

Joan Jonas on *Mirage* installations, interviewed by Kristin Poor, April 19, 2019

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Kristin Poor: Today is April 19, 2019. This is Kristin Poor. I'm here with Joan Jonas at her studio, and we are here to discuss the *Mirage* installation. So Joan, would you speak a bit about the evolution of the components in *Mirage* from a performance to an installation?

Joan Jonas: I think the first time I did the installation of *Mirage* ... I have a photograph in there of it at the Stedelijk. It started out in a very simple way. It was just a projection. It was one projection and ... If I could quickly get the little photograph?

Kristin Poor: Yeah. I also brought some here too, but I want to see the one that you have.

Joan Jonas: I think that's the one there on your right.

Kristin Poor: This one?

Joan Jonas: Yeah. See how simple it was?

Kristin Poor: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And you had this table?

Joan Jonas: Yeah. That's what I had.

Kristin Poor: It looks like here in the drawing, the chalkboards are there, but here the monitor is there.

Joan Jonas: I don't think I can find the photo.

Kristin Poor: Okay.

Joan Jonas: Okay. At the Stedelijk, I guess sometimes the monitor was on the so-called stage, and then I think the chalkboard was on the floor in front of that stage with a monitor on the stage. I'm not sure how many videos were showing on the monitor, at least *May Windows* and maybe *Night Windows*. I don't know if *Good Night*, *Good Morning* was there.

Joan Jonas: By the way, *Good Night*, *Good Morning* was shot for that vertical monitor so it was really shot for this piece. Then there were tin cones, and there was a video projection of the drawing video. I

don't know how long that was, but it was a very simple installation of the piece obviously.

Kristin Poor:

Would you talk a bit about the decision to make an installation in the first place at the Stedelijk?

Joan Jonas:

I was asked to do a show at the Stedelijk. I mean, some years before this, in 1976, I did a piece called *Stage Sets* which was just an installation in Philadelphia. I thought of my works—I didn't call them installations—but I thought of them as stage sets, like *The Juniper Tree*. I made situations for the performances in which I could step into and make a different reality from every day. So it's like a stage set.

Joan Jonas:

I had come from sculpture, so it was a logical step for me to then include these stage sets and try to show my work in a situation that didn't require a performance, with me performing. One of the reasons is because I spent months working on performances, and then they would all be over in a few minutes, and not that many people would see it.

Joan Jonas:

I just wanted more people to see the work, and I was interested in having a different situation and not always having to perform. So that's one of the reasons behind ... I was asked to do a show [at the Stedelijk]. So Dorine [Mignot] and I spent quite a bit of time talking about what that could be in relation to each piece. So in other words, not to show ...

Joan Jonas:

I mean some people might think, "Oh, you can show your props." But we decided you couldn't show any of the props out of context. So that's how I gradually came to think of each piece in relation to all the elements: the props, the video, the media and the situation of the performance set-up. I mean at the Stedelijk I remember the *Mirror Pieces* were shown in a slightly different way. I couldn't show ... It was a row of mirrors lying against the wall with the videotape of *Songdelay*, I think, or *Wind*.

Joan Jonas:

There were films that I made. Also then *Mirage* was very simple. So I chose five pieces to ... I call it "translate" into installation. Let's see: *Organic Honey*, *Mirage*, *The Juniper Tree*, the *Mirror Pieces* and the new piece, [*Revolted by the Thought of Known Places*] ... *Sweeney Astray*. ... *Sweeney Astray* started out as an installation because it was a new piece. So it began in the Stedelijk as an installation, and then it was translated into a performance. Anyway, so that's how it began.

