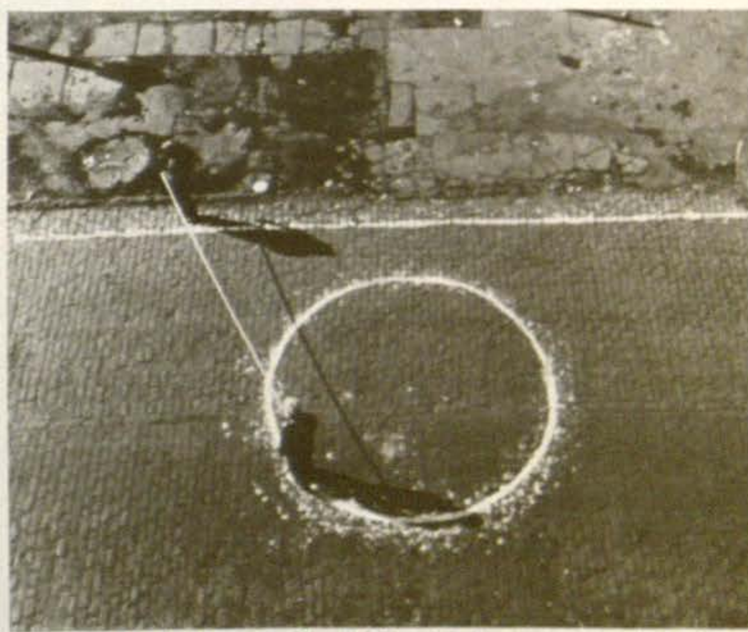
For Jonas was presenting herself in art-historical terms—the nude—in a way that emphasized its conceptual possibilities: an object available pri-

Many of Jonas's early performances and videotapes were staged out-of-doors—on beaches or in the streets and sandlots of Manhattan's lower West Side. These works dealt with perceptual delays between sound and image created by the phenomenon of distorted depth of field.

Beach Piece II, 1971, Nova Scotia. Photo Richard Serra.

The audience's perspective on Beach Piece II.

