

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.

Ferguson, Bruce. "AmerefierycontemplationonthesageaofJoanJonas." In *Joan Jonas: Works 1968–1994*, edited by Dorine Mignot, 13–21. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1994.

Bruce Ferguson

AmerefierycontemplationonthesageaofJoanJonas

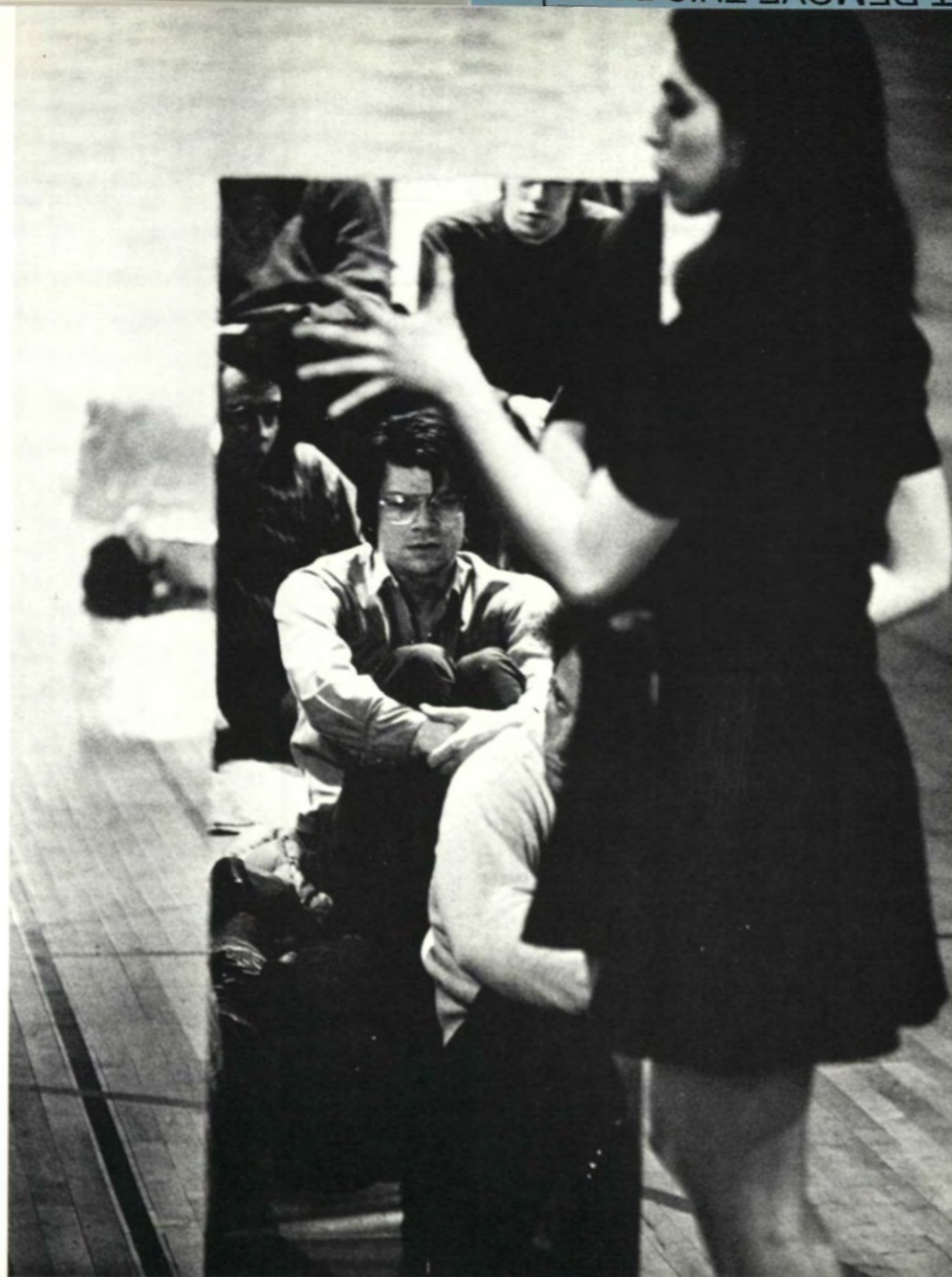
The net has become one of the presiding images of human thought. But it is an image, and just as no one can use the equator to tie up a package, the real wiggly world slips like water through our imaginary nets.

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.



