

Barbara Clausen interviewed by Kristin Poor, August 11, 2020

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Kristin Poor: Today is August 11th, 2020. I'm Kristin Poor and I'm here with Barbara Clausen, who is the Curatorial Research Director for the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base and the Professor of Art History at UQAM. Thank you Barbara, for joining us today to discuss the Organic Honey Archive.

Barbara Clausen: Thank you, Kristin.

Kristin Poor: Perhaps we could start with you telling us how the first presentation of the Organic Archive came about. This was at MUMOK in Vienna.

Barbara Clausen: Yes. So I wrote my M.A. on Joan Jonas's performance *Lines in the Sand*, which was first performed at documenta 11 in 2002. And after this working experience and also research experience of my M.A., I decided to start my Ph.D. working on the history of representational politics of performance documentation, specifically in New York in the 1970s. And one of the case studies was Joan Jonas's early work, *Organic Honey*, which is also one of our main case studies of the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. And my Ph.D. research really at the outset brought me to this simple, but of course, complex question of, what do the photographs that we have today of performances from the sixties or seventies, tell us about the work? And how do these image sources influence the art history and the writing on performance art history and art history in general? And really thinking about the very almost didactical question. What if different photographs would have been taken of a performance? Would that have resulted in a different art historical understanding of key and iconic performances such as *Organic Honey*?

Barbara Clausen: And *Organic Honey*, the body of work that Joan developed in 1972, was so significant because up until that time, there were about a handful of photographs by Peter Moore, by Babette Mangolte, by a few photographers that really defined how—Béatrice Heyligers, you can see them in the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base—defined on how that artwork was thought about, remembered, considered one of the key works in performance video practices. And at that point I was already familiar with Joan's work, had met her, and flew to New York and asked her if she had more photographs of *Organic Honey*, and it turned out there were boxes of photographs of *Organic*

*Honey*. A lot of them that had never been presented to the public. There were also reels of videotape of *Organic Honey*, video materials that then resulted in the various video works that accompany the work and documentation.

Barbara Clausen:

And as the outset of the show, *After the Act: The (Re)presentation of Performance Art*, which I curated at the MUMOK, the Museum of Modern Art Foundation Ludwig in Vienna in 2005, was this idea that these documentary sources could become a source of inspiration, but they can also open up a whole new way of seeing iconic performance-based artworks that were seen as “ephemeral.” But in reality, actually consisted of a pretty broad and rich, layered, visual history through moving and still images. And so this was really the idea for this MUMOK show was to start out by showing Joan Jonas's entire archive of *Organic Honey*, including the photographs, of course, all the filmed footage (so this really included video reels of footage that was shot by various people around that time in 1972, documentary, but also part of the work) ...

Barbara Clausen:

...posters, a few notes, drawings, and to present that on one of the large walls in the MUMOK factory, which was like a large gallery below ground. And in the end, it really encompassed about, I think it was almost 150 objects that made up this installation of the archive of *Organic Honey*. And it was shown that way for the first time. And so that was really the starting point. Then there were other works that were presented next to this exhibition that were based in performance photography. So that's how that exhibition came about.

Kristin Poor:

In terms of the selection, Barbara, it was pretty much everything that Joan had in her archive. Were there some things that for one reason or another, you decided to exclude?

Barbara Clausen:

Yes. So the *Organic Honey* Archive was presented two times. The first time in 2005 in this exhibition at MUMOK, *After the Act...*, and the second time in 2016 at the Phi Foundation in Montréal, Canada. And the first time in 2005, there was this very conscious decision to not include any of the “final videotapes,” or video works, so *Vertical Roll* wasn't shown, the documentation, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* that you can now get from EAI, nor *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, the video work of it.

Barbara Clausen:

Those three pieces were not shown, nor *Anxious Automation*, nor *Duet*. It was a really conscious decision at that moment taken together by Joan Jonas, and with me, to not show any of the, so to say, “final result,” because part of the context of that exhibition was that it was an exhibition that didn't have the

budget nor the other conservatory circumstances to ask the Stedelijk Museum, who owns the installation of *Organic Honey*, which came about in 1994, to be allowed to present that at the MUMOK. So the idea was really to think about, would there be another way of presenting that work that would go further back in history and really look at the process and at the various different perspectives and viewpoints that come together when a work (as it was in the case...at that point, we thought it was just 13 times...

