

Works

Joan Jonas

I am very happy to be here in Mexico, which I've visited several times, now as a guest at this conference. What I'm going to show while I'm talking is a more or less continuous stream of images of works, which I will identify. As these four or five pieces are projected I will speak of them as examples as I describe the underlying ideas of my work. The first video, called *Wind* (1968), is a silent piece and the second video, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), has very minimal sound, so my lecture can serve as a parallel sound track.

I think that my work, because it is performance-based, has something to do with the title of this conference: "What's left? What remains?" Performance is a transitory form, or medium, that one cannot really experience except as a witness to the actual physical act. So from the very beginning I began to translate my performance works into the medium of film and video. What remains—my notes, my memories, my objects, my drawings, is translated into another form. What's left also—and importantly—is a memory of the temporal performance.

So what you are seeing is the film *Wind*, which was made in 1968 and was based on an indoor performance. Just quickly, I'll tell you that my work, from the very beginning, as I moved from sculpture to the performing space, was influenced by my research (a process which at the time was second nature and didn't need to be named). I was passionately interested in many things, in particular, film and the history of film. Almost every night or at least several times a week I went to The Anthology Film Archives which was then in Soho, near where I lived. There I absorbed the history of early Russian, French, German, American, and Japanese film. Modernist poetry was another inspiration. My work is based on these forms. I also tried to look outside the immediate art world, so that as I developed a language, I considered the formal structure of film and poetry. So when I say poetic, I don't mean it in a romantic or lyrical sense. I use poetry as a material. Another inspiration, because of my study of art history, was how myth has been referenced in paintings and sculptures of all cultures from the very earliest times. For instance, James Joyce weaves the myth of Daedalus into his narrative, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to indicate more about the character of the main persona. This inspired me to think about how to structure my own work in relation to myth, although in the beginning it was non-verbal and references were not evident to the viewer even if images were based on such content. When I first began to do performances, I thought "who am I and where am I and why am I constructing these actions for my friends", because that is what the audience was, mostly friends and acquaintances—the art world was a small world, by the way. So I looked at the myths and rituals of other cultures and in fact one idea behind my performance is the concept of what a contemporary ritual might be. In this basic sense my work hasn't really changed. I think that the ideas that you have in the very beginning are carried out throughout your working life.

My work has evolved in relation to four related media, media that transform or translate the image: the first medium is the mirror. I used it in a series of works I call mirror pieces (1969-1971). In *Wind*, notice the costumes the characters are wearing. They are covered with mirrors. Making these mirror costumes was my first use of this medium. The mirrors created a reflective surface that also made a tinkling metallic sound. Later as many as 17 performers carried large glass mirrors, in formally choreographed performances set in gymnasiums and lofts. The pieces were at least 20 minutes long and the mirrors broke up the space, and reflected the performers, the space itself, and the audience. The viewers were included in the performance as they saw themselves in the piece. I was interested in how this could make people uncomfortable, to see themselves as their neighbours looked at them looking. By the way, Borges was my main inspiration for these early mirror pieces. His *Labyrinths* had just been translated into English in the '60s and people were really involved with his work at that time. I wrote down all the references that he had to mirrors in *Labyrinths*, memorized them, and then recited them as I moved in the mirror costumes. Mirrors are complex extensions of our fantasies and inner space. As Borges says, they are monstrous.

The second medium is what I call "deep landscape." In 1970 I became involved in the perception of image across deep landscape and how it was altered. I started performing outdoors and some of you have seen this earlier in the film *Song Delay* (1973), which was a translation of a work first performed in the mud flats of Jones Beach, New York, in 1970. The audience was a quarter of a mile away from the performance. That affected the way the images and the sound were perceived in the distance.

