

Barbara London interviewed by Glenn Wharton, May 22, 2019

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Glenn Wharton: Today is May 22, 2019. This is Glenn Wharton. I am interviewing Barbara London who was the founding curator of video and media art at MoMA. She was there from 1973 to 2017. She's currently a curator, writer, and a professor at Yale. Barbara, thank you for joining me. We're here to discuss your work with Joan Jonas, and Joan Jonas at MoMA. I have a number of questions, but we can just let the conversation flow.

Glenn Wharton: First, I'd just like to ask you how you first encountered Joan's work. I don't know whether you remember the very first moment you saw her work, but ... Your thoughts about it and what kind of work you were seeing in the early days.

Barbara London: In the early days, the field was very small, and it was a moment when just about everybody knew everybody. Our paths just crossed over and over and over again. It's hard for me to remember the first time we met. It could have been at the Castelli Gallery. It could have been at Anthology Film Archives. We quickly found that we were very sympathetic to each other, the work that she does, how I was approaching this new field. We would have tea, lunch, dinner periodically.

Barbara London: When I put together the first shows at MoMA ... In the early days video was under the Projects series, and I didn't go back and look at what the first show was, but one of those first, probably in that year, 1974. She was among the artists whose tapes we first acquired. That included Joan, Bill Wegman, Nam June [Paik] and maybe one more.

Glenn Wharton: What kind of work was she showing early on that you were first experiencing?

Barbara London: She early on was doing a lot of performance, and she incorporated video into the performance, either prerecordings of her ... She really in those early days didn't, as I remember, use a lot of live. It was more prerecorded. She didn't play like Lynda Benglis did with *Now*. Many people did that or a number of people did that. She talks about her early use of mirrors. She was a very avid film goer. She went to Anthology all the time, and she was very interested in the history of cinema, so she talked about [Georges] Franju and other people as being very important.

Barbara London: As an undergraduate and graduate she did study, I think, literature as well, so for her stories were very important, and myth. She also talks about going to flea markets with her mother. In their home and the way she put together things, she had little bibelots and that was normal. She also often talked about and still does, I guess, that when she first started to perform, was doing performance, it was very awkward for her, so to use a mask was very comforting to cover and conceal her identity, although, of course, everybody knew who she was. That was something early on.

Barbara London: That use of the mirror and the observing and the identity, then it was like a natural that she would use video in the studio to develop these personas, and she would study herself. She often talks about, you probably know this, the trip that she and Richard Serra made together to Japan in 1970 was very important for her to have seen Noh theater and the stateliness of time. Her work, you could say it's busy only in that it's very interesting, complex visuals, but it's not busy and layered. It's got a lot there to digest and analyze.

Glenn Wharton: What do you mean it's busy but not layered?

Barbara London: I mean you think of busy frenetic. It's not frenetic busy. It has complexity in that way.

Glenn Wharton: We'll mainly talk about *Mirage* in this interview, but before we get to *Mirage*, could you talk a little bit more about just your knowing Joan over the years, your relationship with her?

Barbara London: I joke that we're both flea market fiends and we both are Cancers. We're both born in the summer. I don't swim anymore, but we're both swimmers, so she loves swimming. There was always that. I'm a great walker, so is she, so I would run into her. There was a comfort level. I know that when we both were in Berlin in 1976, me as a curator and she as part of an exhibition that René Block did called *SoHo* in Berlin [*New York, Downtown Manhattan, SoHo*], she was performing. And she was very close even then to the Wooster Group and other groups that were downtown.

Barbara London: Some of them performed in her work. She performed in their work. There was a great fluidity. I remember having dinner with her and Richard Foreman, and having gone to see his work, and then being in awe that I'm there with this man who's a great artist, and Joan. Sure, she's a great artist, but maybe the comfort level was different then. She was not intimidating to me, anyway. I would see her at Automation House then. That was

the space that Theodore Kheel opened. Basically he being the labor arbitrator and did a lot there. There would be events and things that we would both be at.

Glenn Wharton: Let's move on to MoMA then. I don't know if you remember all of the works that you brought in by Joan, but if you could talk a little bit about the early works that you brought in and your interest in having her in the collection, and what she represented to you. We'll get to *Mirage*, but generally why did you want her at MoMA?

