

Valerie Smith interviewed by Barbara Clausen, March 13, 2020

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Barbara Clausen: Hello, this is Barbara Clausen. I am here to interview Valerie Smith, who was the curator of the Joan Jonas exhibition *Five Works* at the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 2003. At the time, she was the director of exhibitions at the Queens Museum. Thank you, Valerie, for joining us today. We're going to start out with the question of how you became aware of Joan's work and how you started working with her.

Valerie Smith: I think I always knew about Joan's work. I think the first time I knew about Joan's work was as a student at Barnard College. I may have even known about her work pretty much right away. I'm just thinking: because I was at Hunter College for two years, and then I went to Barnard. At Hunter College of course Bob Hewitt and Robert Morris were teaching, so there were all these people of that generation who were there, and I studied with Rosalind Krauss. I'm sure I came across her work in the literature we read. So, it was really early on I think, in the 1970s, I'd have to say, when I graduated [from Barnard], it must have been 1979, or 1974, or something like that. I had heard of her work, and my thesis was on Laurie Anderson, so it was about performance. I knew a lot about performance by the time I graduated from college. Then I was at Artists Space for eight years, and I must have come across ... I mean by then I think I knew her although we didn't hang out socially. But then I met Matt [Mullican at Artists Space], he knew her, because he was doing performance at The Kitchen, so I must have really met her through him.

Barbara Clausen: Did you see any of Joan's early performances such as *Mirage*, for example? Or even *Organic Honey*, which she still performed in the 1970s?

Valerie Smith: No, I don't think so, I don't think I did. To be honest, I think I just knew it through studying it through books. [This is incorrect. Thinking about it, I now remember seeing a performance in 1987 a version of *Volcano Saga* at the Performing Garage on Wooster Street.]

Barbara Clausen: Then how did you start working with her? This was a bit later I assume.

Valerie Smith: [Really right away.] I got the job at the Queens Museum after Sonsbeek [1993], well not directly after Sonsbeek. Let's see. I had the kids in 1994, and then there was about a ... it was around 1999, 2000. My tenure there was from 2000 to 2008. I think what happened was ... Well I'll just be totally frank, what happened was there was a show. When I came on as a curator at the Queens Museum, there was an exhibition of a woman's artist's work that ... it struck me that the person whose position I took over ... as the director of exhibitions and the senior or chief curator . There was only one curator, it was me. When Bill Valerio left, he had done this show with an artist who was doing video installation work and some performance. And I didn't know the artist's work.

Valerie Smith: It struck me as a kind of ... it didn't make sense to me, when I thought about the program of the museum. It struck me as not correct that someone of Joan's stature and body of work had not had a one-person show, but that this younger artist was getting one. So, it seemed to me that I had to make a kind of corrective in the program, and so that's how it started. I came on, and immediately I made an application for some funding, but we didn't really have enough time to really develop the idea. That's what I remember. So the initial application for funding failed, but I just used it as a sort of test for what was to come later. We pursued funding [the following year]. We got it from the Warhol Foundation and other sources, and then eventually we were able to do the exhibition.

Barbara Clausen: Can I ask you, before the exhibition, throughout the 1990s, were you able to see Joan's retrospectives in Europe, such as for example at the Stedelijk in 1994, or in Stuttgart near the beginning of the 2000s?

Valerie Smith: I saw the work in Stuttgart. [I was not in Holland, but traveling for most of 1994. I did not see her Stedelijk show in 1994.]

Barbara Clausen: Yes, because you were curating the show at Sonsbeek in what year?

Valerie Smith: Really, well, on and off from 1991 until the end of 1993.

Barbara Clausen: Okay. So then Joan's show at the Stedelijk Museum with Dorine Mignot was in 1994.

Valerie Smith: Yeah, I might have missed that because at that point I was traveling with Matt for a whole year around the world.

