

Babette Mangolte interviewed by Barbara Clausen and Kristin Poor, September 9, 2020

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*This transcript is a condensed and edited version of the original interview.*

Kristin Poor: Today is September 9th, 2020. I'm Kristin Poor. I'm here with Babette Mangolte and Barbara Clausen, who is the Director for Curatorial Research for the JJKB. Babette, thank you so much for talking with us today. We wanted to start by asking you about how you met Joan and how you started working with her.

Babette Mangolte: The first thing I saw of Joan's was *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* at L'Attico Gallery in June of 1972. I had heard her name, but I'd never seen any work of hers. So I discovered *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and I shot the photographs you have copies of, which were selections I did probably later the same year, in September.

Babette Mangolte: That meeting in L'Attico Gallery was very important, because there were all the performances there, I also met Simone Forti, who I knew of but I had never met. The only person I knew in that series of people who were part of those monthly performance events at L'Attico Gallery, was Yvonne Rainer. And I was there because of Yvonne, and I was interested to go to Rome, and I was also working with somebody else who was interested in film and needed me to translate French to English for a research project done at the Lumières Museum prior to going to Rome. Her name was Regina Cornwell, and she was an expert on Michael Snow, who was my main interest in moving to New York to start with, in late October, 1970.

Babette Mangolte: I met Yvonne in December 1971. I shot her film *Lives of Performers* in 1972 in April. It was shown at the Whitney in 1972, in May or late April, I think, and the film was immediately successful.

Babette Mangolte: It's really interesting. Joan did not know then that I was the person doing photographs at first, but Linda Patton I already knew because she was a performer, and I don't know if she worked with Yvonne, but I knew her prior. Linda wanted out of the work she was doing for Joan, you know, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. She's the person who handled the camera. Linda wanted out of that, so she said, "Well, why don't I recommend you?" And I said, "perfect," you know? I mean,

shooting video was fine with me. On the contrary, I was interested, because it was very different from shooting film.

Babette Mangolte:

So, I had a technical interest in doing that, but also, I really like *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*. I thought it was clearly in the tradition of Nam June Paik, and the fact that video was the equivalent of what we call the selfie now. You know, it was self-referential to the image of the maker, basically, because the image was only good in closeups and not in longshot.

Babette Mangolte:

Because I'm a cameraperson, I could move with the camera and do handheld work. So I remember what I shot, because Joan recorded it, and she upgraded it to Beta SP at some point. I saw those tapes in 1995, when she reinstalled them for a show in Los Angeles.

Barbara Clausen:

Babette, please tell us, what struck you as particular about that time and when you started working with Joan?

Babette Mangolte:

What was interesting is I did not feel then, whatever I had seen only once in L'Attico Gallery in Rome, was going to be what I will do with Joan in *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, which I started to work on with her probably in December 1972. And in terms of performance, you have to check when it was first performed with me in the role of being the cameraperson. [Editor's note: It was January 1973 at Leo Castelli Gallery]. For me, what was great working for Joan in 1973 is the fact that then she often had dates in Europe. So, that was my trip, going to Europe was paid by her. And I also went to Europe because Yvonne also had gigs there and I was working with Yvonne at that time as well.

Babette Mangolte:

So, that was important for me, but what the work was, I remember only because it was reenacted in my memory, because of a show on performance, which was done at MOCA in the Geffen building in Los Angeles in 1995. What Joan did was just stunning. She reinstalled a room with *Organic Honey* material, what you have in those contact sheets of the first photographs I did for her in December 1972, back in New York, and the objects using *Organic Honey*, when she was retooling a new *Organic Honey*. She had a full room in which she positioned all the objects that she used in *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* that she had kept. And because whatever I had shot had been recorded by her, which I did not know at the time when I was doing it, then maybe I was recording it but I was not conscious of it. And the importance that could have had in the future, because those finished tapes which were Portapak, had been upgraded to Beta SP, which was the professional format in 1995, and therefore were shown with good sound and good image.