Mirror Piece II, Emanu-El YMHA, New York 1970 Photo © by Peter Moore

The female performer, who obliges the audience's image, purposefully holds the mirror (whose interior images just described could instead be just a photograph posing as a mirror for all we can know). The mirror, in its turn bears this image slice of avant-garde spectatorship. She looks from herself to somewhere else, probably at her large hand, visible to us and to the spectators, and it would seem that the other hand must support the mirror from the tain side. She concentrates fully, disregarding the audience, and we are late photographic witnesses to what is often simply called 'an image within an image'. As though that redundant repetitious phrase explained away the strangeness of what we see. Or as though that simple proviso justified the perceptual experience along an unquestioned and authorised modernist trajectory of self-consciousness. As though an 'image within an image' were a lucid and understandable concept; a common commentary which was also exegesis. As though an image within an image was not just an imaginary net which only too briefly holds the idealistic hope of discerning art from reality. As though it were not a special balancing act between ontologies and epistemologies. Between mirrors that disrupt and photographs that sustain.

And this photograph was shot too soon, too prematurely, for us to see the slow spiral that the performers walked at the end of the performance; a spiral that enmeshed the performing audience again and again in a rhythmic inturning annulment and betrayal of images, binding and unbinding the performers to and from the audience and themselves. In a slow, vertiginous ritual of *déjà vu*, of the *déjà connu* of fateful destinies.

Robert Smithson is not an artist in this image. Nor is Richard Serra. They are instead part of a concentration of performers who play the role of audience. They are viewers; watchers; observers; onlookers; outlookers; beholders. They are subject positions formed by the work. By Joan Jonas' inscriptive proposition. By a performative moment of photography guaranteed by a theater of mirrors. They are trapped, held, and entrenched by her in a reversal of subject-object relations in art. Ambushed by a seer of seers. And significantly, they are made mute, no longer in the underinterrogated 'discursive fellowship' of men speaking. Made speechless by performances or works called 'pieces' (as though to remind us of the contingency which underwrites the movement and images and sounds of the neither/nor strategy which is Jonas'

continuing disguise to keep totality at bay). 'Pieces' which can never be fully recovered on film, video or paper or tape or memory. At best, there are partial excavations which only act to enforce and emphasise Jonas' heterogeneity, a realm created where even the documentation defies conventional perceptual habits. Documents like this photograph which make a dilemma of any attempt at full realization.

And the revelation of this photograph is also that their gazes – the gazes of the viewers – cannot be so purely or securely masculine, nor predatory as fashionable hegemonic theory would have us believe is always the case. Their gaze is instead turned back into itself, passing through its own secure foundations, as the photograph turns back time to a time before death, before ageing, before perpetuity begins its relentless charge to purity or purgatory. Rather than a passive assurity of patriarchal comfort of vision, the male body language in the inner photograph assigns itself an intensity of anxiousness, even fear. The complicity that male voyeurs display in at least three cases is also allocated a discomfort and a dis-ease beyond dumb torsos. The female performer holds up to them their own displacement and their own solicitous anticipation. Their unforeseen faces are already on an unforgiving cutting room floor.

The audience may be trafficking in women and men as scopic objects, just like the economy of exchange in a peep show or a ballet, but the audience is also trafficked, revised and edited by looking glasses everywhere present. By a winking surveillance. Voyeurs suddenly of themselves, the overview accorded to viewers is narrowed and boomeranged dangerously to the preserve of self. The viewers themselves are the objects of other visions and gazes (desirous looks), including their own possible narcissistic plunge. The hallucination of their own optic ardor is read back to them in the mirror's unyielding locus, in its lustrous return of their own look to themselves.

The performer wears the audience like a book cover wears its text; deflecting a possible look of knowledge to a drifting glance of apprehension. Her mirror shield is radiated onto them, her silver prop is a costume for pomp's own circumstance, unbearable. Like a classic story of tactical warfare.

The description for the work entitled *Mirror Piece II*, 1970, reads in part, 'The performers must move carefully to avoid breakage and ... the performers caress the spectator's reflections'. These grazes,

these persuasions of touch, these impresses, cause the audience to sway and teeter. To fall back.

The audience shimmers, is truncated and cruelly abandoned, and moves quickly and unexpectedly from the horizons of certitude to an elusive sphere in the early performance work of Joan Jonas.

Choreographed audiences, embodied abnormally as cuts and seclusions. The audience is at risk, severed from its windowed mirrorings, from its framed certainties to be thrust adrift to the tumultuous throes of subjectivity and narrativity.

Cast and cut away.