Barbara Clausen: ...now we know it was many times more throughout the 1970s) is performed. So that was kind of the context. And Achim Hochdörfer, at the Museum of Modern Art, the MUMOK in Vienna was the one who invited me to curate this exhibition. So that's perhaps also important to say, he was interested in my Ph.D. research and asked me to put this exhibition together, based on this archive of Joan Jonas' one key oeuvre of *Organic Honey*.

Kristin Poor: What kinds of discussions did you have with Joan about it, at that moment of the first presentation?

Barbara Clausen: Well, part of it was, A), how should we present this? B) was, should we show everything or make a selection? At that time in 2005, Joan was also very clear saying...a lot of that material she had never shown before. And the materials that we're talking about also included notebooks, and it also included contact sheets for example. Some of those contact sheets were damaged, or it wasn't artworks that we were showing. We were really showing an archive or opening up archival boxes and deciding to present them. And so selecting the material, we became pretty clear that [it was] either all or nothing. And so there was really the decision to present it all.

Barbara Clausen: And Jonas was extremely generous in allowing me to do that. And some of the discussion was about how, given that this was literally thirty years later, that Jonas said that at the time, she would have never thought that these photographs and these documentary sources would ever be shown as a kind of archival presentation. Some of the photographs, and you can see them in the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base—that were also photographed by artists partly, are really interpretations almost—[this] is another perspective on the performance. So it was really this question of whose view or whose gaze on the performance are we seeing when we see these photographs?

Barbara Clausen: And so that was very important. And it was also important in 2005, how were they going to be presented? And at that point,

the decision was to be really as simple and as non-orderly as possible. So one of the decisions that was made, that I think I proposed to Joan, was to make a kind of cloud, a giant cloud of photographs, though not have an order necessarily, in having different lines of photographs hanging, but to have them really as clouds. ...but to keep a kind of hierarchy in the sense of chronology, not a hierarchy, a chronology of the work, so from left or right, it would be the first edition. The first rendition of *Organic Honey*. Then at the end, it would be the last one. At that point that was the Guggenheim in 1981. So, we did spread that out through the space from left to right in a chronological order.

Barbara Clausen:

And then there was a question of the framing and that was really to use whatever frames we could find then. You see them literally. So all the photographs, all the documents were framed and some of the works were shown in vitrines and you can see that in the photographs on the Joan Jonas Knowledge base. But they were really, there was no unified aesthetic that would link these photographs together. They were of course, labeled and identified, and it was clearly ... In that sense there was order, but there wasn't a unified aesthetic about it.

Kristin Poor:

And in terms of offering some kind of layer of interpretation, was there, didactic wall text, or any other material that would guide the viewer in a particular way? Or were you really trying to keep this openness in terms of how people see it.

Barbara Clausen:

It was really an openness. We didn't have a didactic. I think we had a small wall text that just mentioned here's material of Joan Jonas's archive, of her seminal piece, *Organic Honey*. It was very, very brief. It was just very exact, also really sourcing that this came from her studio, so this is the artist's studio from New York. But there was no further elaboration in that sense. Next to this exhibition, I also organized a symposium with the same title, *After the Act*. And there was a conversation that took place between Joan Jonas and Babette Mangolte on this history of their work together where Joan had engaged with Babette and asked her and hired her also to, commissioned her to photograph *Organic Honey*, amongst many other works. Pretty much throughout the 1970s, amongst others, also *Mirage*, which is the second case study here.

Barbara Clausen:

So they were discussing how that collaboration worked out. And that was then part of the book that came out very shortly after the exhibition and the symposium, which took place at the beginning of the exhibition. So there was a moment of mediation where the artist herself was speaking, but also one of

the photographers, which was very, very important for me at the time from a curatorial position.

