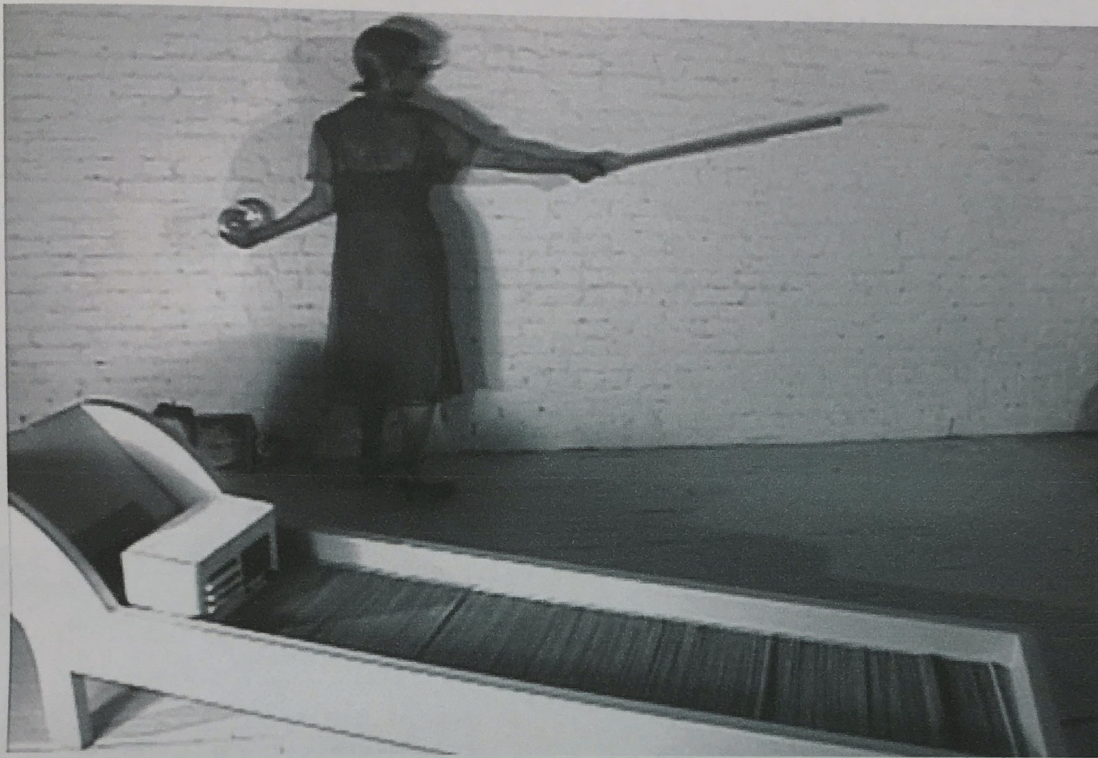


## Joan Jonas: Five Works

December 14, 2003 - March 14, 2004  
Queens Museum of Art



*Lines in the Sand*, Installation video, New York, 2002

### **Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy (1972)**

*Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* evolved as I found myself continually investigating my own image on the video monitor. Wearing the mask of a doll's face transformed me into an erotic electronic seductress. I named this TV persona Organic Honey. From a book on magic came the phrase *visual telepathy*. An important underlying theme was to explore the possible existence of female imagery in relation to the roles that women play, and so only women performed in this series. In translating this initial experiment into performance, I thought of the stage as a film set within my loft. I added a table for my objects. On the wall I tacked a drawing of my dog with one blue eye and one brown eye, doubled. I also used a tall antique accountant's chair. The camerawoman, holding the camera or putting it on a tripod, operated inside the set with me, following my rehearsed movements in close-up. The video images were shown in two ways: on a small monitor, and via a large projection on the wall of the set. I also placed a small monitor inside the set for myself. I monitored all my moves, keeping an eye on the screen as I worked. This way of relating video to performance was the starting point for all my subsequent black and white video works. Several parts of the *Organic Honey* performances were pre-recorded on tape and also existed on their own. I worked back and forth between tape and video performance, translating ideas from performance into tapes and back again.

### **Organic Honey's Vertical Roll (1972)**

*Vertical Roll* was shot in the Ace Gallery in Los Angeles while I was rehearsing the *Organic Honey* performance. Some of the images came from *Visual Telepathy*, others were developed in relation to the structure of the signal malfunction known as a vertical roll. I re-incorporated these new movements into the *Organic Honey* performance, changing the name. Video performance offered the possibility of multiple and simultaneous points of view. Performer and audience were both inside and outside. Perception was relative. No one had all the information. The audience sees, in fact, the process of image-making in a performance simultaneously with a live detail. I was interested in the discrepancies between the performed activity and the constant duplicating, changing and altering of information in the video. The whole is a sequence of missing links as each witness experiences a different series



by glancing from monitor to projection to live action. Time and space in these performances was like Borges' *Garden of the Forking Paths*. Here were parallel worlds I could inhabit, simultaneously, different fields of view and different channels.