- Barbara Clausen: Right.
- Valerie Smith: So, and then in the summer of 1994 I had the kids, and I was out of it for about three [five] years. Well, no I edited the Artists Space book with a lot of interviews [*5000 Artists Return to Artists Space: 25 Years, 1998*]. I was involved with the history of that. So, then I— I don't even remember if we did an interview with Joan. I don't think so.
- Barbara Clausen: But just to come back to the Stuttgart show, you did see the Stuttgart show which happened right before Documenta?
- Valerie Smith: Oh yeah, she was having that show. I'm pretty sure I went to the opening.
- Barbara Clausen: Do you remember seeing the exhibition? Do you remember kind of how that exhibition, just the effect... Did that exhibition influence you? Or was that an important exhibition for you to see?
- Valerie Smith: No, I will say it did not influence me. I mean it influenced me in the sense that I knew I wasn't going to take the show.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, okay.
- Valerie Smith: I had made up my mind already. I don't know exactly how Joan felt about it. I think taking the show was a possibility that was on the table. The curator really wanted it to happen.
- Barbara Clausen: Andrea Jahn.
- Valerie Smith: Yeah. I don't know, I wasn't convinced, mainly because there were some financial issues involved. I just want to say that the recent history at the Queens Museum—and I would say my own history—was not to take shows. I've done all my own shows. I went [to Stuttgart] to see the work, not to try to imitate it, and in fact to do the opposite. That's where the *Lines in the Sand* came in, because we really wanted to produce a new work.
- Barbara Clausen: Right. And *Lines in the Sand* was premiered at Documenta the year before if I understand. Was that a co-production with the Queens? I imagine. No?
- Valerie Smith: No. Well actually Barbara, that is something I didn't know. I can't remember, and I had thought it was new to Queens at the time, but that's my memory.

Barbara Clausen: Well I think in that case it's also very emblematic for Joan's work, because Joan does develop her work from one place to the other. Often it does really become a new work as it enters another institutional setting, which is of course also so much of interest in regard to how you developed this exhibition for and with Joan, for the Queens Museum and for your own curatorial thinking. Could you tell us a little bit of the research process? I know you've said it was several years, you really worked on this for a long time.

Valerie Smith: I cannot honestly say that there was tons of research that went into it. Not at all like the exhibitions I [ended up doing for instance, at the Haus [Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin]. I mean [by this time], I knew Joan pretty well as a friend. It was a matter of going to visit her and deciding what would be the best. The installations: What has been shown here and what can we do here that makes sense? I remember vaguely that she said, "Well, what would you like to show?", and my immediate response was, "*Organic Honey*." That for sure. But besides that, and the idea of including a brand new piece that had not been shown in New York, it was—and this is part of my methodology—it was really her choice. We worked the pieces out together, but I let her have free rein.

Valerie Smith: It was what she wanted, but we decided we weren't going to do a retrospective. It was going to be a kind of survey if you will. That's the way we wanted it. The five pieces, because we had distinct spaces in the museum for those five pieces, then it was expanded to include *My New Theater*, and early video works. There were two new pieces that I'd never seen before. I know in one instance, she had dug up some footage or recording that she hadn't seen in a while. That was the piece, [*Nudes with Mirrors* (1969)]—I'm not even sure if it's in the book here, maybe it is. It was kind of, slightly ... It could've been a late addition. I just remember it because it kind of struck me as something I'd never seen before, and then I think Joan told me, "I haven't seen this footage before." I kept on sort of pushing the idea, "Let's show things that haven't been shown."

Barbara Clausen: Do you remember what that was? Was that the tape of *Mirage*?

Valerie Smith: I don't even know if it had a title. It was just a kind of a short video that we installed in the wall and—Did it ever make it into the book? I'm trying to look up if it did. I'll describe it to you.

Barbara Clausen: Great.