Kristin Poor:

Interesting. So the discursive component of it really took part in that symposium and book.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. And it was also interesting because it really split the opinion. So some people felt critical about it saying that it's a kind of moment where artists' archives become commercialized because of a curatorial intervention of putting them on the wall. The moment where you take documentary [materials], this is 2005, within the whole context of documentary aesthetics that was going on at that point especially in the Viennese context and in Germany and Europe, this question of the aesthetic of the documentary played such a big role in so many different ways, also very critical and activist practices. And there was a discussion around, is this gesture of putting something up on the wall that's actually a documentary, comes from an archive, do you make it into an artwork in that moment? Or how do you frame it that it keeps the tension of its source of being an archival photograph?

Kristin Poor:

And was there discussion at that moment, or was it later, around using these kinds of documentary photographs of earlier performances as a kind of commercialization of the performance?

Barbara Clausen:

Well, it was a split discussion because on one hand, Joan in her installations, which she developed in 1994, already had used some specifically chosen photographs of the performances to be a part of the installation, which is much in line with other artists, Hans Breder, Ana Mendieta... There were many artists at the time who really actively used—Chris Burden of course—like who really actively, consciously used their photographic documentation as an integral part of their installations. So the photographs had always become, to some extent, had already become part of the work. They were also used to spread the word and uses for press purposes basically, or catalogue purposes.

Barbara Clausen:

And there was an absolute awareness, and I think this was really clear, that the photographs we see of documentary performances, were not randomly chosen or didn't appear suddenly, but were really part of a visual strategy and really part of a composition. And were very consciously chosen and commissioned and framed and are really part of the artist's way of reflecting how they want their work to be represented both in the present as much as in the future and past. So I think that

was...became like one of the main points, obviously also for my dissertation at the time in the early zeros.

Barbara Clausen: That it wasn't so much a question of who is really the author, but more what an integral role these documentary images play in the reception of the work and how that choice of which image would be distributed was an integral part of the understanding of the work as a whole. So that discussion started then and it's actually still continuing now to some extent—they've become also very political—and whose photographs were accepted in a refusal to document. And that's a whole other story...

Kristin Poor: ...that all these decisions are quite deliberate.

Barbara Clausen: Absolutely, completely deliberate. Absolutely.

Kristin Poor: So how did the presentation of the archive change for the exhibition in Montréal? Over ten years later, no?

Barbara Clausen: Yes. It was really ten years later. So 2016, Montréal that then DHC now Phi Foundation in Montréal, Cheryl Sim the curator and director there invited me to curate an exhibition of Joan's work, which was really, really focused as a kind of first Canadian retrospective of Joan's work. The centerpiece of that exhibition was Joan's *They Come to Us without a Word*, which was presented in the Venice Biennial, represented the U.S. And the U.S. Pavilion of the 2015 Venice Biennial. So that was really at the center of the exhibition.

Barbara Clausen: And then next to this very contemporary work by Joan that was really never presented in the U.S. before, were four different spaces that were used to present works that are more recent, but also historical. So there was *Wind*, there were different kinds of video projections, there was *After Mirage* there were really various works. And amongst others on the third floor of the Phi Foundation in Montréal, there was again, a presentation of the Organic Honey Archive. And it was interesting, there was a whole floor dedicated to presenting that archive again, because somehow, again, it was impossible to get the work from the Stedelijk in Amsterdam due to climate control questions, costs...[which] many curators are often confronted with when they can't get a work. So when discussing this show with Joan, the decision was quickly made to present the archive again.

Kristin Poor: And what was the process of selecting the materials for the second time like?

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, that was interesting because the second time, of course, we went back and looked at all the checklists that we had for the first time. And because in the meantime, in those ten years, Joan's work was shown so widely in Europe and in the U.S. There was also a lot of, so to say, movement in her own studio and archive amongst others. There was also the big monograph that came out of the work of Joan Jonas' that Joan Simon edited together with Joan Jonas. So a lot of this archive suddenly appeared and it was spread out on the studio tables. And there were also not just contact sheets, but also negatives that were found for the second presentation. So we actually had numerous photographs developed for the presentation of the Organic Honey Archive at the Phi Foundation in 2016.