Jones Beach Piece, *1970, Long Island, New York. Photo Richard Landry.*

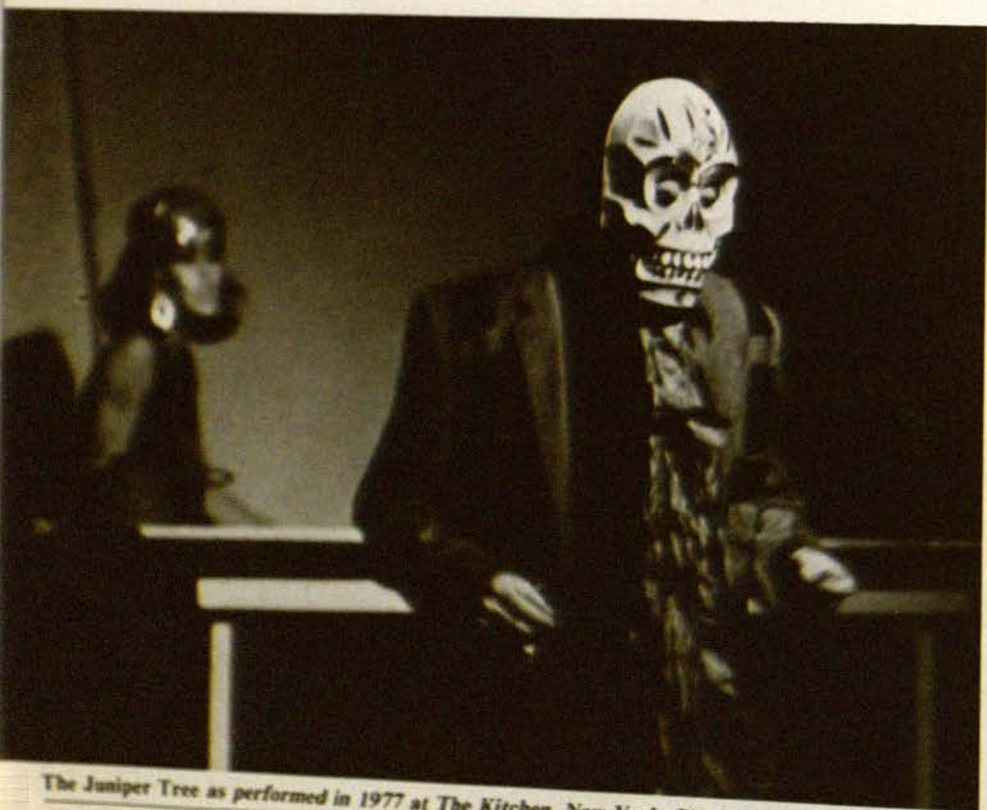


Songdelay, *1973, videotape. Castelli-Sonnabend.*

C. Goodden and G. Matta-Clark in Delay, Delay. *Photo © Peter Moore 1972.*

Delay, Delay, *Greenwich and Reade Sts., N.Y. Photo © Peter Moore 1972.*

The Juniper Tree, 1976, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia. Photo Roberta Neiman.



The Juniper Tree as performed in 1977 at The Kitchen, New York. Photo © Peter Moore 1977.

marily to intellection rather than to sensuous delight. Thus her pose was rigorously clinical. She was both the model in a life class—a typical female role—and the artist preparing for a self-portrait. She was Narcissus, the emblem of the '70s, using a speculum in a political act of self-examination. She was even the bride stripped bare . . . alone, immobilized, affectless.

From then on, Jonas would only add disguises. Thus, in the next scene in *Organic Honey* she appeared masked—a floozie with a feather headdress, shielded by a fan, studied by the camera. The mask appeared to be transparent, but it also blurred the features it revealed.

Organic Honey was performed in an undefined no-man's-land, but Jonas's next work, *Funnel* (1974), took place on a funnel-shaped set. A hoop was suspended in the distance, and the approach to it was barred by other suspended objects—veils, two horizontal poles and a tiny ball. At one point, she swung these obstacles like pendulums. Several giant white paper cones (more funnels), used as megaphones, completed the landscape.

Funnel began with Jonas opening the Pandora's box of a school desk and pulling out a rabbit. This magic trick—an immaculate conception—indicated that things had loosened up a bit; Jonas was even able to conclude the piece with an attempt at improvisation, that is, at interaction with the audience. (Actually, the improvisation was only simulated, because an assistant had solicited audience suggestions before the performance began. Thus Jonas was able to prepare a repertory of possible song-and-dance responses and thereby subvert the spontaneity and intimacy she seemed to be offering.) Asked by the audience to tell a joke, she folded and crushed a paper cone—an act which, if it can be interpreted as a joke, must also mask an incredible hostility.

Jonas's next work, *Mirage* (1975–76), was, in her own words, "an act of reintegration" after a series of disintegrations: breaking up with Serra, psychotherapy, two months in a Bombay ashram—enough time to be "taken apart" but not to "get back together again." *Mirage* took place on a black tilted platform in front of—literally, an extension of—a screen in a movie theater, that perfect, safe, passive image-bath. Now there was only one cone, made of sheet metal, used as a spy glass, a phallus, an oar, a tug-of-war object.

In *Funnel*, during a manic dance with the cameraman, Jonas had held a cone to her mouth while the video zoomed in—a permissible penetration. In *Mirage*, however, she constituted herself as a self-contained erotic subject/object, scrambling from one end of the cone to the other, mouthing mating calls. Kneeling atop a monitor, she acted out her terror. Then she made several drawings: first on paper, matching a projected film image; then on a blackboard, creating an "endless" drawing, a continuously swirling pattern based on a New Guinean rite of passage. She then unleashed a hopscotch dance to drive away demons and exhaust herself. During a film clip of a volcanic eruption, she did a "shaking" meditation to release the knots in which she'd been tied. After this explosion of activity, she stepped through a hoop.

With* The Juniper Tree, *based on the Brothers Grimm tale, Jonas employed her masks, mirrors and drawings to narrative ends. Jonas played the wicked stepmother (above left); other roles were taken by actors, "marking a break from the self-imposed isolation of her solos."

