

Joan Jonas on *Mirage* performances, 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 on Mercer Street. We are here to discuss the *Mirage* performance.

Kristin Poor: So Joan let's start with the origin of *Mirage*.

Joan Jonas: Well you could say that *Mirage* ... I was asked by Shigeko Kubota who was curating performances at Anthology Film Archives. So it originated probably in the first performance I did there called *Twilight* in which I used the space itself in a very particular way. Also the screen which was movable. You could change the size and shape of the screen.

Joan Jonas: So after *Twilight*, which had live video with cameras and monitors and used the space in a particular way, I decided to make a—and it also involved other performers, I think there were at least three other performers—I decided to kind of elaborate or do a solo piece. It was a different piece, but it came out of working in that space on *Twilight*. So it originated in that space. I mean we're going to discuss the other sources of inspiration.

Joan Jonas: *Mirage* was inspired by that space, but it also came out of ... After six years of working with video performance and the relation of the camera to the monitor, to the projection, and live performances for the camera in the performance, I decided this would be the last of that series of video performances. And whereas I worked with color on *Organic Honey* and so on, *Mirage* was black and white. The space was black and white, and I worked with black and white film footage in this case. Also because it was a cinemathèque where films were projected, I specifically referred to that by projecting films and not videos. I had videos on monitors so it was a combination of film and video in that piece.

Kristin Poor: You briefly mentioned some of the sources and inspirations for *Mirage* specifically. Could you talk about some of those?

Joan Jonas: I think I decided it would be, in a way, abstract. I know what it ended up being was I thought about opposites of light and dark. It was inspired partly ... I'd been to India, I think in 1975, the year before I made *Mirage*. So it was partly inspired by my trip to

India and my involvement with meditation and meditation exercises and abstraction I would say, not illustration or not playing parts. In other words, I didn't see myself as a character.

Joan Jonas: I remember one of the critics that wrote about it said it was about game playing. In a way it was that. So it just grew out of beginning with one thing that led to another. So there was no particular narrative, but it all was held together by the visual aspect and the ideas of light and dark.

Joan Jonas: You mentioned here a *Spiritual Disciplines* book. For some years, I've had a book called *Spiritual Disciplines*. We have that somewhere, don't we?

Kristin Poor: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Joan Jonas: I've been working with that book as an inspiration for a long time, for five or ten years and actually working with images from an essay about a tribe in New Guinea. It was called the Melukean *Book of the Dead*. I used those drawings in *Organic Honey*, in the performance. I continued to use these drawings from that book that were done by the tribe in New Guinea to cross from this life to the next. One had to know how to make the drawing. In other words, you had to know how to finish it. I think what they call the devouring witch began the drawing, and then you had to finish it.

Joan Jonas: So I learned how to do those drawings. They're looping images on a grid. I thought they were perfect for performance because you didn't take your chalk off the surface, with one continual looping line on the grid, using a grid. That was one source of some of the drawings in *Mirage*. Another source was the same year that I was working on *Mirage*; believe it or not I didn't know Maya Deren's work. I hadn't seen it yet. I was introduced to it that year. They showed the raw footage of the film she shot in Haiti when she was making her film about Haiti. The film was the rough uncut version. It was four hours long, which I found fascinating. I was inspired by that durational quality of people repeating over and over again these drawings on the earth with white powder of patterns. I didn't copy the patterns, but it inspired me to make a film about drawing on a blackboard with chalk.

Joan Jonas: That's one aspect. So I made a thirty-minute film of which we showed five minutes in the first performances of *Mirage*. Then later—four, five years later—I showed the whole film, and it became part of *Mirage*.

Joan Jonas: Then you have dynamic meditation. When I was in India at this ashram, there was a meditation called “dynamic meditation” which involved standing in one place and moving your whole body as violently and hard as possible. In other words, waving your arms around and moving your body. I performed that as a kind of performance in *Mirage*. It wasn't a meditation for me in the performance, but it was a movement. So those are some of the elements, and you mentioned others later on.

Kristin Poor: Where did you see Maya Deren's film? Was that at Anthology?

Joan Jonas: Anthology.