### **The Juniper Tree (1976)**

*The Juniper Tree*, a story told again and again, mostly by women, and then written down by the Brothers Grimm in 1812 was, in fact, the technology of the human voice handed down. In this story I continued to explore how women are represented and the roles they play. It becomes partly an exploration of the self and the mirror of my own projections. I am interested in how these tales reflect basic human psychology and behavior, while laying bare hidden taboos. I wanted to shift my concentration away from the medium of film and video or camera and monitor in relation to performance. I recorded the text on audio-tape with music and sound effects, which became a background for my image making - again another kind of closed-circuit. These images are, in a way, as imaginary and non-realistic as those in the earlier video work, but they were inspired by the story and how I experienced it. I chose to represent the story first as a theatrical collaboration in the style of Chinese opera, and then, starting over in a final version, as a solo. In both versions I began with the stage set, a house and a tree. For the group performance, there was a table and a ladder in front of a paper shadow-screen; for the solo, a loose structure of wood and string representing the house that hangs like a puppet from the ceiling, and which finally collapses at the end of the story. I also included a ladder; a shamanic representation of a magic tree - ladders to the sky. This structure becomes my sculpture. Color enters through the story: "as red as blood and as white as snow." On the wall behind the set are red and white drawings painted on red and white silk that represent the boy and the girl of the story. These drawings were made during the performance, and the best were chosen for the set. In the solo version I play all the different female roles: daughter, good mother, and wicked stepmother, the main character. Some parts of the story were danced, some spoken, some drawn on silk. The same mirror used in the early mirror works also served as a reflective drawing surface.

### **Volcano Saga (1985-1989)**

I begin synthesizing the development of female character in *Volcano Saga*, using the story as a mirror and the volcanic landscapes as representations of narrative. In Iceland, the psyche is connected to the elements, which, for example, in my film *Wind* (1968) becomes character. I chose as my story the thirteenth-century *Laxdaela Saga*, which tells the story of a woman who married four times. The book begins with a historical account, tracing the main characters' ancestry and the history of the settlement of Iceland. The woman, Gudrun, then tells four dreams to a seer who interprets them. The second part of the saga involves the actual marriages and the fulfillment of the seer's prophecy.

□  
Icelandic landscapes were captured in video and slides to be incorporated into a solo performance in New York. The live performance was adapted into a 30 minutes narrative for public television broadcast, with Tilda Swinton playing Gudrun and Ron Vawter as the seer Gest. Gudrun tells her dreams to Gest as they sit together in the hot springs, a beautiful blue lagoon with wind, mist, and black volcanic rock. The steamy blue gave the relationship of the characters an erotic cast and a desired level of closeness, as it relates to our own ideas about how and when we tell our dreams to others, and how they are interpreted.

The slide projection reveals the original performance and includes still shots of the Icelandic landscape, which represents the narrative setting.

### **Revolted by the thought of known places... (1992/2003)**

The medieval epic poem, *Sweeney Astray*, in a version by Seamus Heaney, is a tale of the pagan Irish king, who clashes with the cleric St. Ronan, as he attempts to occupy Sweeney's territory. Ronan curses Sweeney, who is subsequently driven mad during a battle, and is transformed into a bird (while physically remaining a man). His expulsion from society forces the hothead Sweeney to speak thereby channeling his alienation into poetry. He laments his losses, sings praises to nature, and complains of hardship, and so on. Eventually he returns to the fold, only to die from a spear by a jealous husband who wrongly suspects him of adultery. The curse is fulfilled. The theme of the individual, stressed beyond endurance by war and fleeing into the wild, can be related to the chaos of the present. An interesting aspect of the poem is the time in which it takes place: in the crack between cultures, the overlapping of ancient Celtic tradition with early Christian belief.



□  
I had lived in Berlin in the early eighties and wanted to return after the wall came down in 1989. In 1992 Berlin became a set for *Revolted...* as I began to work on this project for the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Kunstwerk, an alternative space in Berlin Mitte was just beginning to form and so, in their old liquor factory space *Revolted by the thought of known places...* developed. Berlin Mitte, Sans Souci in Potsdam the newly accessible roads of East Germany were all magical contemporary settings.

The main prop, a six-foot high glass table - a nest - through which the camera shot the actor, made Sweeney look as if he was suspended in space. We worked with reflections and juxtapositions of the actor's body with images of the other performers. A metal well was built, based on those I had seen in the Aran Islands. I asked the composer Harry deWit to construct a set of percussive structures resembling a blacksmith's forge. *Revolted by the thought of known places...* is a work in progress.