- Valerie Smith: I do have a kind of vivid memory of it. [Looking through the catalogue] Let me see if it's in the back, these are installation shots. Well, just to backtrack, *Woman in the Well*, that's not the one, but *Woman in the Well* was I believe ... Oh but she did show it at Stuttgart, so I'm wrong. So, we showed that, but the one ... For me *Woman in the Well* was relatively new, but I really loved that piece. I loved of course the *My New Theater 1*, that's a great piece. Well, there are so many great pieces. I'm just trying to find here that one little video, let's see if it's here. Okay, if I cannot find it then I'll describe it to you, maybe it is here. It might have been during the period of 1969 the *Mirror Piece* performance, it could have been [...]
- Barbara Clausen: Was it the color footage of *Mirror Piece*?
- Valerie Smith: Well, the memory I have was a section where, there were I think both men and women. It was quite short, and they were entirely nude. They were holding mirrors that were flapping back and forth, sort of like butterflies.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes.
- Valerie Smith: I just have this memory that she said that she hadn't seen this footage in a while, or she just dug it up. Maybe she and ... Yeah she just dug it up and we decided to show that. I really liked that piece. Somehow it resonated with me. It made sense, because of the YMHA performance was something I knew already. I just thought it was great to be able to find new work that related to these other pieces and to just sort of expand the idea of use with mirrors.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes.
- Valerie Smith: I thought that it was important to see as much as we could.
- Barbara Clausen: On coming back from working on the exhibition, the third kind of segment of this interview, how did this exhibition fit into the programming at the time at the Queens Museum?
- Valerie Smith: Well, since it was kind of the first big show that I did ... There are lots of ways to answer that. I have to say that I didn't care. I was going to do it no matter what. For me, it was sort of like, "This really has to happen," and—
- Barbara Clausen: There was an urgency.

Valerie Smith:

Yeah, there was a kind of urgency for me. There I was in Queens, and I thought it should happen at the Museum of Modern Art. I mean I could be a little bit nasty here and say—I've told this to Joan already—that I went and I think I wrote a letter, I'm not even sure if I actually talked to her, I may have talked to Barbara London. I said, "Can we please do a joint something." That [Collaborations] had been done before, because it was so difficult for people, psychologically, to come [to Queens] at that point. I didn't want to get into a situation where people weren't going to see the show, just because they didn't want to come [travel] out there. So, we had a kind of satellite somewhere else, but that didn't happen. There may have been institutional reasons for that, I don't know, but I was kind of shocked when I got a negative. There may be some of that in the archives somewhere, I don't know. Then, I went to Dan Cameron at the New Museum and thought we could split the show somehow, or expand it, New Museum-Queens Museum. And he said, "Why would we want to do that? I just did a Carolee Schneemann show and a Trisha Brown show. I'm not going to do a Joan Jonas show." So, that was a big disappointment.

Valerie Smith:

It kind of ramped up the urgency for me. I was just pissed off and said, "I'm just going to revolutionize this, just going to push this through." Tom Finkelpearl was very supportive, but there was a sense that this may not have been the kind of thing that he would want for the Queens Museum because he's so community minded, and working with the community. But on the other hand I think he might have felt that someone of Joan's stature would bring another kind of audience to the museum, although I don't think that was a priority really, for him. And he saw it—and he said this to me—that he saw it as something that would enhance my career, not even Joan's, my career, that I would show a big artist. I think he might have said that because at the time, Eugenie Tsai, his wife, had just published or was about to publish her PhD thesis on Robert Smithson. It was the beginning of assessing that period for a number of people in different ways, although I certainly wasn't aware of that. In retrospect, I think that's what happened.

Barbara Clausen:

It's a very important moment in time, and I think also a very important moment that you decided to, and you pushed through, presenting that show, and presenting Joan's work.

Valerie Smith:

I feel it should have been a better show, in many ways. I worked with the resources I had at the Queens Museum.