- Kristin Poor: What was the process of assembling these installations? What did you consult?
- Joan Jonas: Well, all my notes, and we'd collected all the objects. I had the whole loft at that time. We collected all the objects that had anything to do with the performance, sorted them out. I think I just planned ahead of time and then went and actually did it. I think it was the first time so it was a little difficult for the installers because I would change my mind and rearrange things in a different way. But I built a new stage set for the ... *Sweeney* piece which ... That was another step.
- Joan Jonas: I mean I had the stage sets from 1976 in Philadelphia, but that was also based on the performance of *Funnel* with the paper walls and the hoop. I was using elements that I've worked with before. I had the combs. I'm very sad they're not showing it Porto, they were going to, but it was canceled. What was I saying?
- Kristin Poor: You were talking about what you were looking at. You brought all the props out into this space and ...
- Joan Jonas: Yeah, we were just saying they're not going to work by themselves and going from there. I mean, I don't remember, it was really a trial of ... It was a process, making this first show at the Stedelijk, putting things together, and as quickly as possible arranging them. But I prepared quite a bit beforehand.
- Kristin Poor: You and Dorine had worked together here in New York before?
- Joan Jonas: Well, I knew Dorine pretty well. I was in things that she had curated. She came to New York and worked with me together on planning it.
- Kristin Poor: Then the *Mirage* installation changed quite a bit from that first installation.
- Joan Jonas: Well, that was 1994, and it wasn't until, I think 2000 when I made that parallel film. Then I added that to the installation. It didn't change radically in that it had two parallel films or videos side by side, projected. I made it more spatial later. In other words I had three monitors on the sides with each of the *May Windows*, *Night Windows*, and *Good Night, Good Morning*.
- Joan Jonas: Then I had the double projection. Some of the drawings I made very large, especially in ... I'm thinking when I put the piece in MACBA that took on another life. I don't remember the first

time I showed that as an installation. Then I showed the volcano film separately. So it became much more spatial with things playing simultaneously.

Joan Jonas: So there were the two projections of the drawing film and the new video that I made called *Mirage II*, plus the projection of the volcano footage, plus the monitors. So it became much more expanded and, I think, more interesting, more complete as something other than the performance. It took some time to reinvent it as an installation. That wasn't true of some of the other works like *Organic Honey*: from the very beginning I played all the videos together simultaneously and projected ... That changed too but not as radically as *Mirage*.

Kristin Poor: So looking at some of these images, when you did it at the Whitney for example, in 2001, we see in the photograph there's the double projection of *Mirage* and *Mirage II*, and then there's a monitor, but there's no props here.

Joan Jonas: Yeah. I guess not. It was a decision. It was part of Chrissie's [Illes] show *Into the Light* [*Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977*]. Yeah, I don't know why there were no props. I'm not sure why they made that decision.

Kristin Poor: Okay. Do you remember at the Queens Museum—

Joan Jonas: What it was?

Kristin Poor: ... showing *Mirage* there? Yeah, and what that was like?

Joan Jonas: Actually I don't. I was looking through my Queens catalogue. Was it shown at the Queens?

Kristin Poor: Well, I see this label here, a wall label that says, "DVD transfer from 16 mm film of *Mirage*", and then a photograph from the Anthology [Anthology Film Archives] performance, and then the metal cones and the chalkboard drawing were there.

Joan Jonas: Really?

Kristin Poor: According to this from the archive, but I was curious what you remember.

Joan Jonas: I just have the catalogue. We can look at the catalogue. I'll get it. It must've been in that show.

- Joan Jonas: [Looking at Queens Museum catalogue] Then there are pictures of *Mirage* in this back section but not of the installation. So there's *Mirage*.
- Kristin Poor: The performance?
- Joan Jonas: Yeah, that's it. Funny isn't it?
- Kristin Poor: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Joan Jonas: So I don't know where it was. I don't remember. Yeah, I don't remember. So what else?
- Kristin Poor: So then in 2005, this is about where it came to the roughly final iteration.
- Joan Jonas: 2005? Where's that?
- Kristin Poor: Yvon Lambert.
- Joan Jonas: Oh. That's interesting. Yeah, that's true. Then MoMA bought it. It was shown at HangarBicocca and in Malmö [Malmö Konsthall] in the same more or less complete iteration.
- Kristin Poor: With slight adaptations for the spaces or—
- Joan Jonas: Well, maybe spatial but no adaptations as far as the material itself. I never changed the relation with the projection to the table: that was always the same. The drawings were maybe put in different places. Maybe I'm mixing *Lines in the Sand* up with *Mirage*. I made big drawings for *Lines in the Sand*. That's where I could be mixing up.
- Kristin Poor: At the Stedelijk you had photographs as part of it too, right?
- Joan Jonas: Oh, always. I mean in the Stedelijk maybe I did, but always there's a whole sequence of photographs included. That's part of the installation, of the performance. Always.
- Kristin Poor: When you were preparing to hand off *Mirage* to MoMA for the acquisition, what did you give them?
- Joan Jonas: I gave them everything that was at Yvon Lambert. They saw the Yvon Lambert. Barbara London was the one who organized it. They just got the whole thing, whatever was there. I don't keep the stages. Maybe Yvon Lambert did. I don't store the stages,

but I gave them ... I wouldn't think about it that way. They got all the elements that were in the Yvon Lambert piece.