Kristin Poor: So you mentioned *Twilight* as a work that is related to this one. Are there some other works from this time you see as part of the world of *Mirage*?

Joan Jonas: Not really. I mean, I don't remember. I thought you meant by this question other contemporary works by other artists. No, I was just working on *Mirage* during this period. It was very intense. I'm not sure why I did the films *May Windows* and *Night Windows*. It was at the same time. I think it had something to do with the saying. I used the monitor on its side in *Twilight*, and I continued to develop that in *Mirage*, to work with a monitor on its side which fit exactly the shape of a window. So these two *May Windows* and *Night Windows* were made in relation to the monitor on its side. But also I started working with James Nares. Paula Longendyke was working with me: she brought James over, and so we started working together. We made *May Windows* together.

Joan Jonas: Then *Night Windows* was also inspired by this ashram. The teacher was Rajneesh. I had a tape of him speaking, and you hear that, but you can't hear what he's saying.

Kristin Poor: Were there other works by other artists at the time that were directly inspiring to *Mirage*?

Joan Jonas: Not that I remember.

Kristin Poor: So could you talk a bit about how you developed the score and the other components of the performance?

Joan Jonas: Well the way I developed, especially in those days, I wasn't working with a text that had a narrative. So I think I would work on something. In other words I would begin at the beginning, and the beginning was always a way of getting myself and the

audience into the piece. Then slowly I build on it piece by piece. So I put it together piece by piece. I don't remember exactly how I did that. But pretty much by experimenting and working with the materials that I mentioned.

Joan Jonas: I mean, I remember we made the film at one point, but I only used five minutes of it. I'm sure I prepared for making that film by choosing images that I wanted to draw. Some of those images were motifs that I had used before, in *Organic Honey* for instance.

Kristin Poor: You mentioned before briefly the screen at Anthology, how that was—

Joan Jonas: Well I mean that was my kind of structural device. The piece was structured around altering the shape and size of the screen. So I set up a series of different shapes and sizes: a tall rectangle, a horizontal rectangle, a square, and so on. I performed in front of those. I made a conscious decision not to have live video or prerecorded or ... Yeah. I wanted to work with film. I did the same thing in *Twilight*. I think film in *Twilight*. I'm not sure. So it was a mixture of film and video in *Mirage* which was a conscious decision in relation to Anthology Film Archives. So I just gradually pieced it together.

Kristin Poor: What was the process like when you first published the score for *Mirage*?

Joan Jonas: I see it's 1983 when we published that book. It took me a while to make that book. Finally Douglas [Crimp]—I collaborated with Douglas on the catalogue [*Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982*] ... I don't remember writing the score. But I'm sure I just collected ... I had a record of all the moments. When I looked at the score, when I tried to redo *Mirage* for the Tate, or did redo *Mirage* for the Tate, I found the score that's in the book that Douglas and I did a little unsatisfactory. Because every time I did *Mirage* someplace, I changed it a little bit. So it was a little different every place. And so I found the score—even though it makes sense sort of in the book—unfinished. It could have been better.

Kristin Poor: Is that something you'd like to come back to—

Joan Jonas: No because, well I don't remember. I couldn't do it now. But when I did the piece at the Tate that's another version, which I probably will never do again. But we have a video of it. Did you see it?

Kristin Poor: I did, yes. I did, I saw it. Well, could you speak a bit about what it was like to perform *Mirage* over the years, the way that it changed between venues?

Joan Jonas: Well I don't remember specifically. I remember two performances. Well I remember I did it in Philadelphia. The thing is I never had that kind of screen again. So I could never do it that way again. I'm not sure how I compensated for that, but there were little changes. That's all I can say. It's too bad. You could see it in photographs, if I looked at all the photographs I have. But I do remember doing it in two places. Well Philadelphia and then I did it in Basel. I remember that I was very happy with the performance in Basel.