Much of the footage shot in Berlin in 1989-1992 has remained unedited. Recently, as in *Mirage*, I have found it interesting to reintroduce previously unedited material. In this work there are five newly edited timelines consisting of footage shot in Berlin in 1989 and 1992. The conflict and alienation of Sweeney was suggested in Berlin during this political shift. The figure of the king represents a sense of displacement. In this context Sweeney was my starting point.

### **Woman in the Well (1996/2002)**

A story travels from one place to another.

While working on *Revolted by the thought of known places...*, I had wanted to find a female character from this same medieval time. While in residence at the Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, I was introduced to Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, an Irish poet who writes in Gaelic. Nuala gave me her version of the ancient Gaelic tale "'Misand Dubh Ruis,' a Parabel of Psychic Transformation," about a woman driven wild from the effects of war. Her "taming" is humorous and erotic.

I thought of a well, a metaphor for source, which appears in folk tale traditions and I imagined this woman swimming at the bottom of it. This video sequence played on a large monitor, which was placed inside a traditional wishing well in a patio setting. Mirrors were placed around the video screen to multiply the image. A book with the story about the wild woman was also placed in this setting next to the well as if someone were reading it or listening to a woman telling it, aware of the under water female presence. Leo Smith composed music for this installation. Harp music played inside the well and trumpet music seemed to come from an old radio nearby.

In this second version of *Woman in the Well*, the story and the woman swimming are again juxtaposed, this time in the room adjacent to the installation *Revolted by the thought of known places...* If one sits on the bench facing the chalkboard to read or to listen to the story, the woman swimming and holding her breath under water will not be visible, but the sounds - gurgles, bubbles, hums, are always present.

### **My New Theater I (1997)**

□  
In 1997 I began *My New Theater*, a series that satisfied the desire to continue performing in situations which did not always require a physical presence. I thought of a portable video theater in miniature. To refer to theater but avoid the usual objects (monitor and projector) as visible furniture, I designed a long narrow box that sloped nine feet from front to back, a squared-off cone-shape that sat on saw-horses at eye-level, about five feet. The shape is reminiscent of the paper cones in *Funnel* (1974) and the tin cones of *Mirage* (1976). I also thought of the *camera obscura* and other early viewing devices. The cone serves as an instrument to direct sound to the audience, and I whispered, sang, and yelled into both ends. I also looked through the cone and listened through it. Like the cone, the box is a sound device.

The viewer stands looking into what is a small theater. A stage is set up at the large end of the box. Behind the stage is a screen for back-projection onto which a video loop is projected from a small projector hidden in the box. Small props that refer to the content of the video are located on the stage and the floor in front of it, along with tiny speakers to amplify the sound. The box also became a speaker for the sound of feet tapping on wooden surfaces, the sound of a fiddle and a waterfall.



□

The seven-minute video loop is a poetic documentary about a Cape Breton step dancer. He performs for the camera in different locations: on a board by a waterfall, on a porch with a fiddler and a piano-player, and in the dance hall. Intercut with this older man is a close-up of the feet of a young girl step-dancing in a more elaborate style. I wanted to record the dancing of this particular man because his simple casual style from an earlier time, when people danced in kitchens, is magical but will disappear. I was also inspired by the relation of music and dance to the culture of a rural community where people grow up playing fiddle in the kitchen. This was also a kind of research, where I compared this older form to my own context of performance, which is more formal, separated, and pre-planned.

### Lines in the Sand (2002)

*Lines in the Sand* is based on the epic poem *Helen in Egypt* written by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) in 1961. The original myth, as recounted in the *Iliad*, tells of the seduction and abduction of Helen to Troy. H. D. quotes other classical sources that suggest Helen remained in Egypt and never set foot in Troy. The myth of Helen as the cause of the Trojan War is a phantasm; the Greeks and Trojans fought for an illusion. Trade and access to the Black Sea has been proposed as a more likely cause, but the true reason for the Trojan War is lost. Interestingly, for centuries the accepted myth - a war fought over a woman - was preferred to a lesser-known, but more subtle and abstract version of absence. In this alternate version it is Helen who constantly questions the reality of her own myth. Egypt, like Helen, is represented by a real and a fake. The fake is Las Vegas and its new casino Luxor. The real exists in the photographs of Egypt taken by my grandmother, Florence Dimond d'Olier in 1910.

The installation resembles a stage-set. It includes a double video projection representing elements of the central narrative together with multiple chalk drawings of the Sphinx, the pyramids, and endless spirals on a blackboard. A video with another short text, *Pillow Talk*, from the ancient Irish epic *The Tain*, is a play within the play. A young Irish king and queen lie in bed discussing who has the most possessions. Their humorous dialogue, a kind of trade war, demonstrates how arguments over possessions begin at home. The couch, possibly Egyptian in style, refers to Freud's couch, or a coffin. The narrative of *Lines in the Sand* consists of excerpts from *Helen in Egypt* intercut with *Tribute to Freud* (1956) in which H. D. describes her analysis with Freud in the 1930s.

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