Kristin Poor: Were there any particular preparations you needed to make to hand that over because you'd already put it together?

Joan Jonas: Yeah.

Kristin Poor: Did you give any specific instructions about spatial relations—

Joan Jonas: I went and installed it with Barbara, together. I think unfortunately there it was installed in a room that people walked through. It was like a passageway, which was not ideal. But anyway, no, I went and did it with Barbara. Hopefully the next time they do it ... I mean they're pretty good. I think it's ok. But she's not there anymore.

Kristin Poor: Was there a conservator also?

Joan Jonas: No. I mean, not that I remember. Maybe there was. Everything I do I'm very careful, but it'd be interesting to ask them. I wonder if Glenn [Wharton] would remember. I'm sure he was there.

Kristin Poor: What are your concerns about having institutions own your work?

Joan Jonas: Just that they show it properly. Really, that's the only concern, that they show it properly. I've had the experiences of it not being shown properly which, in my case, ruins the work. So, pretty much, it has to be ... Like with the Stedelijk we very carefully planned how to show *Organic Honey*. Then some curator showed it without following the plan. The conservators actually wrote to me after the fact saying they felt so terrible that they didn't want to tell me, but it was really bad.

Joan Jonas: It was when the Stedelijk was renovating and was using the central station, a building in the central station. And then .... Who was the ... She's in Chicago now. She was there a short time. The head of the Stedelijk? Who took over the Stedelijk?

Kristin Poor: I know who you mean, but I can't think of her name right now.

Joan Jonas: Well, not Beatrix Ruf but the one before that. Ann Goldstein.

Kristin Poor: Yes.

- Joan Jonas: So Ann actually asked me about it, and I told her. Then they installed it for their opening show perfectly. So they know how to do it, you know. So that's great. I'm really happy about that.
- Joan Jonas: I have to make little corrections like if I see ... *The Juniper Tree* at the Tate, once I saw it the sound was ... You couldn't hear it, it didn't make sense. Things like that.
- Kristin Poor: In terms of the Whitney's acquisition of *Mirage*, how did that work and what instructions—
- Joan Jonas: The Whitney doesn't have it.
- Kristin Poor: The projection and the—
- Joan Jonas: Oh, do they own it? I don't know. I mean some of these things go through EAI [Electronic Arts Intermix] ... Oh, the Whitney acquisition. They probably bought that through EAI. I don't have anything to do with what EAI sells. I don't oversee that.
- Kristin Poor: So you did not have any part in the acquisition process at the Whitney?
- Joan Jonas: No. I should have some say in how it's shown, but I don't ... I should talk to Chrissie. Ask her about it. But they bought I think the double projection, that's all.
- Kristin Poor: Ah, not the monitor?
- Joan Jonas: No.
- Kristin Poor: Okay.
- Joan Jonas: I'm pretty sure, but I don't know.
- Kristin Poor: So do you think that institutions in general and the people who have *Mirage* in particular adequately understand the work in order to install it in the future?
- Joan Jonas: Well, so far. But I think it is a problem that I should pay more attention to.
- Kristin Poor: When you installed the work after acquisition at MoMA, you mentioned you were there with Barbara. What was that process like?

- Joan Jonas: Well, we just worked every day for a week putting it up. And you work with a technician.
- Kristin Poor: And exhibition designers or conservators or—
- Joan Jonas: No. I design all my installations. So I don't work with exhibition designers.
- Kristin Poor: What was most helpful for you? Do you have any advice for museum staff?
- Joan Jonas: They should carefully research, find out when it was best shown and research, and try to do it exactly that. They have to do research about it. I mean if I'm not around. If I'm around then they can ask me, but if I'm not around ...
- Kristin Poor: Of the various installations of *Mirage*, is there one for you that is the best?
- Joan Jonas: No, but I think it was very well done in HangarBicocca and in Malmö. Those two places. I'm sure it was okay at MoMA, but it was a room that people walked through. I think it looked really beautiful in those two places I just mentioned. They have a lot of space in there.
- Kristin Poor: So in Milan the space has really high ceilings.
- Joan Jonas: In where?
- Kristin Poor: At HangarBicocca.
- Joan Jonas: At Hangar, yeah. But it doesn't have to have high ceilings like that. No, it's not about the ceilings. In Malmö —
- Kristin Poor: Malmö, I see in this image they're lower.
- Joan Jonas: But it was beautiful in both those places.
- Kristin Poor: So what parts of *Mirage* carried over into later works?
- Joan Jonas: The structure, probably. I didn't reuse any of the footage. Well, the cones: now there's a piece called *After Mirage* where there's a circle of cones. There's a circle of metal ones and a circle of paper ones, with *May Windows* playing on a monitor. That would be one. But I think it's mostly the structure of *Mirage* that I worked with. But I can't tell you, I'm not sure what piece that would be.