The Juniper Tree performed in 1979 at London's Whitechapel Gallery.

The Juniper Tree at 112 Mercer Street, New York, 1978. Photo © Babette Mangolte 1978.

Underneath, *performed in 1970 in a pit in artist Alan Saret's loft, New York.*

Mirror Piece, *1970, 14th Street YMCA, New York. Photo © Peter Moore 1970.*

Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy, *1972, Lo Giudice, Gallery, N.Y. Photo © Peter Moore 1972.*

emblematic of centering, of regaining a monadic, solipsistic peace.

In 1976 Jonas was commissioned by the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art to create a work for children. She chose to illustrate a fairy tale. As Bruno Bettelheim indicated in *The Uses of Enchantment*, published the same year, fairy tales help children deal with inner conflicts, find meaning and hope in life. As a child, Jonas was too frightened, she recalls, to read such tales; she made do

Jonas's characteristic prop is a mirror, used sometimes as an instrument of self-examination, at others as a slab or shield which protects her from the gaze of the audience.

with expurgated modern versions like Babar. In choosing to work with the Grimm Brothers' "The Juniper Tree," she went directly to the rawest possible account of a "family romance": a mother dies giving birth to her firstborn, a son; his wicked stepmother chops off the boy's head and feeds him as pudding to his father; the half-sister buries the boy's bones, which turn into a bird which drops a millstone on the stepmother . . . and father, son and half-sister are miraculously reunited.

Working with an established text gave Jonas a base to play against: "I like getting away from the subject matter of myself. I choose stories that I respond to—the same kind of images come out—but it allows me more freedom, the pieces are more lush. In comparison, the earlier work is darker, more self-referential."

With *Juniper Tree*, Jonas dropped video from her performances; her drawings became paintings—red slashes representing hearts, dogs, women's faces. She used them to decorate the walls of the performance space. The 1976 performance also included other actors; although Jonas had used assistants in all her pieces as semivisible, black-cos-

In 1968 Jonas began to investigate spatial illusion and fragmentation through the use of mirrors. At first they were directed toward the audience, which saw itself reflected in the performance space. Later, video would be used as another distorting mirror interposed between viewers and performance.

Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy, *1972.*

Mirror Check, *1970. Photo Roberta Neiman.*

Organic Honey, *1972, Ace Gallery, Venice, Calif. Photo Larry Bell.*

In Jones Beach Piece, *1970, Jonas, standing on a ladder behind the performance, used a mirror to reflect sunlight into spectators' eyes.*

tumed Bunraku stagehands and musicians, *Juniper Tree* marked a break from the self-imposed isolation of earlier solo performances.

Upside Down and Backwards (1979), as its title implies, was jumbled ritual based on two fairy tales told simultaneously—"The Frog Prince" (told backwards) and "The Boy Who Went Out to Learn Fear." It contained an astonishing core image, a dance macabre with a skeleton dressed in Jonas's clothes. She undressed it, removed it from its stand, held it in her lap like a pietà, lay down with it. She then picked up a slab of glass painted with an inverted blood-red image of a boy with an erection; she held the slab above her breasts. Then, breathing heavily, she gradually let it slide down her body. Based on the Tibetan meditation "Imagine your bones," the image became extremely personal: "I feel you get closer to yourself if you think about your skeleton. It's like yourself, you remember the way you're constructed. Most of the time you forget about what you're made of."

The set for *Upside Down*, a painted triptych, represented another advance

"Double Lunar Dogs" was Jonas's spectacular, a lunatic, Busby Berkeley attack on depression. Still, the intensity masking the fragmentation masking the despair remained.

in Jonas's method of presentation. Three giant scenic flats showed roads leading towards mountains, depicted in two-color double outline. Jonas cast her own shadow onto this world, first using light of one color, then of another, making the images jump-shift.