Barbara London: I think she had a great understanding of what video and the moving image is, and that she made *Vertical Roll*, what, in 1973. I think it's 1973, 1972 maybe, and that she really played with what the TV is. I remember as a kid having the vertical roll and your father would say, "Oh, go fix the vertical hold." There it was. Also, it's a very impressive work. You look at it and you think, yes, it's got this sequence of events, but it was very carefully rehearsed. It's long before you really had all of these control devices. It's one long continuous take, which not everybody realizes, that it's very complex spatially. It's in a studio. I forget if it's her studio or if she shot it out in California. I forget.

Barbara London: To work with her performers, and they're also controlling the camera. It just flows. I remember showing it to my Yale students, and one of them said ... He felt terrible that she came out at the end and then gazed at the camera, that blew it for him. It was like, no, but it was we're observing her. She was observing herself, and then she's observing you, the viewer, later.

Glenn Wharton: Fascinating, so she was doing a lot of work. One of the reasons why we chose *Mirage* to do a deep dive as a case study with *Mirage* is because it's so complicated as a case, and it's been manifested many times in different ways. Let's move on to *Mirage* then. I'm curious about your curatorial decision for selecting *Mirage*, the context, and your concept for bringing *Mirage* in.

Barbara London: Well, first of all, to backtrack, I did see the performance that *Mirage* evolved out of. I did see *Twilight*. I remember going to Anthology in 1975 and seeing it, because I went to everything. In my book I talk about ... I spent every waking hour non-MoMA in artists' studios and going to shows. I remember going and thinking here's the Anthology theater that I know pretty well, and she's totally reworked it.

- Barbara London: Also, she appeared naked, and it was like ... That was pretty bold. For the way I was brought up, and, I think, even the way she was brought up, propriety was something that you had in mind. To be so open and to use the mirror. She did the piece called *Mirror Check*. It was pretty bold. Then it evolved the next year into what she called *Mirage*. I can't tell you visually exactly what the differences are, but I think the way she works normally is she performs and tweaks something and embellishes or adds, takes away, figures out what worked, what didn't work for her, does the drawings and blah blah.
- Barbara London: I understood it in the performance as a very serious major work, and maybe for her kind of a breakthrough. The way Joan works, she would perform something almost until she got tired of it. She would be invited to perform it in Europe. For artists like her, and Vito Acconci and others in New York, it was a hardscrabble life I think. Vito got a stipend. I don't think Joan got a stipend from anybody. You would go to do these performances and it would be a gig and you'd get cash, or you'd have the opportunity to make a new work.
- Barbara London: It was very common for, then, in an institution like a museum in Europe to think, "Yes, I'm going to get a work out of Joan, because she's going to make it on the spot." She did make some videotapes that way. The piece always stuck in my mind, and then she stopped performing it. She did other things, many other things, and then I think when she was with Yvon Lambert then it became an installation. It took actually a while to get the funds together.
- Barbara London: I think the lovely guy who was the director of Yvon Lambert and Joan, herself too, were very patient. It took, I don't know, five years. It was much too long to string along somebody. I would not joke, but people would say, "Oh, Barbara, your credit lines are the longest." It's because it took me a while to cobble together the money to put it all together.
- Barbara London: Having worked for a long time already, by the time it came into the collection, I knew it was very important to figure out what the parameters were. I forget if you were there. You were still there.
- Glenn Wharton: I had just arrived.
- Barbara London: The parameters, because it's got a drawn part, it's got this part, that part, so exactly how big you can scale it up and how small you can scale it down. Getting that from Joan was very important.