Barbara Clausen: I think one of the most striking differences was that, for the second showing Joan was much more involved from an artistic point of view in the sense that she really was very thoughtful about the color of the walls, which was this very specific grey that Joan uses for installations. The order again was chronological, but the posters were really presented together. Groupings of photographs were determined by year again, chronologically, but also by photographer. But I think the biggest decision— there were two really important decisions—that no more raw footage was shown as in the first edition.

Barbara Clausen: But now the "results," so to say were shown too. So we, together with EAI, were able to present all the video works that are related to *Organic Honey* as an array within the exhibition space. And Joan actually really installed the videos the way...on a projection, on the cube monitors... some of them were on smaller monitors and bigger projections. It was five videos that were presented at the time that were also part of the performance. So there was really more of a sense of the work coming together as an installation rather than presenting an archive. So the videos played a role in that, on pedestals and just the cube monitors. So there was *Duet*, *Anxious Automation*, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, *Vertical Roll*.

Barbara Clausen: You had quite a few videos in the room. There was sound, it was very loud, which, in Vienna there was no sound, very quiet. You really entered into a space that completely engulfed the viewer as an experience. It was much more installation. There was also this question of deciding to have all the photographs framed with frames. So it was a unified frame. There was a lot of framing going on so that the work would be presented in a way that became very ... The differences between the photographs didn't pop out in the same way, because there weren't different

types of frames. It was a white wooden frame that always had the same thickness. And that combination of wall, so background, and framing really, really changed how the installation came together and the archive really became an installation.

Kristin Poor:

What else could you say about that decision not to include the raw footage? What was the rationale behind that? It's interesting to not show it alongside the final videos...

Barbara Clausen:

It is. And I think it was Jonas's decision as an artist to really—I think from an art historical perspective—authorize and author the presentation of her archive. It kind of proved that point that these performance photographs do become an inherent part of the work. And in the future, the Organic Honey Archive will be shown again. I am sure. And another difference was that actually in Montréal, we did not show any notebooks. So it was all flat except for the video monitors. Whereas in Vienna, there was much more of a three dimensional spread-out feeling because the notebooks were there, behind vitrines, nevertheless, but still there was a sense of consultation, which in the DHC space, it was much more ... You were in a space dedicated to, it was only one, it'd only have one purpose...

Barbara Clausen:

And that was to present the Organic Honey Archive. There was a very detailed floor plan, a map where you could really see which work is which (which you can also find on a Joan Jonas Knowledge Base). So I think these decisions are really taken in very close collaboration with the artist and Joan Jonas really decided that. I think it's also a difference to say that the first time we showed it, in *After the Act...*, it was a group exhibition. So there were different works that were shown in the exhibition next to this archival presentation. Whereas at the DHC, Phi Foundation, it was a retrospective, which is just a totally different type of...it's a solo exhibition against a group exhibition.

Kristin Poor:

You describe it as an installation and the ways that Joan was using the color and the uniformity of frames and other things that she has used in other installations in the past. And also this context of a retrospective, which of course like the Stedelijk Museum was really the genesis for a lot of her other installations. Do you think that Joan herself now considers this work to be an installation? Could you see this going on to become really a set installation in a way that *Mirage* and *Organic Honey* have become over the years? Can you imagine that it would still evolve... What do you anticipate?



Barbara Clausen: I know parts of that presentation have been shown, like as small groupings of photographs that were taken, extracted from this grouping of the white frame, photographs have been shown before. I know there's also the show, the exhibition that happened in Kyoto, I think in 2018 where the curator decided to only show the video. And it's an interesting thing. If you compare the floor plan of the video show and the Phi show in Montréal, the videos are really placed in the same spacings, in the same positions, which goes back to the first performances of the work. There's actually a floor plan that can be traced. They could go both ways.

