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Organic Honey, installation Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 1972/94

Dorine Mignot

From Refection to 'Revolt'

'When I started to think about performance in 1966, I went to Crete because of the Minoan culture. I went to a wedding ceremony in the mountains, that lasted for three days. It was a ritual. I was always interested in folk culture, because it is part of everyday life and anybody can be part of it. You don't have to be special to do it. My performance came from trying to communicate this experience with my friends'.¹

There is without a doubt a need for a retrospective of Joan Jonas' work for it to become known to a larger public and critically studied in a way that will place it in a historical perspective. Jonas was one of the 'founders' of the artform called performance which in 1966 still had to take shape. She has remained true to this artform ever since.

Jonas developed her style through:

- mirroring herself, the surroundings and the audience
- fragmentation of space and time
- transformations and disguises
- use of new technologies, specifically video
- her own movements, speaking and singing (which are not to be understood within the traditional disciplines of dance, theatre or opera)

- working with untrained people
- thresholding of different disciplines
- consciousness of being a female artist
- cross-cultural interests
- her revolt 'by the thought of known places'

All of these have created images that could turn out to be exemplary for the cultural movements in America at the end of the sixties and further on.

Making a retrospective of the work of a performance artist is a dilemma. Generally speaking, the nature of an exhibition conflicts with the nature of performance: static images versus images that evolve in time. We could have invited the artist to realize a historical series of performances, but this was impossible for various reasons. So a way had to be found to display her work. After thorough discussions with Jonas, we decided to make a clear choice of performances and turn them into a series of six installations: one based on the mirror and outdoor performances, two on video performance, two on performances where narrative is a point

¹ The artist in conversation with the author, Amsterdam, May 1994

of departure and the last one on a performance that still had to take place at the moment of installing:

- 1 *Mirror Pieces* and *Outdoor Pieces*, 1968-1990 (pp.22-41)
- 2 *Organic Honey*, 1972 (pp.42-51)
- 3 *Mirage*, 1976 (pp.52-57)
- 4 *Juniper Tree*, 1976 pp.58-67)
- 5 *Volcano Saga*, 1985 (pp.68-77)
- 6 *Revolted by the thought of known places...*
Sweeney Astray, 1994 (pp.78-108)

To make installations out of Jonas' 'performance material' was not an entirely inappropriate idea, as she had already done this before. Besides, all of the performances had undergone various changes during the many occasions she had performed them. Material that came out of one performance was often used in the next. For most of her performances it took two years to develop into a final stage.

So one could argue that it was possible to see the installations as more stabilized entities which evolved from a performance. In the same way that Jonas would interact with the available space and specific circumstances of a particular performance, she would similarly respond to the rooms of the museum in making the installations herself.

In each room an attempt has been made to evoke the atmosphere, character and multi-layered imagery of the performances, through a set-up of the original drawings,

paintings, films, videotapes and props and a documentary series of slides that were taken during the actual performances.

At the end of the sixties Joan Jonas was one of the first visual artists who turned to performance to explore ideas of perception in space and time. The conceptualisation of the art at that time exploded in an endless variety of forms: minimal art, process art, land art, body art, to name but a few. Jonas' early performances were at the core of these movements.

In 1968 she started to perform with friends and acquaintances for friends and acquaintances: in the street, on the beach, in her loft or in alternative spaces.

For instance, in *Mirror Pieces I/II* large mirrors, moved around by the performers in the real space of the audience, choreograph dancing images of the reflected, fragmented space. In *Mirror Check* Jonas mercilessly scrutinizes her own naked body from top to bottom in a small round mirror in front of an audience. The basic elements of her later performances can be found in these works: reflection, fragmentation, transformation, desynchronisation and a search for the self. All of these stay main concerns in her total oeuvre.

The structure underlying Jonas' performances is not obvious. Her working process seems rather arbitrary, as she consciously wants to keep possibilities open, to let chance and circumstance be part of the piece. To not be bound to one discipline or border. She works in images and the processing of images

takes time. Even during the performance this attitude is present, but it does not mean her pieces are without structure.

In her performances Jonas juxtaposes disparate elements: props/objects, video-images, drawings/paintings, narration, place and time, each with its own characteristics, technical possibilities, historical background and formal qualities. It is her way of putting pieces together, to build a picture in time:

*'The fragmentation partly comes from the structures that I always worked with, that are based on filmic techniques such as the cut and the idea of montage. Because I did not work with a narrative but more with a poetic form I felt the freedom to move from one element to another from one scene to another.'*²

In all of her performances Jonas uses *props*. The mirror, the mask and the monitor are her most trusty comrades. She plays and interacts with them. She creates a double reality for the audience: she herself as an image and as a performer. And as a performer she reacts again on the image. Together with the blackboard, these props belong to her 'image-material in stock'; she always takes them along on her next trip to the next performance. The same prop can be used in different ways, for instance the cone in *Mirage* is used to direct sound, to yell, to sing, to blow, as a telescope,

as an oar, or simply as a form. The props Jonas designed for the new piece *Revolted by the thought of known places...* *Sweeney Astray* stand as objects in the installation in the Stedelijk and will become props in the theatre.