Joan Jonas: Sometimes I wouldn't be happy with a performance. I guess it didn't really work in the way that I wanted, in the way that it did in the Anthology. But it really worked in Basel. Then I do remember the performance in Rome, and I remember I shortened it quite a bit, which was strange. [Michelangelo] Antonioni came. Not just to see my piece, but he came to see all the things that were going at [Galleria] L'Attico. It's a performance festival [India/America Festival di Musica e Danza]. I remember when I did that performance, it was over very quickly. I don't know why I made it so ... I shortened it and so on. Maybe I was nervous that he was there. I don't know. But I remember Fabio [Sargentini], the person who directed the gallery, came up to me after and said it was so short. So it was ... It's the way I worked then. Kind of freely. Altered pieces.

Kristin Poor: Do you remember anything about the Basel performance in particular that you liked?

Joan Jonas: No I just remember it was very concise.

Kristin Poor: So what was it like to do rehearsals for *Mirage*?

Joan Jonas: Well my rehearsals were always about putting it together. So you could call the rehearsals for the first performance until the very last minute I'm putting it together and making it. So the rehearsals were really the process of making the piece. Then I don't remember the rehearsals for *Mirage* and other instances. But probably just I go through it once.

Joan Jonas: Now I rehearse in a very different way, more rigorous probably than then. It was much looser and much more ... Yeah.

Kristin Poor: Since many of the people we imagine using this in the future will be curators and performers who will want to know how you worked with the performers that you included in your pieces, it'd be interesting if you remember—even from this most recent instance—the kinds of direction you give to someone working with you or how you instructed them.

Joan Jonas: You're talking about *Mirage*? For *Mirage* I often had one assistant. What I remember is I would give them directions, really, and they usually wait for me to give them directions. So I remember Kiki Smith was my assistant once. I don't remember who else. But it's very simple in this case. The people I've worked with were assistants to help me. Not performers really. Of course that's different with every piece.

Joan Jonas: I usually demonstrate and give directions. I demonstrate how something needs to be done and give directions. But *Mirage* is a solo so it was really something I had to do myself. Then people would hand me things like hand me objects or help me hold something. Things like that that were very concrete.

Kristin Poor: That's great. For the Tate performance when you revisited it, you've mentioned that there were some changes and that of course it evolved. What are your thoughts about the strengths and weaknesses of the changes at the various institutions?

Joan Jonas: Without seeing them all again I can't really be specific about that. I can say in general sometimes they didn't work, and sometimes they did. Like the one I just told you about, the shorter one: I would say that's a mistake that I made. I don't know why. Now I'm very careful to do things exactly the same way because otherwise you do run into trouble.

Joan Jonas: The Tate performance I had to compensate for my age and my ability to move. I have to look at the video. I haven't been able to look at it. But I think it was probably interesting for people, I don't know, to see it. But I think it must have been peculiar because it was me, at my age performing with myself in 1976. So I think it's kind of strange, and I'm sure it didn't have the same unity that it had when I first did it.

Joan Jonas: And I freely ... Yeah I had to change it ... I didn't change it, but I had to fill in the spaces that were left by my notes and scripts. There's one video, but the video is very ... From another version I did of it which was very fragmented. So I think that I can't speak for other people when I first did this piece in the 1970s. There's going to be a slightly different attitude towards a performance than there is now. But I can also say that people accepted,

sometimes, very fragmentary performances in a different way than they do now.

Kristin Poor: When you were performing it regularly over those first four years, what was it like to travel and perform with the work? And who and what did you bring with you?

Joan Jonas: Well usually I brought—it depended on the piece—but for this piece, for *Mirage* I don't think I brought people with me. I didn't start bringing people with me until much later. Because there wasn't much money in those days, and there wasn't ... The people that invited me didn't have money to bring more than myself. So I'd always get people who worked there, if I needed help, to work with me usually. So I don't remember who I brought to ... If I brought somebody to Basel. Maybe I did. I don't remember actually. I enjoyed traveling and putting my pieces up in different places.

Kristin Poor: But you weren't traveling with the cones for example?

Joan Jonas: No I never brought big props like that. Never. Because again, that was an expense that people could not cover. I made paper cones in the places that I went to. I made them there.

Kristin Poor: So those traveling performances had paper cones rather than the metal ones?