- Glenn Wharton: It's actually, well, I shouldn't say one of my regrets, but I became more actively involved in the acquisition of complex media installations shortly after acquiring *Mirage*, and now that I'm deeply researching *Mirage* I wish I had been there. I just missed it, because I just came to MoMA.
- Barbara London: Then the things, like I know you and I worked on, and the regrets we have that you get the experience in the acquisition. You do the interview, the artist interview. You put it up, and then you do what we want to get everybody together and learn from the experience. Sometimes it was hard to corral everybody to get them to sit down, because everybody's onto the next thing. That's always the problem with staff time and everybody is so preoccupied with the next thing.
- Glenn Wharton: From the best of your memory, could you talk about the acquisition process and Joan's involvement, her concerns, and then the initial installation and her participation?
- Barbara London: Well, I forget how many years were between the actual acquisition and the showing. I think she was willing to assist, for sure, with the first installation that we did, because that would be determining a lot of the factors, what was important, what wasn't important, relationship of the parts. I remember one of the AV guys to get the vertical roll he actually emulated it, Howie, and he was very happy that he was able to do that. Credit is due to him for that.
- Barbara London: She came, and I don't think we videotaped her doing the drawing. I forget. She drew it and then she danced on it too, mused it up.
- Glenn Wharton: She created drawings expressly for MoMA's acquisition?
- Barbara London: Well, she created, you well know the piece has drawings. Those were from her archive. Those were on the wall framed, but the platform then has the hopscotch on. That was very particular, and we wanted that to be documented.
- Glenn Wharton: Were there any new videos made or anything else that was created for MoMA's acquisition?
- Barbara London: I think just the one with the vertical hold. I'm quite sure that's all that was created.
- Glenn Wharton: In terms of the monitors that were used and the other exhibition equipment?

- Barbara London: It was the cube monitors that we had.
- Glenn Wharton: I imagine that some people listening to this in the future will be curators or possibly conservators or exhibition designers, or critics and other people. Some people will have some tasks at hand. They might be reexhibiting *Mirage*, for example, and it would be very helpful, I imagine, to them to know what Joan's concerns were in the variability, in the feeling, and the public's experience of the work given how it might be displayed in one environment or another, or how exhibition equipment might shift to new technologies. Do you have a sense from your experience with her, her tolerance for change, or does she really like it to be very specifically reproduced each time?
- Barbara London: Well, I don't think she's, what would you say, dogged. I think it's very important the relationship of parts, so that the monitors with those different elements should be in a certain relationship, and visible or viewed. You wouldn't want those in another room, or at such a distance. It's meant to be intimate of an experience, but not so intimate it's like your closet. It's more you're encountering.
- Glenn Wharton: It's a large space, the installation at MoMA. What about audio, throwing audio or being able to hear it from one part of the room to another?
- Barbara London: Well, I think the audio of each monitor is really more local, and it's not meant to be heard. If this is here, way over there that one. No. I think it's local. Sound is local.
- Glenn Wharton: Do you remember any other specifications such as light levels or room color, benches in the room?
- Barbara London: Well, because it was first in a theater that's like a black box, it's not a black box gallery, but it's not flooded with light. I think the walls should recede and not be stark white. I forget what we put down for wall color. I don't remember.
- Glenn Wharton: It was a gray color, but I'm sure we specced it out in the files.
- Barbara London: The drawings are not meant to be integrated in. They're meant to be there for someone to go and, or the photos, to go back and look at them.
- Glenn Wharton: As I mentioned before, it was just before I got involved with the documentation. I'm sure that MoMA did document the floor

plans and specifications of the equipment and wall colors, light levels, audio levels.

Barbara London: For sure. That platform is of a very particular size, and the cones are meant to be in a particular space. There's the platform with the hopscotch, and then there's another platform in front of the two projections, one with the news footage which includes Nixon's stuff. The mask is there.

Glenn Wharton: If we could step out of the specifics of that installation a little bit, and maybe move back to thinking about other works related to *Mirage* that you possibly ... Have you curated any others? You mentioned before you're aware of the evolution of *Mirage*.

Barbara London: I also got in one of her little mini-theater pieces, and that was before *Mirage*. I don't want this to really be in the record. There were territories, as you well know, in the institution.

Glenn Wharton: Actually, since you mention the theater piece, that's the one that I actually interviewed her about.

Barbara London: Oh good. There are parts of it missing that she promised to give. I would remind her and then a year would pass.

Glenn Wharton: Well, hopefully she will, or maybe she has because we both—

Barbara London: To put it in a good way, because video evolved in the institution first under projects, then ultimately it went into the Film Department, because it was moving image, and storage was not quite like film, but it needed stable conditions. Then when Hamlin, the preservation center was built, then there were the climate-controlled vault for the videos. There was always a bit of not a dilemma, but where do you place the installation and sculptural work?

Barbara London: There were cases where I would present to the Painting and Sculpture Acquisition Committee, and Kynaston McShine would look at me like, "Don't misbehave." Then those works would be jointly owned, and then that's complicated.

Glenn Wharton: You mean jointly by different curatorial departments.

Barbara London: Yeah. Painting and Sculpture, and then the Department of Film, or Department of Film and Media.