- Barbara Clausen: Can you talk a bit about, or walk through the show somehow? Was there a certain order, or what was the sequence of the works that you presented? How did you present that?
- Valerie Smith: If you came in through the front door, there's a gigantic panorama, it's a physical ten thousand square foot panorama that is like a donut hole in the middle of this building. This is before it was renovated. So, you come in through the front door where the parking lot is, and you immediately have a choice to go into I think a series of two or three rooms that are square in some way, or you can circulate around the wall of the panorama. In that kind of funny triangular space was *Lines in the Sand*, but you were greeted by I think the first piece that Peter Campus filmed.
- Barbara Clausen: *Wind*.
- Valerie Smith: That was the first piece. Then you had *Organic Honey* in those square or rectangular spaces, and then you had *Juniper Tree* and then *Volcano Saga*. Then you had *My New Theater*, several *My New Theaters*. I think there were a couple, or maybe three. Then you had *Woman in the Well*. [Pointing on the floor plan] This is a kind of elbow. So you walk in, there's this, and then you go that way, and then it opens up to the other side of this round panorama, and you open up and you go down the stairs, and you have a vast space in which we showed *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places*. That was really quite spectacular. And *Lines in the Sand*, so the last, latest piece was also quite near the very first pieces.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, I've just put up the floor plan on the screen.
- Valerie Smith: Okay, I'm glad they were able to find it.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes and that looping was very special I felt. I saw the show, and I felt that was very successful in really connecting the different pieces together.
- Valerie Smith: Well, it amazingly worked and that was really due to Neil Benezra's and all of our efforts. There were curtains involved maybe in one or two spaces just to buffer the sound. You went through them and you could hear everything clearly in the space. There wasn't an amazing amount of sound interference that you might think there would have been, so it worked nicely.
- Barbara Clausen: I felt it was very site-specific. It really adapted to the space and the work really created its own space within the museum.

Valerie Smith: Yeah.

Barbara Clausen: And you worked with Neil [Benezra], who we're also going to interview. So video, I imagine, played such a huge role for this exhibition. Can you describe your work together with EAI [Electronic Arts Intermix]? I think it was probably Rebecca Cleman and Seth Price who you worked with at the time?

Valerie Smith: I have very little memory ...

Barbara Clausen: But EAI kind of gave you the videos ...

Valerie Smith: Well, I remember Lori [Zippay], the director at the time, who's very nice, and I may have talked to Seth a couple of times. I find that they were very cooperative. Pretty much those details I left to the professionals. There was a registrar, Hsu-Han Shang. She'd never had experience with [an exhibition like this one], and I remember insisting on a checklist. I don't know if it still exists. But she said, "Oh there are all these little objects in *Organic Honey*," and I said, "Please make a checklist of everything," because it was all out in the open, and people could have taken them.

Barbara Clausen: Exactly, and just to give the listeners a reminder, the checklist of *Organic Honey* included over eighty pieces. We can see that on the Stedelijk, in the collections papers, an elaborate amount of different types of media and different types of sources needed. Can you speak about the lighting of the exhibition a little bit? In your memory, well how you remember it.

Valerie Smith: I don't remember working with... My involvement really was... Joan was working with Arnold Kanarvogel, who was our head preparator, and Neil Benezra [on the sound]. And at the beginning, Pia Lindman [on video editing]. [...]

Barbara Clausen: It's okay. Valerie, it's easier if we just move on. We can find these names no problem.

Valerie Smith: So, what was your question again?

Barbara Clausen: The first one was the light.

Valerie Smith: I just remember coming in and ... When you work with lighting, you think, does it work for the artwork? I gave my opinion after they had fiddled around with it. I just wanted Joan to be happy. I felt that she was the expert in understanding how that piece was to be done because she'd done it a thousand times. So for me to



come in and say, "No, I don't think this works," or, "I'd like it to be this way," I've never imposed my will over the artist. Never. That was not part of my thing, ever. I left it entirely up to her, and I think it worked. My feeling was if she wanted my opinion, and if I happened to be hanging out and just checking and seeing how everything was going, she would ask for it. I didn't want to interfere in any way.

Barbara Clausen:

I know you had very detailed floor plans, program brochures; there was really a lot of material to guide the visitor through the exhibition. How was this mediation of Joan's work and explaining Joan's work important to you? Do you feel like most people who came had already known Joan's work, or whether it was also for a lot of people a moment of discovery of this practice? Can you speak a little bit about that moment when the show opened and its reception?

Valerie Smith:

Well, I have to say that we were all very surprised that anybody came at all.

Barbara Clausen:

I remember. I was at the opening. There were tons of people, it was packed.

Valerie Smith:

Yeah, it was a great reception. I think Joan was really pleased. I wonder if she was actually surprised too. Then we came all back here and had a little dinner. It was a bit disorganized, but it was just the coming together. The documentary material, or the ancillary, tangential material written text stuff, that was not unusual for the Queens Museum. It's something they did try to refine over the years because there was a sense that we needed to educate the community or anybody [who visited]. For those people who knew Joan's work, it was something that you could take away. You need that. I think people need that in some strange way, and it was all positive. I think people responded to the work no matter what because it's quite accessible on many different levels. So it wasn't so obscure that people didn't get it.