Joan Jonas: Yeah. I didn't have the metal ones until I did the show at the Stedelijk. None of these. But I didn't do the performance of *Mirage*; I just did a version of the installation.

Kristin Poor: I was just looking to see who performed with you in Basel. It looks like it was a solo.

Joan Jonas: Yeah. There was nobody there. Is there anybody in any other places?

Kristin Poor: Rosella Or in Rome.

Joan Jonas: Oh yeah that was somebody from Rome.

Kristin Poor: Jane Crawford in Kassel.

Joan Jonas: Oh yeah in Kassel. That was a really difficult performance. Jane was in Kassel doing something with Gordon [Matta-Clark] I guess. But in Kassel I do remember that experience. They hadn't finished setting up the electricity in the space where I was

supposed to perform. So we had to sit there for a couple of hours with the audience and me.

Kristin Poor: And no power?

Joan Jonas: Well finally it came on. But it was probably not a good performance. For years afterwards people would come up to me and say, "I saw your piece in Kassel." Anyway ... But I started doing the *Mirror Check* in relation to *Mirage*. It's strange.

Kristin Poor: Did you do that in Kassel?

Joan Jonas: Yeah.

Kristin Poor: Interesting.

Joan Jonas: I remember I did that.

Kristin Poor: While you were waiting for the power to come on?

Joan Jonas: Well it wasn't because of that. I was planning to do it anyway. But it was a very uncomfortable situation, I remember that.

Kristin Poor: Do you remember when you started doing *Mirror Check* with it?

Joan Jonas: No. It may have been then ... But I do remember because we couldn't rehearse, because there was no power, it was a very difficult performance. I mean, in those days there was often a kind of really, not a great situation for performers in museums and galleries, for the kind of performance that I do. Because they didn't have too much technology or set up for ... That was always late to get the rehearsal going. It was difficult.

Kristin Poor: Not the way you like to work now?

Joan Jonas: No. I would never do that. Work that way again.

Kristin Poor: In terms of the other performers and the traveling *Mirage* performance there was Tabea Blumenschein in Berlin.

Joan Jonas: Yeah these were all people that I got at the place where I went.

Kristin Poor: And Jane Savitt in Philadelphia. Then Christina Patoski at Anthology.

Joan Jonas: Yeah. I don't remember.

- Kristin Poor: So, Joan, would you talk a bit about the film components and what it was like to make the films? What do you remember about that?
- Joan Jonas: Well for *Mirage* the only film component was the drawing film, and we only used five minutes of it. I incorporated it later as you know in the installation. I just remember that Babette [Mangolte] came over one day, and we just made it. And I drew over and over again with the blackboard.
- Joan Jonas: I don't know, it wasn't totally continuous, or maybe it was. But it was just a matter of setting up her film camera and me drawing. Then there are other sections of the film which we shot off a monitor on film with the *Vertical*—well I call it by then *Horizontal Roll*—going by, with a monitor on its side. So I performed, but we didn't film my live performance: we filmed the performance on the monitor. So that's part of the film then.
- Kristin Poor: Oh.
- Joan Jonas: And you know the horizontal roll and me stepping through the hoop in the film?
- Kristin Poor: Yes.
- Joan Jonas: I remember the hoop I found in Italy. So certain things were put together depending on finding props. Then the other thing is I remember finding the hopscotch, walking in the street one day and seeing kids playing hopscotch. In SoHo actually, on the street. I remember thinking that would be a good element to have in *Mirage*. So I put things together piece by piece for *Mirage*. But there was a kind of continuity to everything. Yep.
- Kristin Poor: And the volcano film?
- Joan Jonas: The volcano film I decided on because I was working with the idea of the cones and the fact that cones drew up energy. Anyway, with the shape I thought of volcanoes. So I just wrote away to a film house in New Jersey. They sent me the film. I think it's five minutes, I'm not sure. But I didn't touch it. I've never edited it, that film. I just included it in its entirety as they gave it to me.
- Kristin Poor: Did you know which volcano it was?
- Joan Jonas: No they didn't say. I think it's in Italy, but I'm not sure. But I ran in front of it. That's when I did the dynamic meditation, in front

of that film. I put those things together. Again, it's not a meditation, but it's a movement that seemed to fit the eruptions.