They had been kept very well, archivally speaking. They had not self-destructed, like some others had. And for me it was mind blowing. It reminded me when I was 31 years old having fun, really. [laugh] And also it was so interesting, I was doing closeups while walking and to the music and I knew how to zoom out and move out to have actually a long shot of Joan and end up on her face on the monitor. Or I end up on what she was doing and seeing also the monitor because I'm a good cameraperson, basically. [laugh] So, I could really improvise and I love improvisation with the camera. In video you keep on shooting because you record sound as well as image so you never turn off the camera so I could shoot long takes of tracking shots, panoramic and zoom movement.

Babette Mangolte:

And in video, you are not limited to time. You don't have to think then you are going to run out of film after 10 minutes because you can keep a camera movement for 30 minutes if you want to. So, that was an enormous pleasure for me, and I had forgotten that and I rediscovered that. But Joan also had a very interesting taste in music, for me, which I discovered shooting the piece. I also discovered the music, the soundtrack. So, I think in your database, you need to have the soundtrack of the performance.

Kristin Poor:

Babette, when you would do still photography of Joan's performances, for example, with *Funnel* or the first time you photographed *Organic Honey* or later when you photographed *Mirage*, what was your approach to choosing the angles and the moments of the performance that you wanted to capture with the still camera? Did you have any plans in advance about how you would photograph the performance?

Babette Mangolte:

For *Funnel*, there were only a couple of images which I could choose, because I had my still camera under my feet and I was seated, there was no camera movement. *Funnel* for me is a great, great piece because it's a cone, it's actually the reverse of the Anthony McCall cone film [*Line Describing a Cone* (1973)]. The photographs I did for *Funnel* were designed by the fact that there was a singular point of view and I was facing the monitor and Joan at that little desk, which, she had objects, and she had the little rabbit inside the desk. I have an image of the rabbit coming out in the contact sheet that I sent you of *Funnel* done at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1974.

Babette Mangolte:

But I was very limited in what I could do because when I was working with the camera, I had to readjust sometimes the composition, and see to the camera moves, but from a stationary tripod. So, I could not divide my attention and also shoot photographs, if the video camera was on automatic

recording with no movement on my part, I could do that. But in general, the photographs of *Funnel* were done during performance, yeah. The four photographs I have were done during performance because in general, when you set up, you set up the light and you have to realize the last image was there for ten, fifteen minutes because the ring was spinning, Joan was spinning, the ring, I let it spin and she was leaving, so that image was so charismatic.

Kristin Poor:

And how about with *Mirage*, where you were not operating a camera during it?

Babette Mangolte:

I saw the piece many times before starting to photograph it and I photographed it with multiple lenses and multiple bodies, I had two bodies at that time or maybe even triple, in 1976, I forgot the date because 1976, my equipment was stolen, so I had in—

Kristin Poor:

It was 1976, yes.

Babette Mangolte:

July. So I forgot when *Mirage* is. I think it's before that, so I had all my equipment and I did multiple... but I kept all the images in the order of the four rolls that I have because I think that was done in a rehearsal, there was no public there. And I was specifically shooting...that was structured by the fact that the film projection, which was manipulated and had been rehearsed by Joan and the person who was in the projection booth at Anthology Film Archives, which was changing the format of the film screen, which was white light with no film inside, but was creating that shadow on the screen and was made in relation with the movement. The choreography then Joan had done for herself in relation with the size of the screen. So those things were totally controlled, yeah.

Babette Mangolte:

I was not controlling the screen size, that was the script of Joan. What I was controlling is when I shot the photograph in terms of movement in particular, but there were enough moments which were stationary, then I sometimes took two photographs just to make sure the focus was really great. And for *Mirage*, actually, there was something which was convenient because the light on Joan was sufficient. So, I could shoot when I wanted to shoot. A body in movement always should be shot at 250th of a second. And I could do that, which I could not do in many performances in galleries where the light was done with 60-watt bulbs and nothing else, or fluorescent, which is insufficient to shoot very fast.