Barbara Clausen:

Did Joan perform for this exhibition? Was there a performance element?

Valerie Smith:

There was. God only knows if there's any documentation on that, probably not. And probably should have been.

Barbara Clausen:

What was the performance and where did the performance take place?

- Valerie Smith: The Queens Museum has this funny little theater—or had—I don't even know if it still exists. It's part of the old 1939 architecture. It wasn't very deep. I think it held 300 people, and there wasn't a proper stage. It was on the ground level. She projected—I don't have a clear memory of the titles—she projected a piece [a version of *Wolf Lights*]. Snippets of Las Vegas, snippets of the wolf image. Ragani performed with her. She was also in the [*Lines in the Sand*] video.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, she was.
- Valerie Smith: Joan performed. It wasn't very long, about half an hour to forty-five minutes. It was amazing, it was very moving. I was very moved by it. I'm getting emotional thinking about it.
- Barbara Clausen: I can understand. I think anybody who's seen Joan perform can relate to the feelings that are evoked by her work, the many different layers of her work.
- Valerie Smith: It was magical. I think it was maybe one of the first times that I had seen ... You were talking earlier about this kind of visual duplication of images. That came out very importantly in this version of the performance and in a way that I hadn't seen before and to an incredible effect. Then there was a scene, of course, this incredible scene, where she's on some kind of parapet, so she's acting like a banshee. It was shot in Las Vegas somewhere, and she's going crazy. It was very beguiling and bewitching, and the whole idea of the sleight of hand came out. I remember in the audience Robert Storr and Elizabeth Murray came, and that was nice. In addition to our regular audiences, maybe some other people from Manhattan came, but it was nice that they came, and I think they enjoyed it. I think it was roughly around the time that Elizabeth was having her show at MoMA. Anyway.
- Barbara Clausen: When you were working on the catalogue, just to go on how these works kind of prevail in the future, especially through the photo documentation, there is of course photo documentation of this exhibition which was also included in the catalogue. When you went about the catalogue, can you speak a bit about the concept behind the catalogue? Because that is such an important resource, that has remained such an important resource and such an important document.
- Valerie Smith: Well, let me see, my memory's shot to hell, I don't have a very clear memory of it.

Barbara Clausen: Did you work on the book together with Joan? Was it something where you really collaborated with her?

Valerie Smith: I think we must have. I mean I have to say that I think I had thought that I would be able to have access to her archive, her entire archive. I got the feeling that—and maybe I'm wrong about this—I got the feeling that I wasn't going to be able to because it wasn't organized in a way that I could just go in and do that. I didn't want to step on her privacy and her toes in any way so it was a bit of a disappointment, but I understood and I accepted that. So I think at one point I thought that I would be able to just rifle through all the files, but that was clearly not going to happen. So I think what we did was we met several times together at her house, and she pulled out some images. We worked between her place and the designers', who were very young.

Valerie Smith: I went to their place and her place. We decided on the cover, on the text. Joan really wanted John Miller to write a text, she really liked his writing. I don't know if the idea of Susan Howe was both of ours, because at the time I was very close with Rebecca Quaytman, her daughter, and I knew that Susan and Joan knew each other, so I might've proposed that. I think I might have, and then Joan said, "Well, she might be busy," but then coming from me it could happen, it happened. Susan was happy to do it. That's how it came about.

Barbara Clausen: And it played such an important role in Joan's life and also in her work, in her sensibility towards poetry, and her work. And you worked with Warren on the book as well, right? Warren Niesluchowski. You worked with Warren Niesluchowski on the book?

Valerie Smith: I have to say his contribution was really in the editing of that interview.

Barbara Clausen: In editing, in translating, yeah.

Valerie Smith: I don't remember him editing any other aspect of it.