Barbara Clausen: It could be that Joan Jonas decides, "Nope, I want this to be ... this was shown two times, I don't think the archive will be shown again." It could also be that this archival presentation format that turns into an installation will absolutely accompany, maybe the installation that is very set from the Stedelijk, because as you can see on the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base, the Stedelijk installation is not supposed to evolve or change anymore. It's really part of the collection of the Stedelijk Museum. Whereas that's maybe an also an important factor. The Joan Jonas archive of *Organic Honey* is in Joan's own ownership. So this has not been sold or isn't part of another collection. It really belongs to Joan Jonas, the artist, since she really still uses it.

Kristin Poor: She still uses it. How, is it something that she refers back to?

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, that she refers back to, and that maybe at times she would use for different publications. Because it also then ties into this question of the rights to reuse the photographs in different ways because the physical photographs, so to say, become originals in the ownership of Joan's studio. When we presented this, I think that's maybe a very important factor in this question of originality or uniqueness of a kind of archive installation, is that while there are some negatives that Joan has, a lot of it is prints that she owns, and which she acquired from the photographer, so these prints exist in her studio. So they become kinds of originals.

Barbara Clausen: We didn't get in touch with all the photographers to get new prints of these photographs. So there's this question of the original documentary material that really comes up, where that might also have an influence in future years on how Jonas will present this work, but maybe will it also become part of a collection? Will these photographs hopefully not be separated? That brings a lot of questions with it. And again, they're all originals. They belong to Joan as original prints, but the copyright is still the photograph that somebody took.

- Kristin Poor: Right. That's so interesting. And also what might happen at the moment of acquisition, if an institution or individual ever did decide to acquire it, if that was something Jonas was open to, what would change? And would there be exhibition copies made of those prints, and would that change the experience? Because there is so much information to be gleaned from the back of the prints and...yeah, that's very interesting.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, and you can see this with *Mirage*, right? The photographs that Babette Mangolte took of Joan Jonas's *Mirage* performance are photographs that Babette Mangolte took for being asked to take them by Joan Jonas at the time in 1976. And some of these photographs are now shown as part of the installation. And of course they should be credited also to Babette Mangolte, because she took these photographs, but they were on the other hand, commissioned by Joan Jonas. And Joan was very clear in asking the photographers, as much as her camera persons, the way she would ask them to film or photograph her was following a very distinct set of rules and positions. So it wasn't so much, at least for the one, the photographic documentation that she then used afterwards to represent our work.
- Kristin Poor: Thank you so much, Barbara, is there anything that we missed about the archive that you want to be sure that we document here today?
- Barbara Clausen: I think one of the most important things is, on one hand, to see them as an integral part of the artist's practice and work, and work procedure. And on the other hand, to be aware that the work of an artist such as Joan Jonas, who works with these different media is always also part of a collaborative process where Jonas very consciously and wisely and distinctly chose to work with the best of the field to photograph her work, and to photograph her within her work, or doing her work, or performing her work. And I think it's important that these different collaborators are also mentioned of course, and that they may continue to be mentioned. But also really to look at the working circumstances and the circumstances of how these collaborations came about. And that obviously the questions of authorship are complex, but there is a moment where an artist decides to work, and hire, and commission and pay a photographer.
- Barbara Clausen: So there's a specific set of questions that come up that are fascinating to look at. And that I think in the Organic Honey Archive are well represented, and hopefully will continue to be reflected upon in the future.

Joan Jonas Knowledge Base

- Kristin Poor: That's great. I also will just point listeners to some of the other interviews that are on the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base with some of the photographers, including Gwen Thomas, for example.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes.
- Kristin: Good starting point.
- Barbara Clausen: And maybe we can, as art historians, both Kristin being the Associate Curatorial Director of the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base, also say how important it is that these archival collections stay together, and that they're not separated into many different bits and pieces, and hopefully that will happen in the future and stay that way in the future, that they will remain together.
- Kristin Poor: Oh yes, absolutely. It would be a major loss to have them scattered. Well, thank you so much, Barbara. This has been very helpful. I really appreciate it.
- Barbara Clausen: Thank you.

*This transcript is intended to provide an accessible form of interview audio content. It has been edited for factual accuracy and clarity. Any alterations are noted with brackets.*