Kristin Poor: When you made the film, you knew you were making it for this performance?

Joan Jonas: Yeah.

Kristin Poor: Okay.

Joan Jonas: No, I wasn't making the film. When I *chose* the film.

Kristin Poor: Not the volcano film, I'm sorry: the drawing film that you made.

Joan Jonas: No I knew it was for this piece. But I don't know why I didn't use more of it.

Kristin Poor: And the videos, same question.

Joan Jonas: Yeah, I knew that they would be in the piece and then *Good Night, Good Morning* because, again, it was about opposites and repetition.

Kristin Poor: So it wasn't so much a matter of deciding what you would put into the performance? These things were already made with the performance in mind?

Joan Jonas: Oh no, that would be a process of deciding what I was going to put into the performance. I mean, it all went together. I didn't plan ahead of time. I never do. I always find material as I'm going along and discovering. I don't write my scripts before the performances: I write them after.

Kristin Poor: So you mentioned earlier the ways in which you think audiences have changed in terms of how they approach performance. What has the reception to *Mirage* been like over the years?

Joan Jonas: It has always been very good except, as I said, the times when I did a bad performance. Then I got a very mixed reaction. No but this is one of the pieces that people are wanting. I shouldn't put it that way. It's always been good in relation to *Mirage*, except when I've done a bad performance. Then I only did it in the 1970s. I don't think I did it in the 1980s, and then I didn't do it at all. But I've gone back to *Mirage* as part of an installation because I always liked that piece a lot. It's very open-ended. I thought I could go back to the material and reintroduce it but

also use the structure and some of the ideas. Then particularly, just very recently, trying to reperform it was, I don't know, kind of both a strange experience and probably interesting.

Kristin Poor: Did you realize new things about the performance and the process of putting it together again for the Tate?

Joan Jonas: You know I haven't looked at it. And when you're inside something ... No I didn't. Because I've looked at that piece so much and revisited it so much that I don't think I had any new thoughts about it. It's just a piece I find interesting. But I did add a lot more of the drawing film to the new version.

Kristin Poor: Apart from its open-endedness, are there other qualities of it that you think make it particularly productive to return to, that has made it so interesting for you over the years?

Joan Jonas: Well I think one reason I returned to it, the time when I was asked to project the drawing film ... Then I began to think, "Is the drawing film interesting by itself, or does it need ..." I thought it needed another element, and that's why I made the video from footage shot in the 1970s: as a way of showing another aspect of what I was doing. Most of it was unused film, or video. And that interested me to do that. So it became something else. That became part of the installation which, for me, made it more interesting.

Kristin Poor: That was an invitation you received to show that film in particular?

Joan Jonas: No it was Seth Price actually. No. I think Dia invited me—or it must have been more than just me—to show on the roof of Dia [*Film and Video Work, 1968–76*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York, 2000]. So I was going to show that film, and then I thought to show the parallel video with it.

Kristin Poor: So that's when you made *Mirage II*? And then it went into an installation?

Joan Jonas: Yeah.

Kristin Poor: What about the objects in the performance? You mentioned the hoop earlier. You mentioned the cones. Did you keep them? Do you still have them?

Joan Jonas: The hoop, the original hoop, it might be ... You know MoMA bought that piece, *Mirage*. So I know that they have several

hoops. One of them might be the original. I'd have to look at them. But I don't have that original in my possession. If it's in any place it's in what MoMA bought. Then at one point I added this mask—no, that was always in it actually—this Mexican mask. That's in the installation that MoMA owns. The original cones were made of galvanized tin. They were remade for the Stedelijk and then remade again. So probably there's no such thing as an original. I might have one in the basement. I might have some pieces here of the original ones. They kind of fell apart, some of them. But at that time I didn't carefully keep original things. I did carefully keep the mask and the hoops and what else would it be. Of course, we rebuilt the blackboard. I don't have the original blackboard. I think that's all of the originals.

Kristin Poor:

The cones, the monitor?