Barbara Clausen: This is great. In regard to the documentation, when you documented this show, during the show and after the show, was there something specifically ... I'm moving more towards what concerns should we have for the future. So, documentation of course, plays a big role in that. Do you remember anything beyond the normal institutional documentation of this show that was part of your thinking, or was that sufficient in the sense of

documenting this exhibition? Or were there any thoughts? What was important for you to be included? Because I know the catalogue has installation shots of the exhibition, and I felt that that was a very important decision because often catalogues come out at the beginning of the show, so they will not have installation shots. This is something that a lot of institutions do nowadays, but I think in the beginning of the 2000s, that wasn't necessarily what was done. I felt that was always something very ... Looking back, that is incredibly helpful and really great that you did have installation shots also of the exhibition in the catalogue.

Valerie Smith:

Yeah, I mean I don't know where that idea came from. I tend to think it had to do a little bit with maybe my training [from] Sonsbeek [1993], that I felt it necessary ... How do we make this exhibition unique, or something that can be used later on? Or, how can we make it special? And that aspect seemed super important. I was certainly willing to let go of the idea that we wouldn't have ... institutions always want to have the catalogue for the opening, and I was totally willing to sacrifice that. I don't know where the catalogue is now, if it's completely sold out or not, but that is always the issue, "We're going to be left with a whole bunch of catalogues."

Barbara Clausen:

I can just say from the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base perspective, that catalogue is an incredibly important resource. For us this catalogue was very important, I think it was also very important for the big monograph that came out together with Joan Simon. That was the starting point somehow, also for Joan Simon's big monograph *In the Shadow a Shadow*, that then started its production. Absolutely I think it was very important.

Valerie Smith:

I'm glad.

Barbara Clausen:

Absolutely, Valerie.

Valerie Smith:

The Queens Museum didn't produce very many catalogues. It just didn't have the money, and for me it was a bit of a learning curve in terms of my own essay and the whole writing. I hadn't had that much experience. I mean I had done some art criticism early on, but I had dropped that, because we just never did catalogues or had very little opportunities.

Barbara Clausen:

At Artists Space, no?

Valerie Smith:

Yeah, I mean we did the [Michael] Asher and [James] Coleman, and there were a few catalogues but not ... I mean this is a

curatorial issue. Some curators write some don't. I have to say since I feel very strongly about writing, and that's where my efforts are going now. I wish I had been up to this level when I wrote Joan's catalogue.

Barbara Clausen:

If we would have known what we know now, that's a classic.

Valerie Smith:

Right. I would have done her more justice. But it was fine, and with the interview and with John's essay, and I think since ... It's great what's happened.

Barbara Clausen:

We are looking back, but maybe to look ahead for the last point—and then we need to close the interview—is the question of documentation. So if you think about it now, and you would speak with a younger curator about to embark on a survey show or on a show that would challenge the institution to present several works of Joan's today: would you have any advice or knowledge to share in regard to conservation? Not necessarily conservation but in regard to how to curate Joan's work? Is there something that's important that you think for curators to know, who would like to embark on the curating of Joan's work, either with the artist present or works that are part of a collection but, in any case, for its installation and presentation?

Valerie Smith:

Well, a couple of things come to mind. I mean to go back to documentation; I would advise anybody and everybody to document the hell out of the work, before, during, and after. I think we are in a time now where that's certainly possible. So, that's great. We're maybe even going overboard. In terms of conservation: checklists, individual object labels. We have the ability now to photograph each piece, I don't know if Hsu-Han did that. She should have for conservation purposes, especially on *Organic Honey* that had so many different pieces to it. I mean all of that is totally necessary and important, to get as close as you can to the original. So, I think one should do that.

Valerie Smith:

At the same time, one can also take all of that and throw it to the winds and say, "I'm just going to do my own thing." I think Joan's work sort of lends itself that way, to adapting to the space. So you add things, or you subtract things, as you feel it's necessary, given the context, the physical and the environmental, the audience. All those aspects, play into it. It all matters. You have to take that into consideration. I don't think young curators really understand that there are messages in everything that one does, and it does play into the reading of the work. So, just to be considerate and to consider how one approaches the work. Of course, the best result is really just to let the artist do what they do, that was always my approach.

Barbara Clausen:

Thank you so much, we'll end it here. Thank you so much Valerie, this is a wonderful contribution. Thank you.