The mirror is *the* artistic trope of the break from modernism to postmodernism (it can be found in the early '70s work of Robert Smithson, N.E. Thing Co., Robert Morris, Rebecca Horn et al, et al). But this governing mirror is not only the Lacanian mirror of (mis)recognition (and thus, characteristically and continentally, constructed as a disappointment, displeasure and the beginnings of a quarantine in the prison-house of language). Instead, the mirror is the controlling metaphor of the delay and deferment in the fissure between the two moments of history because it moves, arouses and agitates so presidingly over a never still terrain of changing affiliations. It doesn't just reflect as it were, figuratively or

literally, an ideology or a viewpoint or a partiality of power and authority as representational theories claim. It is not a re-presentation, static and invested with resignation to facticity. Instead it gravitates to new sites and new cites and new sights, dancing a frolic over and through an untamed territory; the mirror as ferocious euphemism for all that disappears, reappears and is about to appear yet again in another mode as a symptom of what cannot be contained by enlightened thought.

As a symptom of the excessive space hidden by the 'truth' of structuralism's either/or, Joan Jonas' mirror is the postmodern paradigm's paradigm; a simple, confounding mode of dramatic skepticism which utterly displaces, excavates and disconjuncts the passivity that presides over the modernist gaze which sees for a museological, judicial and theological eye. The mirror – this newly constructed mirror of 'productive violence' – announces, ironically given its early scientific and art historical story of reification, that the terror of certain vision is over or at least is on the wane. This mirror mirrors the desire of multiplicity, of circus distortions and carnival appetites; of capers and caprices to come. With no safety net.

The mirror in Joan Jonas' work, in particular, is an infatuated archeological tool which inherits the breath of its congregation. Like an early doctor's mirror set under the patient's nostrils to see if there is any life left throughout its bony skin, Jonas' mirror acts on Julia Kristeva's 'sleeping body' (which Kristeva says is nothing more than a necrophiliac's 'philosophy of language'), to awaken the bourgeois cadaver of a modernist audience by a wondrous catharsis. A 'last look' mirror at a last chance *salon*. A painless interrogation instrument for a narcoleptic. 'Dressed in a man's suit and hat, a female performer climbs to the top of the moving wall, where she shines a light through a magnifying glass, illuminating individual spectators and leaving spots in their eyes'. To see if they were blind. To see if they could hear anything without their usual eyes. To offer them their own medicine.

Jonas used the mirror specially and specifically at this moment (1968-1971) not to reify the structuralist moment (where nature and culture and other semantic oppositions were interchanged in a systematic and masculinist manner, i.e. Smithson, Kounellis, Heizer, Long, etc., and where indices were transferred but never transformed) but instead, to examine its transitional spaces. Or perhaps, more

accurately, Jonas used the mirror to create, author, invent and occasion a process of space which would allow her a bit of the dance floor to investigate the gap between the binominal structures of a bifurcated, metaphorical world. A floor to ground her speech on (which came later on, rushing on like a waterfall). Jonas (like Rebecca Horn and Judith Shea) began, it might be said to animate the minimalist moment. To use the mirror to position herself differently as a difference that makes a difference, as a mirrorful space which is concave; convex; opaque; transparent; distorted and distorting; disoriented; shattered; broken; antimimetic. To claim a space for a vision which is relentlessly restless; indeterminate; even nameless. An eye without an I. The audience as Other is folded into the space of the performer, inculcated beyond seduction to an inspace with the sweep of the social, of the common space of oscillation and potentiality. To renew and reaffirm an unknown constellation of explosiveness. To avoid the industrial and institutional conclusion. To dance the light fantastic, the *leit motif*.

The most luxuriant worlds are closer kin to the wealth of early mythologies, while later fictional worlds bear a notable mark of austerity.

Thomas G. Pavel: *Fictional Worlds; the economy of the imaginary*

To dwell or indwell on this one image or its imagined and fantasized extensions is perverse perhaps and mad, for sure. But, for me, it is an image which is simply exemplary and accessible in its peculiar resistance to closure of any kind. It wants to be historicized significantly with all its excesses hanging cut like a shirt tail, with its strange animality heedless of critical language and its endlessly bisected distortions a warning and a celebration. It is a delirious utterance of revision and reappropriation at the moment of its taking, and yet it is not given its credit in a particular revisionist economy of emancipation narratives nostalgically constructed around art's input to the cultural 'revolution' of the 1960s. Nor are many of the debts to Jonas' whole body of work acknowledged within this economy. Thus, re-seeing one image only, perhaps its subordinated status can ask new questions of gendered value. Perhaps it can see how Jonas proposed and undertook new exigencies and enjoyed and embraced them as only a pyrophile might.