Glenn Wharton: During the entire time I was there, storage was always a big issue. We would always talk to artists about do we need to

acquire these large components associated with a work, or can we replace them, or use exhibition equipment out of the equipment pool instead of buying dedicated particular items. I can't speak specifically for this work, but that was always an issue.

Barbara London: I think, say, with then that little theater piece, yeah, it needs a little flat screen. Those have evolved and evolved and evolved and evolved, as have the TV sets. I know MoMA stockpiled quite a few of those cubes. One day is going to come and a flat screen ain't going to cut it.

Glenn Wharton: That's right, and hopefully we'll get some answers here for some of the users of this resource in the future, from Joan herself, because we're working very closely with Joan, and we will be interviewing her as well. Do you know if *Mirage* has ever been loaned to another institution from MoMA?

Barbara London: I don't think so.

Glenn Wharton: What would some of your concerns be if it were loaned?

Barbara London: Well, always I used to joke that I was a harpy, that you could not lend the Gary Hill *Inasmuch As [Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place]*, it's too fragile. I know the Janet Cardiff has gone off and loaned. They have helped with the upgrades, Cardiff and her partner. It's wear and tear.

Glenn Wharton: One of my concerns was always about the exhibition equipment, especially the vintage monitors. We just wouldn't loan them at all. We would require another institution to supply their own.

Barbara London: Right.

Glenn Wharton: That got more and more difficult, because CRT monitors weren't available on the market, and so that just became more and more of an issue. I imagine it will be even more of an issue in the future.

Barbara London: To heck with loans. If this is a work of art for the institution in the institution's collection, and it wants to preserve it, well, it jolly well better preserve it. Even if you owe a favor to someone.

Glenn Wharton: Well, it's why we were buying sometimes double backup sets of equipment for these pieces. Do you have any other thoughts that you would like to share with somebody who might be listening to this in the future about exhibiting Joan's works, or

conserving her work, or communicating to the public important concerns about her as an artist?

- Barbara London: I always feel that context is very important. She emerged out of a group of very smart, active artists who lived near each other, talked to each other, had lunch at FOOD restaurant. The theater side of it, like Foreman and the Wooster Group were very important contexts. I also give the anecdote that Michael Snow and she told me, it was in the late 1960s, I don't know if she told you this, in the late 1960s he recognized that she wasn't a minimalist. She was hanging around with a man who's a very strong sculptor with minimal proclivities. Snow said, "You should go see Jack Smith." That opened up doors. I think, yes, there's context.
- Glenn Wharton: That context for her was very much the work that other artists were doing and people she knew.
- Barbara London: She was going to see everything, I mean everything.
- Glenn Wharton: I think she still is.
- Barbara London: I think she still is too.
- Glenn Wharton: That says a lot about her.
- Barbara London: Yeah.
- Glenn Wharton: How she draws from so many different sources in her work.
- Barbara London: I forget the name of the poet, who's a very close friend, maybe that's come up. It should be in the record. They almost went to school together. I'll have to get that for you. But Jack Tworokov and that whole circle and as painters. The poets are very important too.
- Glenn Wharton: Can you think of anything else that we may not have covered that you'd like to communicate?
- Barbara London: I went through the records. Video Viewpoint started with a Rockefeller Foundation grant, I think, in 1977. I was looking at the lists before coming here, and it wasn't until November 3 of 1981 that she gave a Video Viewpoint. I thought to myself, today I thought, "Why did I wait?" Well, she also traveled a lot. In the beginning, I didn't do them that regularly. It was a cycle of maybe six in a year. She wasn't in the first, the second, third. She was in 1981. That was a way, I felt, I would get an artist uptown

who was downtown to come in, show the work. I always said that what you say is really important, because we're transcribing and audio taping. Those are files that are there in the library.

Glenn Wharton:

Good to know.

Barbara London:

She did talk a couple of other times after that. I know Sally Berger did a conversation with her at some point. Those are worthwhile to go back to.

Glenn Wharton:

Any other thoughts? Okay. Well, Barbara, thank you so much. It's so good to see you again after working so closely with you for so many years at MoMA.

Barbara London:

This is short and sweet. I hope it's useful.

Glenn Wharton:

It's nice. I think I learned a lot, and I look forward to having a glass of wine after this interview.

Barbara London:

Good.

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.