

instead on the *instrument* that used that ground, I would focus on myself as instrument who then could choose whatever ground happened to be available. Put it yet another way: minimal art was my father-art, but I had to kill the father, so that I would have something to do, somewhere to go - so I made myself think that, because a minimal sculpture appeared with no sign of the maker, it appeared as if from nowhere, like the black monolith in [Stanley Kubrick's] *2001: A Space Odyssey* - when something appears from out of nowhere, you have to bow down in front of it, it might be more powerful than you are - so in contradiction to that I had to appear in person, because then I would be held responsible, I couldn't hide behind the scenes, and what I did was the same.

Is there a ritualistic aspect to your body of work?

I hope not. If there's ritual, then there's religion, and I hope what I've done and what I'm doing is the opposite of that. There might be a *replicating* aspect, and that's okay: when something is repeated, it becomes matter, it becomes a fact - when something is repeated, it proliferates like a disease, that spreads over and overtakes the normal.

How did you respond to the unexpected? How important was improvisation?

I assumed the unexpected; it was the unexpected that gave a piece its incidents, all the rest was rote. If the hair at the back of my neck caught on fire, I'd better be ready to rub the fire out (*Corrections*, 1971); if a person came downstairs toward the basement, my self-hypnotism had to make me ready to kill (*CLAIM*, 1971). But I didn't think of these as "improvisations"; they were simply being on guard, being on the alert, living as if in a minefield. Improvisation, in terms of my work of the 70s, meant talk. In most of my videotapes, I set up beforehand a general structure of talking, and then the actual talk was improvised - I was trying not to be an actor, I wanted to think/talk on my feet and from the hip. But in retrospect, the attempt was futile: since it was a prerecorded tape, no one could tell whether I was improvising or not - I was an actor, whether or not I wanted to present myself as one. Improvisation was important only in live performance. The event of performing was the event of a stand-up comic: the lights go on, and you have to go on, there's no turning back now. Performing meant performing a contract: you said you were going to do it, and now you had to carry out your promise. But improvisation made no sense in video, because improvisation demands stage fright; improvisation makes sense only when other people are there, who can watch you fail, who can *make* you fail.

Interview with Joan Jonas

by Klaus Biesenbach

When and why did you begin making videos?

My first public performance was in 1968. Later it was translated into a film called *Wind*. It was shot outdoors on the beach (with camera and co-editing by Peter Campus). In 1970 after visiting Japan I bought my first Portapak (video camera and recorder) I wanted to extend my work, to translate it into a medium that would reflect but also alter the original. This came from my interest in the history of film - it was simply the next step. Unlike film, video allowed instant simultaneous sequences. Like performance, video was relatively unexplored territory.

Can you talk a little bit about your process, what sort of preparation goes into your performances? What role does endurance play?

I begin in different ways with props, and/or material and a specific space. I also construct a space or set. In 1968, inspired by Jorge Luis Borges, I made a mirror costume and quoted all references to mirrors in "Labyrinths," while a consideration of the performance space (a large gymnasium) and the peculiarities of the mirror costume generated my movements. I step in and out of the performative area and ideas come from just looking from the point of view of the audience. In thinking of illusion and space I would imagine early Renaissance painting or frescos in Pompeii, for instance. In the *Mirror Pieces* (1969-70) performers carrying 5' x 18" mirrors moved in choreographed patterns. We improvised until I decided on specific patterns and use of time. These mirrors reflected and fragmented space, bodies, and audience. I was interested in the perception of space and how to alter the image through a specific medium (i.e., mirrors, closed circuit television, deep landscape, and text or story). *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy/Vertical Roll* (1972-73) (other works from same time include *Duet* and *Left Side Right Side*) evolved as I continuously investigated my own image in the monitor of the closed circuit video system. I played with costume, mask, and objects in relation to the video camera. At that time I imagined I was an electronic sorceress.

What is the relationship between the video and the performance?

I developed a structure in relation to content that evolved from interacting with the particular relation to camera and monitor and projector. All moves were for the camera. Usually a performance takes about a year to develop. However I do not work with endurance as a concept as Marina and Ulay did.

When I began to work with video I called it film. I was making videos, but I was referring to film all the time. I was entranced by the early Russian films: Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein. And early French films: Jean Vigo, Marcel Carné's *Children of Paradise*. Early black-and-white films where the narrative was dreamlike, poetic. *Children of Paradise*, for instance, portrays the essence of the theatrical magic in the way the performer on stage relates to the audience in the highest balconies through the body.

I began by making a simple set. There was a table with objects: a mirror, a doll, a water-filled glass jar into which I'd drop pennies. There was a chair, cameras, and monitors, large mirrors, blackboards. Sol LeWitt asked me to do something for his students, and moving this set to the 112 Greene Street Gallery, I got a cameraperson to come in. We performed sequences involving the fashioning of images for the camera. It was all there, it was just a question of putting the viewer in a certain position to watch it. From the beginning I was interested in the discrepancy between the camera's view of the subject - seen in the monitor, or a projection, which was a detail of the whole - and the spectator's. The video camera framed details of the live performance, juxtaposing a parallel narrative - the part to the whole. Such simultaneity allowed me to make more complex statements.