I am of course implying something like a complete re-reading of Jonas, although I'm avoiding a systematic model for that re-search. I am avoiding tying her pieces (obviously not 'easy' pieces) too specifically to any of the quiet academic 'radicalities' because they

would, I believe, limit the hermeneutic possibilities of her work through the introduction of unquestioned terms already too cherished as easy rituals of intellectual lore. Rather my words are set up and about, adjectivally and rhetorically, sometimes ungrammatically, to suggest more work to be done, more writing to feed from the power of Jonas' breathtaking journey. To attend to this remarkable rend in the fabric of art history's and museology's still marching drive seems to deserve hyperbole and a kind of plenitude of sense. 'The slide projection of an Indian miniature is reflected on the walls around the loft with the use of a small mirror. The image of an Oriental rug is projected onto a real rug which is then dropped to reveal the mirror, into which the image dissolves. Water is poured over the mirror to catch the color from the projected image. Large sheets of paper are held up by the performers to catch projected images out of the air. A performer dances in the image of a Turkish mosque lit by a candle, while another fits her body into the image of an Egyptian bird'. Clearly these are no ordinary mirrors, these. Not just ordinary photographs. Nor is this description of a part of a performance just a text, except as text is occasionally understood to be beyond language; as interventionary resistance. And the mirror's changing metaphoric status does

not suggest a mere stage, a phase, an inevitability of separation. There is a kind of revolution in these images and their meanings, a kind of supplementarity to minimalism, to dance, to photography and to the very notion of split subjects. There is a kind of impossible vision here, one that is prescient as well as poetic.

Jonas' brilliance was to create this space and then occupy it suddenly as a technological voice as well as a face to face encounter. As Douglas Crimp has accurately written, her work consistently insists on the same 'eccentricity', the understanding that '...the medium through which one gains access to the image, whether it be simply one's sense or a technological apparatus, is contingent, unstable'.¹ The medium, parallel to performance which she continues to produce and for which she is reproved by history, collectors and curators, is of course, television. For if Jonas was complicit with the process-driven moment of minimalism, her eccentricity escaped its grave burden of materiality and institutionalized constraints by discovering rituals located historically outside the contemporary moment. Like Jackie Winsor's hand-made and obsessive rituals, Jonas used the possibilities of television as she had performance to construct

multi-layered, multi-voiced, multi-referentials, multi-gendered, multi-linguistic, heteroglossic agitations which reached far to evade the ordinary discourse of production.

From the justly famous *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, 1972 (whose title already impressively prepares the way for Patricia Yaeger's 1988 theorisation of *Honey-Mad Women*), through the Fairy Tales of the period 1976-1980, to video tapes like *Double Lunar Dogs*, and *He Saw Her Burning*, what Jonas seemed to come to understand (perhaps through looking at the same photograph) was that the mirror could also reach back into history, into a revisioning of stories already told but told through a social practice unquestioned. (She saw McLuhan's 'rear-view' mirror). It was the mirror that allowed her to see other mirrors – the mirror of Narcissus certainly, and of Psyche, and of all the toilettes of Venus and so on throughout art history. But the mirror became for Jonas a hinge to cross-cultural mirrors and cross-historical mirrors; the mirror of the great sun goddess Amaterasu-omi-kami, perhaps, understood

¹ Douglas Crimp, 'De-synchronization in Joan Jonas' Performances', *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*, University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley, 1983.

as a reflection of power and divinity and a symbol of imagination. Without fetishizing one mirror, or one metaphor of mirroring which the window and the sea can both be as well, Jonas gave in to parallel blasts. She allowed herself to be swept away and become a feather on the forces of narrative's mirrors, sometimes mimetic, sometimes allegorical, sometimes non-sensical. In the third person, she says, 'The performer sees herself as a medium: information passes through'.

Jonas' performance and video work has been characterized then by a movement into and through other cultural genres and forms. Notably, Noh theater and Nordica sagas have informed her successful attempts to insinuate other forms of story-telling into her work. The innovative work integrates allegorical, symbolic, and mythological elements of form and content into narrative to restructure and reform stories. Characters are stylized, even symbolized and through use of costume and masks, postmodern, medieval, classical, western, eastern and local and international simultaneously. It is this use of the mirror, of the television as mirror or the body as mirror, of the mirror as medium in its most profound sense, that she can and did come to voice, to speech and to a rhythm of delirium which

operates between live, recorded, symbolic, bodily, mystical, mythological texts and images simultaneously. A strange grainy voice which stops time short of its narrative destination; just enough time delayed for an audience to consider its own burning desires for completion and significance. Effacing all distinctions between presence and absence, drawing and television, science fiction and newscasts, fairy tales and theory, Jonas has danced (awkwardly and oddly for there is a grief to this activity), on a bed of burning coals of her own making; on a vocabulary of babbling inconsistency; on a plane of vision; on a hinge of mirrors.

Locust Valley, 1993