- Kristin Poor: You mentioned earlier when we were talking about the performance that you've revisited the drawing film to make the two-channel.
- Joan Jonas: Yeah, that was in 2000. Yeah. I was just working on ... Yeah.
- Kristin Poor: In terms of the performance documentation that's included as part of it, at the Stedelijk there was also documentation of *Funnel* which dropped away later.
- Joan Jonas: Oh yeah?
- Kristin Poor: Would you talk a bit about the choice of that? Why or what it does for you?
- Joan Jonas: Well, I don't have a good video of either of these pieces. I do have one of *Organic Honey*, but of *Mirage* I just have this ... We found a tape that I just looked at recently, that Barbara mentioned, that is not a very good representation of the performance in its best state. So I would never show that as part of the installation. I only show the photographs. I always show the photographs from the Anthology Film Archives as documents of the performance but not the video.
- Kristin Poor: So that the performance is present in the installation?
- Joan Jonas: The actual performance, images of it, is only in the photographs. It's not really present in the installation. The video elements that were in the performance are present but not the performance itself.
- Kristin Poor: What are your concerns for the future in terms of conservation on one hand and exhibition on the other hand?
- Joan Jonas: Well, I really trust the institutions that own the works and who distribute, like EAI, all my single-channel works from before a certain period. So I trust them to update their technology continuously which is what they do. And also big institutions to also update their technology. That's a big problem with videos: how do you preserve video? It's a big issue. Then aside from that, the way they treat all their acquisitions.
- Kristin Poor: What are your main concerns about how *Mirage* in particular is installed?

Joan Jonas: I can only say that it should be installed the way I wanted it to be installed. Also, always with a good projector. You know, the obvious things. And then knowing how it should be installed.

Kristin Poor: In the MoMA installation, are there minimum spatial requirements for the distances between components?

Joan Jonas: You know, I don't remember what it looked like there, I have to say. I'd have to look for photographs. Maybe I'd feel differently about it. But when I did it there, it was before it was in the HangarBicocca. I think it looked good at Yvon Lambert, so maybe it's okay in MoMA.

Kristin Poor: Is there anything in particular about the Malmö installation that you like?

Joan Jonas: No. No. Again, I had to think about the space, you know, the relation of the screens to each other. But I can't say in words what that was. That's just the way I work. MoMA has a fixed plan. I'd have to look at it again to know what it is. But they own it, you know, so ... And they gave me the freedom to install it however I wanted to.

Kristin Poor: When you went after they acquired it, and you installed it for the first time?

Joan Jonas: The only things they send are the cones and the props. They don't send the tables or anything. But we didn't put it in the Tate show because MoMA was being renovated. So they didn't want to lend anything.

Kristin Poor: The loan moratorium, right. Is that related to why you used the photograph mask in the performance?

Joan Jonas: No, it has nothing to do with it.

Kristin Poor: Okay.

Kristin Poor: Who do you think we should interview about the installation?

Joan Jonas: Well, obviously you could ask Barbara because she would know how to access it. And Andrea [Lissoni] because he installed it. He was there in HangarBicocca and Malmö. Those two. I can't remember anybody else.

Kristin Poor: Okay. Did we miss anything?

Joan Jonas Knowledge Base

- Joan Jonas: I don't think so, I don't know. But if I think of anything ...
- Kristin Poor: I think for the future listeners, if there's anything in particular about those installations that you like, that stand out to you as the best ones, if there's anything that comes to you about that, that would be really helpful for us to have.
- Joan Jonas: The two are different because it was two different spaces. I mean, I like these two plus the one in Barcelona.
- Kristin Poor: The MACBA one.
- Joan Jonas: It was very good. There was lots of room for the piece in all those places.
- Kristin Poor: Okay, great. Thank you, Joan.

*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.*