I was also involved with feminism and what it means to be a woman. The women's movement profoundly affected me; it led me, and all the people around me, to see things more clearly. There is always a woman in my work, and her role is questioned. Video provided a channel for exploring the possibilities of female imagery. In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy/Vertical Roll* I created an alter ego, my opposite, and called her Organic Honey. I stepped outside of myself and played with a reflection. The monitor was an ongoing mirror. In *Left Side Right Side* (1972) I explored how one perceives left and right in the video monitor as opposed to a mirror. A mirror held mid-face doubled each side mixing left and right, emphasizing the difference.

I approached video in the same way as one would with experimental films, working with the actual medium and its peculiar qualities. The vertical roll in video looks like a series of film-strip frames going through the monitor - that's the reference. I also played with the video light, the light emitted from the monitor, as a source of illumination for other actions. I was referring to the continuous time of the piece in a different way. In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, I drew my dog Sappho. She had one blue eye and one brown eye. Her image was a kind of leitmotif for *Organic Honey*, the animal spirit that represents a force or instinct. Then I did

drawings for the video monitor. I drew "around" the vertical roll and used the vertical roll to bring the parts of the image together. I drew the top half of the dog's head on the bottom of the paper, the bottom on the top; then with the roll the two halves came together. I also put my masked face in place of the top half of the dogs, turning me into half-woman, half-dog.

Does the video documentation alter the perception of the performance?

Yes definitely. One can never experience the original live event in the same way. The documentation is just a record. At first I was reluctant to even do it but recently I edited the footage of *Organic Honey* shot at a performance at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1973. Almost thirty years later I am able to see more objectively. Most of my autonomous video works are translations and developments of performances or of ideas found through the process of performing. Some were made quite separately. I move between performance and video continuously.

Could you comment on the significance of the audience?

The audience is necessary. In the Mirror works they became part of the picture they saw reflected in the mirrors. I imagine how the audience will perceive images in the distance, for instance, as in the "Jones Beach Piece." They were standing a quarter of a mile from the action. This gave me a certain freedom of movement. I kept a distance indoors also, relating indirectly to the audience through the closed circuit video. Drawings made in performance are different from ones made privately. I am interested in how the presence of an audience affects an action.

Why focus on your body?

I don't necessarily think of my work as focussing on my body, but my body is the vehicle for the work. At first I treated my body as material to move, to be moved or to be carried by others stiff like a mirror - to be moved by or to move props, to be part of the picture, to make the picture. In the video pieces the body was a sum of its parts to be fragmented and seen in close-up, never whole. As a performer I could change rolls, identities through disguise, costume, and use of masks. I made sequences, images for a poetic narrative. Video allowed us to see ourselves in the moment, which led to a development of performance strategies. I was interested in the narcissistic aspect.

I find my language partly through simply stepping into the performing space and playing in relation to all the various elements (sound/music, object/prop, story, and so on).

What or who inspired your work during this period?

All the films I saw at Anthology Film Archives during the 60s and 70s. Happenings and the collaborations of dancers and visual artists in the Judson Church. The work of Jack Smith, the Noh and Kabuki theater I saw during the visit to Japan in 1970, the work of American poets called Imagists and James Joyce, Borges and of course the situation in downtown New York at the time, where traditional boundaries between the forms of painting, sculpture, music, film, etc. were questioned.

What roles if any does gender play in your work?

I am interested in specific female roles or parts and how that relates to the culture. This is a continuous thread.

What role does mythology and rumor play?

Mythology in a traditional or historical sense is present in all of my work, although it is not visible. In switching to a time based medium I referred to traditions or devices in literature, film, poetry and theater, and even the iconography of painting.

For instance in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, the myth of Daedalus is used to represent the situation of the main character. My early work is more or less silent and black and white - I used stories and myths to construct image sequences that represented something in my particular consciousness that was personal but abstract and not autobiographical. I had to construct an imaginary world - imaginary personas. Later in 1976 I saw the films that Maya Deren shot in Haiti. The filmed drawing sequence in the video performance/installation *Mirage* (1976/94) came from seeing repeated actions unedited, of sand drawings. I translated this into chalk, drawing and erasing my own set of signs.

How does video as a time-based medium relate to your preference for repetitive actions?

Repetition was always there as I also based pieces on musical forms. However, referring to film, working in video, I used the language of montage, of the cut, the edit to construct my work. And in *Vertical Roll* the frames of the vertical roll as I performed actions in and around and in relation were a repetitive element. I am interested in how an action changes by repeating - in how one's perception is altered by repetition.

How did you respond to the unexpected? How important was improvisation?

I used the unexpected as discovery. No such thing as mistakes. This was part of a dialogue with the audience. I used improvisation only in

research/rehearsal. It is essential to development and discovery. My performances are usually totally choreographed beforehand. However *I Want to Live in the Country* (1976) (a videotape, never a performance) was made entirely by improvising in a television studio with props and movements in a video setup with two cameras. Occasionally I find a system or device which allows for moving with props like *Moving with No Pattern* (1998). This came from a student workshop. In my teaching I set up improvisational workshops with sound and video.