In many performances Jonas has found an ingenious way of integrating the intrinsic technical possibilities of *video* with her live action, such as close circuit video, vertical rolling of the image, compressing live time, or keying images.

In her first video performance *Organic Honey* in 1972, which has since become a key-work in the history of performance and video art, Jonas started to use the monitor as her 'ongoing mirror' by using close circuit video. In this performance she watched herself, trying to alter the image, using objects, costumes, and masks, moving through various identities. This was not only a fascination with her masked alter ego on the monitor, but also a play between the live activity and the video image, revealing to the public the discrepancies between the two images through the total set up, the third image.

In the videotape *Vertical Roll* separate parts of Jonas' body are shown in movements specifically choreographed in relation to the constant rhythmic appearance of the black bar of the vertical roll. The rhythmic quality of the vertical roll

² The artist in conversation with the author, Amsterdam, May 1994

is further intensified by a clicking sound which accompanies it. This original and radical tape, with its hypnotic quality, forcibly remains as an after image in the viewer's mind. When this tape became part of the performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, Jonas also choreographed her live action in relation to it, for instance by jumping. Another example which typifies Jonas' use of a technical device in shaping a specific video image, appears at the end of the videotape of *Volcano Saga*. Here, an image of flowing water is keyed into a blackboard which lays on the lap of a woman as she begins to wipe out its images, saying 'I want to forget these puzzles'.

A third element in Jonas' work since 1972 is *drawing*. In the second version of *Organic Honey* she started to draw in a close-circuit situation, looking at the monitor instead of what she was drawing. For *Mirage* she made a film of repeatedly drawing images on a blackboard, and then erasing them. Each time Jonas performed *Juniper Tree* she also made two paintings: a heart that looks like a bug or turns into a woman's face or the devil – one in red on white and the other, white on red. In the next performance they became a backdrop in the set up. Also in *Volcano Saga* Jonas ritualistically made drawings during performance. The most literal metaphor for performing is making a drawing. By the process of drawing, the image evolves in time. By erasing, it disappears.

A fourth element in Jonas' work is her use of *narrative*. *Juniper Tree* is Jonas' first performance where narrative, in the form of a fairytale by the Brothers Grimm, is used as a point of departure. In this performance, Jonas represented the story through imagery in an attempt to get as far away as possible from a literal representation of the story. In *Volcano Saga* the relation between the story and the images is stronger. In the new piece *Revolted by the thought of known places... Sweeney Astray* the interaction by the different actors and the various elements of the poem will be more complex.

In all of her performances Joan Jonas works with separate elements, interacts between them, and processes images without creating a centre or climax to their sequences. The use of small objects, costumes, and masks from different backgrounds add up to a complexity of content and image. It is through Jonas' live interaction between these disparate elements that the sequences of images, which evolve in time, are held together by content and association, by rhythm and repetition, as the lines in a poem.

Now, for the first time, working partly with professional actors, Jonas will direct a theaterpiece, developing a way to transfer her 'performance vision' to theater. A beautiful challenge. Image Sweeney, perched on a slack chord like a bird in the air, captive in the frame of a video camera, potentially free within the space of the performance and audience.

Bruce Ferguson

AmerEFIERYcontemplationonthesagaofJoanJonas

The net has become one of the presiding images of human thought. But it is an image, and just as no one can use the equator to tie up a package, the real wiggly world slips like water through our imaginary nets.

Alan Watts: *The Book*; on the taboo against knowing who you are.

There is a photographic image which is almost all that remains of an early Joan Jonas performance from 1970. A young Robert Smithson is sitting on a hardwood loftlike floor, arms wrapped around his knees pressed closely to his chest, a wayward lock of hair falling forward. A young Richard Serra, I think, is ahead of him, blocking in the same flesh-framed position, looking rigorously defiant to one side, almost over his shoulder. Another man's visage is cut off by a maliciously horizontal line through the eyes at the top of the picture. Inexplicably, he also looks to be restrained or forced back by a female performer's flat, pushing thumb held against his image; an illusion of scale produced by virtue of photography's own dimensional magic. And another person, less legible but possibly a woman, looks

elsewhere, across the space at another performer perhaps or at another member of the audience unseen to us (or she looks at the performing photographer who is otherwise only implied). Or, any of them might be looking at the imaginary text they are already writing in their memories; their thoughts a language yet unworded like petroglyphs coming to life.

And all of them sitting there were already pictured, even before the camera shot was taken, because they were the quiescent and closely cropped subjects captured within the domain of a full-size mirror precariously supported by the female performer during a task-oriented choreography. Now, as at the very moment of its emergence within this image, we look at two spaces simultaneously: the space of performance and the space of audience – a quotidian collage. Both images are only fragments of a facing, but crossed exchange circles and witnessings. We see a performer performing an audience, where the audience is the sub-conscious and hidden drive finally exposed in a flash of de-repression.