- Barbara Clausen: That's very interesting, Babette. Is this something that you were also discussing with the artist, with Joan, was it something that you discussed together in preparation for taking photographs?
- Babette Mangolte: No, I did not. You don't discuss the way you cook. I mean, in a way people in general like my photographs, they let me do what I wanted to do because I will not have accepted any other way, I'm not somebody who is for hire, basically. Although, they pay me to be able to use one photograph for their publicity. So, the photographs of *Mirage* were made and one photograph was used to make the card, which made the people come for a week or for a couple of weeks, I forgot, *Mirage* did very well actually, at Anthology. But all those photographs were done prior to the performance for *Mirage*. For *Organic Honey*, they were done during a performance and there was only one performance I could see. I probably was there during the day before the performance went on at L'Attico because I had nothing else to do, except to shoot cats in Rome or to go and walk in the city. I was not spending my time going to a museum. So, I was really stuck to L'Attico, which I told you was a fascinating place.
- Kristin Poor: Did the audience being present affect your photographs?
- Babette Mangolte: I'm sorry, the audience for *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* came only at 7:00 and the setting up for Joan happened probably between 5:00 and 6:00, or between 4:00 and 6:00. And for an hour, everybody kind of took a rest and the audience was coming in and half an hour later. And I was taking my photographs with the audience in the back of me for *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. For *Funnel*, I did the performance of Joan moving in the present, in the space, doing the performance, but I was obviously there because I was helping Joan doing the light then and I was helping her put the camera and take care of the monitor, and take care of the composition of the space, which was really important.
- Kristin Poor: That's very interesting.
- Babette Mangolte: So, the crew was very small for *Funnel*. For *Mirage*, all the preparation of what the performance is about was done without me being there. I just took it when it was ready.
- Babette Mangolte: But way before the performance was open to a public.
- Barbara Clausen: How would you compare the stage performances, for example, also in the studio, like with *Glass Puzzle* that you shot with your

camera to the live performances, how were these different for you to operate in?

Babette Mangolte:

Oh, that was enormously different. The most pleasurable work I did for Joan is *Glass Puzzle* because it took two months and we tried all kinds of different things. I think you have the photographs done in December 1972 of Lois Lane, none of that was used, but I went to visit Joan and in her loft many times when she was rehearsing with Lois and with herself obviously, and with a stationary camera. And basically, the video exists because she was in her loft on Spring Street and it was shot probably in February or March over a period of, I think, two months, and the sun was coming in, that I'm not sure it was February or in March, but the sun was coming in, reflecting on the monitor. And I shot a test of that for Joan and I said, "We have to use that."

Babette Mangolte:

And therefore, we were often meeting prior to that moment where the sun was reflecting in the monitor because if the monitor has an image which had been prerecorded playing on it, you had in addition, the reflection of the light. So for me, that was exactly what I love. The light is a given of God and we use it to be able to create an image which could not be created in a performance. In a performance, the light has to be done by the lighting designer, in this case I'm the lighting designer, and there is light change, and if I'm at the camera, the light change has to be performed by an attendant, by somebody who is a stagehand or whatever. So, there is coordination of a crew. It's more complicated. It cannot bring in improvisation. And improvisation was the name of the game in the 1970's, that's the most important element for me of creativity, and it still is. I love to improvise.

Babette Mangolte:

Even now in 2020.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. More important than ever.

Babette Mangolte:

Yes. Improvisation is one of the most important elements of creativity. And I think it comes without you knowing how it's triggered. I think it really comes from being in a state of voluntary distraction but I'm not going to elaborate on that because I probably will write about it at some point.

Barbara Clausen:

How were the images selected afterwards? What happened after you took the photographs? What was the working process with Joan for that? Did you bring her the contact sheets? How did you select the images?

Babette Mangolte: In general, I was giving her the contact sheets...in general, we discussed when she had the contact sheets. She was looking at them and she decided on some photograph she wanted printed, and I recommended others that I thought were also interesting. There are photographs that I discovered were really fascinating twenty years later when I looked at the contacts. So, it's a very complex issue, how you decide to select a photograph. I think at the moment you react from your memory of what you have just seen and therefore it's really important, but you also do not see...

Babette Mangolte: And at that time I was convinced that photographs were very important because I'm a visual person and I looked at photographs when I was a kid, I had never looked at movies until I was twenty years old but looked at still photographs when I was going to the theater TNP [Théâtre national populaire] looking at the Agnès Varda photographs of the TNP of Gérard Philipe in *Lorenzaccio*, a great piece, a great role for him, which I saw when I was a kid, when I was twelve years old. So, photographs entered my world very early with painting and the static image. My taste was formed with the static image, paintings, and still photographs.