How has technology affected the current output of art production? And how has it shaped your artistic approach?

The medium is a tool. The camera is equivalent to a pencil. Lately new technologies make things easier and faster. I can do everything in my studio. I can concentrate on the editing process. My studio is a place of production. My work is not better, it is different.

Anyone with a computer and a camera can make a film, can document a subject. This is interesting and empty.

How did the medium itself inform and influence the work?

I never saw a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film, or a dance. A gesture has the same weight as a drawing: draw erase, draw erase - memory. My ideas of form and content come from an interaction of these forms.

Is there a ritualistic aspect to your body of work?

In switching from sculpture and art history to performance I wanted to refer to sources outside the art world. In the 60s I went to Crete and witnessed a three-day wedding in the mountains during which the men sang impromptu greetings as guests rode from village to village. Later I visited the southwest and saw the Hopi Snake Dance. Both experiences were profound. I saw how ritual and performance existed as part of a life cycle. These experiences were inspirations for my work, although I was careful to translate into my own language, not to borrow. Later I did actually use a drawing ritual from a tribe in New Guinea as part of a blackboard sequence in *Organic Honey*. It is called "Endless drawing" and was perfect for drawing in performance. I wanted to find my own rituals of the everyday for an audience that was then composed almost entirely of a familiar community.

What are the sources for your choice of narrative and props?

I used what was at hand in the *Organic Honey* pieces. Props were passed down from family and

found. I visit flea markets. I made a drawing for the camera, tracing outlines of a sequence: an old doll, a stone, a mirror, a hammer - building layers of lines suggesting a poetic narrative. I see an object that can be used inappropriately and repeatedly in different ways. Houdini escaped from a wheel, which gave me the idea to make a six-foot metal wheel to roll around in (*Jones Beach*, 1970). Later it hung from the ceiling, spinning to reggae music. For this work, *Funnel* (1974), I began with the form of a cone. I wanted to explore the implications. I made a set out of paper that receded and filled it with paper cones of all sizes. A video monitor in the set reflected this grouping. Then for *Twilight* (1975) and *Mirage* (1976), I had six nine-foot metal cones fabricated and used them in as many ways as possible - to sing and shout through, to bang, to look through, and so on. Narrative models were early film, poetry (in terms of structure), the Noh Theater, rituals, magic shows, the circus. Later I worked with fairy tales, news stories, and sagas.

In what ways has the medium evolved? Is single channel video important today?

In terms of poetic narrative in the work of younger artists such as Eija-Liisa Ahtila the work goes beyond the one-shot/one-idea projected image as painting syndrome so prevalent in work of the last ten years, and relates to film making using possibilities of video directly relating to the content of the work. And Pipilotti Rist is also one who finds ingenious solutions to the challenges of display.

I find it very interesting that young artists are using information that has sifted down through the past 35 years involving performance art, conceptual art, and all forms of media. These and other young artists are going into the world and working with the everyday or popular culture in relation to particular, and/or personal issues, while discovering, recycling, and inventing various images. In documentary style, they record specific events as they relate to their perception of how to position themselves in relation to relatively unexplored subject matter. In this sense the work is political because it asks questions and interacts with the local context in a challenging way by mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar and by transporting different visual languages.

Also there has been a continuous high conceptual standard in the work of people like Gary Hill and Stan Douglas, for instance, who explore more complicated relationships of media structure and content. Single channel video is only important if it represents such concern with invention.

For the Love of Scan Lines

Barbara London

"Video art" began in the mid-1960s, when portable video equipment - the Portapak - became available on the market. Until that time the medium had been restricted to well-lit television studios, with their heavy two-inch-video apparatus and teams of engineers. Not that users had an easy time with the early version of the Portapak: it consisted of a bulky recording deck, a battery pack, and a cumbersome camera, and the tape, on open reels, often got snagged. Still, artists found the Portapak affordable, and the ability to record in ambient light made the medium attractive.

Artists accustomed to painting by themselves in a studio found they could carry on their solitary routine with the new video equipment. They pointed the camera at themselves, composed scenes, and monitored the live images as they were recorded. The artist was producer, cameraman, and performer rolled into one.

Video editing of these first productions was next to impossible. Artists accepted the limitations of the medium, and in keeping with John Cage's slogan "Go with whatever happens," they adopted "No editing" as an aesthetic. Consequently, many early works run for the full length of a thirty- or sixty-minute tape.

Bruce Nauman's videos of the 1960s feature repetitive processes performed for the camera. *Lip Sync* (1969) records a single nonstop action repeated over and over on the one-hour tape: Nauman, outfitted with earphones, tries to repeat what he hears - his just articulated phrase "Lip sync." Evidently, his aural and vocal faculties are disconcertingly out of sync. Nauman's exertion induces physical distress in the artist and in the sympathetic viewer.

William Wegman's *Selected Works: Reel #3* (1973) takes a different tack: the artist works in his painting studio, on his own with a star performer - the weimaraner dog Man Ray. The humorous sketches enacted by Wegman's canine alter ego call to mind the zany antics of Ernie Kovacs, the funnyman of the golden age of television.