Jonas's progress towards mastering the creation of images began with a passive dependence on mirrors as simple reflectors-deflectors. Then video supplied ready-made representations and built-in distortion and fragmentation. In the first part of *Organic Honey* she merely traced an object placed on a sheet of paper on the floor; later, she drew an object while looking at its image in a monitor. In *Mirage* drawing was a compulsive ritual, a dance. In *Juniper Tree* she painted and used her own images to decorate the set. In *Upside Down* she imagined a landscape, painted a set and, further, created her own mask in performance, painting on a small plate of glass which she then held before her face.

Drawing compensates for the inevitable loss implicit in performance: "After a performance, sometimes I'm left with a sense of loss, a total loss. If I make drawings, it somehow satisfies my need for hanging on, for having something out there that stays there—which is not what performance is supposed to be about."

Jonas's new work, *Double Lunar Dogs*, based on a Robert Heinlein science-fiction story, "Universe," was an ostentatiously futuristic attempt to let go of the past, to escape gravity, to penetrate the mysteries of the universe, to break out of the flatness and frontality of her earlier performances. Filled with the usual camouflage of ritual stomp-dancing, percussive sound, toys, rolling balls, mirror/

Double Lunar Dogs, ***1980, University Art Museum, Berkeley, Calif.***

masks and NASA film clips, this was Jonas's extravaganza, a massive mustering of energy, an orchestration of a huge cast and crew. It was performed in the round: Jonas finally found a way to present herself as freestanding sculpture, to establish her presence in the void. She even suspended a swing from a jutting balcony and mounted it to become an airborne mobile in her own Calder circus. The fact that swinging is a catatonic movement did not diminish her nervy determination to fly.

Her obsession with her mirror-image was objectified here in a double, actress Elsie Ritchie, costumed in black (Jonas wore a bare-shoulder maroon jumpsuit with white fringe down the side). With her mane of hair and taut, supple body, Ritchie was a wonderful projection of desire. Indeed, after the requisite rituals, the two retired beneath the peaked central platform (the divided self) to draw and fight with each other—as much intimacy as Jonas allows. Ritchie was later sent up towards the ceiling on a power lift, an erectile lunar-lander, while she and Jonas, standing on the swing, engaged in a dialogue of quotations—a stilted romance, but a relationship nonetheless.

For the first time, Jonas seemed willing to make contact with her audience too, to allow them access to her narrative. Invisible at first, she began by reading a straightforward exposition of the plot. Introduced to the metaphor of the museum as spaceship, and reassured that things really did make sense, the audience could enjoy the trip, even laugh a little. And there were some funny bits: a man in a white suit, standing on a pulpit-platform, released long, thin balloons which soared into the audience like zany zeppelins; two real dogs acted up; a live Art-Institute punk band, "The Right-Thinking Research Laboratory," delivered a gloriously inept song composed for the occasion.

Double Lunar Dogs ended dramatically, as if Jonas had resolved some inner conflict which made available further conventional formats: having condemned Jonas to death for attempting to penetrate the mysteries of the universe, the authority figure in white (bad father, nasty superego) was banished; he exited, brandishing a sheaf of papers—the script, the history, the pedigree Jonas would so like to escape.

Intoning a reasonably cheerful song through a small cone, Jonas was surrounded by clown-musicians, who shielded her with painting-veils; she emerged, however, to sing in the open. A compressed-air tank was vented—blast off! Another purge had been enacted; Joan Jonas was no longer lost in space. □

1. Joan Jonas (with Rosalind Krauss), "Seven Years," *The Drama Review*, March 1975, p. 13, italics added.

2. This article is based on that retrospective, curated by David Ross. In addition to showing Jonas's videotapes, four major performance works were reconstructed, although her masterpiece, *The Juniper Tree*, was omitted because it had been performed in 1979 at the San Francisco Art Institute.

3. This and all subsequent citations are based upon unpublished artist's statements, which will be collected in a book to be published jointly by the University Art Museum, Berkeley, and the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Netherlands.

Author: ***Howard Junker was recently appointed public affairs coordinator for the University Art Museum, Berkeley, Calif.***

"Replays" of **Organic Honey** *(left) and* **Mirage** *(right) at the Guggenheim, New York, 1980. Photos © Peter Moore 1980.*