Kristin Poor: Yes.

Babette Mangolte: But it was changed totally when I became a filmmaker. Yeah. And definitely being a filmmaker decided the way I shot photographs as a photographer, but I never felt I was a photographer until I started to shoot my first images of Richard Foreman, in 1970. On December 5th, 1970, I shot my first photographs really, of *Total Recall* in New York City.

Kristin Poor: Babette, this raises an important question about your archive. You mentioned what it's like to come back to these contact sheets twenty years later. What is your strategy or your approach to archiving your own work of all of these important performances that you have documented over the years...now?

Babette Mangolte: The fact is I'm increasingly scanning my still photographs, my contact sheets, and not just the photographs I have printed. And I discovered many of the prints I have made because on the contact sheet I have the prints made, or I have still a piece of paper, which says that those photographs were ordered, the numbers that were ordered, and it's with the contact sheet. So, they've disappeared, so I don't have them anymore. So at some point, I have tried to scan negatives but I scratched a negative, so I decided never to do that again. And I don't have the equipment, it's equipment which is at my university. So, I have a

tendency to want to do everything myself, I'm not somebody who delegates. So, in many ways, my archive benefits from the fact that many of my photographs have been shown in shows, which I have curated myself.

Babette Mangolte:

Like for instance, the show I did at the gallery when I had the gallery in 2010, which is called *Movement and Still*, where I really rediscover photographs... And also in 2007, for the show at John Hansard Gallery, which is the first big show I did. I did an installation piece, which is very fundamental in my work...and which was rethinking what photography is...the installation is about that. And it takes photographs of theater and dance and performance...Bob Whitman in particular, and Trisha [Brown] and Yvonne [Rainer], and so on and so on. So that piece, which I did in 2007 and I worked on since 2006, was really the beginning of me thinking I had an archive which had to be protected.

Kristin Poor:

Babette, it's so interesting to hear how active your archive is for you still to this day. So, thank you for sharing all of that information. We have one more question for you as we are also, in addition to *Organic Honey* and *Mirage*, looking into a few of Joan's exhibitions in detail. And we know that you traveled with her to Berkeley at the time of her exhibition there in 1980. And we wondered if you could share some of your memories of that exhibition and the performances that were a part of it.

Babette Mangolte:

I don't remember anything about that Berkeley show. You'll have to send me photographs.

Barbara Clausen:

Okay. You were operating the camera. The performances were *Organic Honey*, *Funnel*, and I think that's where she started doing *Double Lunar Dog*.

Babette Mangolte:

I loved the performances when I worked as a cameraperson for Joan and when she asked me, I would always go back, yeah.

Barbara Clausen:

Okay. This has been such great information that you've been sharing. It's been so interesting to listen to you.

Barbara Clausen:

I think it would also be great to know if you would have any advice for younger photographers, for example, or camera people today when they photograph performance. I think it would be really wonderful if you could share some of your thoughts, briefly.

Babette Mangolte:

I think first you want to see the performance a couple of times before you start to shoot photographs. At least that's the way I



proceeded when I could, and I did better photography because of it. And the other thing is, which I did not do, you keep the announcement, you keep the ephemera that is distributed for free at the entrance of the performance, which I do now.

Babette Mangolte:

I was not a photographer anymore, starting 1986. So, everything is black and white and there's a couple of color images of *Lateral Pass*, the last piece I shot for Trisha [Brown], which I absolutely adore and so on. I also shot a video of it, which came back to light in 2013 or something like that. But the archive, which is analogue, is easy because you have the materiality of the negative, you have the materiality of the contact sheet, you have the materiality of print, you can put that on a spreadsheet, whatever you do, the number of prints you have made. So you have the paper trace, but with digital, you could do the same thing, obviously, but it's very complicated because you have to copy everything at least three times. I do so many different things on any given day that I use the same drive, and therefore I have to reorganize the way things are stored later on and that's very cumbersome. So, what I did not do when I was working in analogue and I don't do now but I should, working in digital, is you want to shoot the photograph and as soon as you can, you want to describe those photographs that you like, that you have selected.

Barbara Clausen:

Thank you for the interview.