Joan Jonas:

I kept the monitor for a long time. But then eventually they wear out.

Kristin Poor:

And the platform you performed on?

Joan Jonas:

Oh no. I didn't keep that. I had no place to put it.

Kristin Poor:

So should those objects be recreated by others in the future?

Joan Jonas:

No, MoMA owns them. So they can't recreate ... When I did the reperformance we used a photograph of the mask instead of the original mask, which of course takes away from it a little bit. Also I had hoops made. In a case like this I'm not super strict about remaking these, about whether it can be done or can't be done. I mean, the mask could not be remade, but the cones could be, and the hoops ...

Kristin Poor:

And you found your own way to remake the mask in a way with the photograph?

Joan Jonas:

With the photograph, yeah. But I've used photographs before of objects that were no longer in my possession.

Kristin Poor:

What are some other times when you did that? Do you remember?

Joan Jonas:

Oh, the only one was a coyote from *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, because somebody bought that. Then I showed another version of that piece in California, and I made a photograph of the coyote to put in that. So I was thinking of that when I made the photograph of the mask for this piece.

- Kristin Poor: Going back to the *Mirage* props, do you have any thoughts about cleaning or repairing them?
- Joan Jonas: No. I mean, if a museum owns them that's their problem. That's what I would say.
- Kristin Poor: So in this case it's MoMA's.
- Joan Jonas: I mean if I have something in the basement and it's been there for years, of course I'd clean it.
- Kristin Poor: Have you worked with any conservators that you recommend that we speak with?
- Joan Jonas: Well the people in Amsterdam, at the Stedelijk, I don't know if they're the same ones. They may not be. Because the last time I worked with them was when Dorine [Mignot] was still alive. She's passed away. We carefully mapped out how to show *Organic Honey* and [*Revolted by the Thought of Known Places ...*] *Sweeney Astray*. When we show ... *Sweeney Astray*, they always come, the Amsterdam people. They always come to install the things that they own. Not every museum does that. So I like that very much. Those are the only ... Then I work with Glenn [Wharton] a little bit on *My New Theater* at MoMA. Those are the only ones that I've worked with.
- Kristin Poor: In terms of the future of *Mirage*, do you imagine a future performance without you?
- Joan Jonas: With what?
- Kristin Poor: Without you.
- Joan Jonas: No. I mean, it might happen. I couldn't do it again. I don't want to do it again. But it could happen. I'd rather direct it myself the first time it happens. But you know, I'm sort of more open about people reperforming my works than I was before. I know that I either have to say it can't happen at all or I have to be a little open about it. If I permit it, then obviously there are going to be things that I might not like, how people do it. I mean recreating the mirror performances has been really great. Because I really was careful to try to be as close as possible to whatever it was that happened in the late 1960s. Now I work with a wonderful assistant Nefeli [Skarmea] who is very good at reperforming the *Mirror Pieces*. I really enjoy that. That piece can be reperformed. The difference between the *Mirror Piece* and *Mirage* and some of these is that my performance is not an element. You know,

the way I perform, the subtleties of that. How do people move and so on. It's not an issue. But it is in things like *Organic Honey*, I can't imagine.

Kristin Poor: You can't imagine another performer doing it?

Joan Jonas: No, I can, but again it would have to be really carefully done.

Kristin Poor: Preferably with you directing?

Joan Jonas: Yeah, but obviously I'm not going to. Also I don't want to spend the time. I'd like to work on new work. But there are all the videos and everything that are there. I'm not sure that ... No one's ever expressed interest in doing that yet.

Kristin Poor: Okay. Did we miss anything in terms of the *Mirage* performance that you think is important?

Joan Jonas: Oh probably but I can't remember. Not that I can think of.

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

Joan Jonas: You could interview ... Well, you're going to interview Paula [Longendyke].

Kristin Poor: Yes.

Joan Jonas: You could interview ... I don't know about Jane [Crawford]. I don't know.

Kristin Poor: Should we talk to Kiki Smith?

Joan Jonas: You could ask her about it.

Kristin Poor: See what she remembers.

Joan Jonas: Yeah.

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.