I call my films and videos "translations" because the actions I record in moving-picture media may be different from those used in live performance: The performance is undertaken for the camera and edited. *Song Delay* (1973) is the filmed translation of *Delay Delay* (1972) and *Jones Beach Piece* (1970), both live performances with audiences

My third medium is video, in particular closed circuit-video. Finally, the last, and fourth medium, is narrative. I'll talk more about both of these in a bit.

Now I will switch to reading a text. This is a text that Douglas Crimp wrote about my work in *Joan Jonas Scripts and Descriptions, 1968-1982* (ed Douglas Crimp) and I think it says something about my work better than anybody has:

A single-strategy paradigmatic in this respect informs all this work. That strategy is de-synchronization, usually in conjunction with fragmentation and repetition; these latter were initially explored in the early performances with mirrors. Desynchronization is first fully operative in the outdoor works, *Jones Beach Piece* and *Delay Delay*. In those events, performers made loud noises by clapping blocks of wood together in wide overhead arcs. Because of the vast distance between performers and spectators, the gesture was seen well ahead of the sound they produced, making the gesture—one of sound and silence—seem to come from nowhere, both because of the number of performers clapping blocks and because the sounds were repeated with their own echoes, it was impossible to link sound and gesture. In this very simple way, Joan Jonas enforces the separation between the spectators' sense of sight

and hearing, making them aware of the contingency of perceptual experience. Desynchronization was intensified and complicated by the use of video technology, in the indoor performances. The videotape entitled *Vertical Roll*, related to the *Organic Honey* performances of the early '70s, serves as an emblem for this activity. Here the desynchronization of the monitors receiving and transmitting frequencies causes the images constantly to scan vertically across the screen, disappearing at the top and reappearing at the bottom. The viewer is more aware of this hypnotic vertical motion than to any movement internal to the image itself, which can only be glanced.

If you think about sound and space and time, and the use of time as material in these early works — the piece that is playing now is called *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* — in the outdoor works time was experienced in one way, and in the indoor works in another way. The audience was either in an open, undefined place far from the action or in the same enclosed framed space and close to the action. *Delay Delay* was filmed in the empty lots by the Hudson River in downtown New York where it was first performed. The audience viewed the action from the roof of a loft building, looking down over an area of about 10 city blocks.

If I may mention another influence on my work, it has been my travels. Especially significant trips included a year spent in Greece, in the '60s to initially look at the Minoan and Mycenaean cultures, as well as visits to the south west and far west of the U.S., and travels in rural Canada, Mexico, and India, just to mention a few...

I want to speak, in particular about a trip to Japan in 1970. I did travel around Mexico in the '60s and I'll mention more about another trip I did in the '60s later. In Japan I saw the Nô drama. Nô and Kabuki theatre use the sound of wood clapping wood. The sounds are very clear. Some stages are designed with large ceramic jars set underneath them, so they resonate and become percussive surfaces. I love that sound. When I visited Tokyo and Kyoto where the temples are, I was very aware of sounds. Gazing and sitting in the Japanese gardens was an intense experience. The apparent simplicity of the gardens and Nô affected me deeply. Many Western artists have been influenced by Eastern theatre, which is basically a visual dance form relating to poetic language.

So I mention Nô theatre because it influenced these early outdoor works and video works. Also when I went to Japan I bought a video camera, my first, a Portapac. I brought it back to New York and in a certain sense that changed my path, it altered my direction because it gave me the opportunity to make what I called "films" in my loft, immediately.

I should say here that I did go to college and art school, studied art history, studied art, but the bulk of what I do now I did not learn in art school. When I went to art school I worked in clay, from the model, and actually learnt how to draw, and I continue to include the act of drawing in all my work, as it is a form of communication in images. I then went to New York and went to Columbia graduate school to continue in sculpture and art history, but still there was no correspondence between grad school at Columbia and what was going on then in the contemporary art world. After I left school I plunged into the New York art world. I learned in the streets, more or less, and I think most artists had that experience at that time. Now the situation is quite different, of course, but I just wanted to mention that.

After first performing publicly in 1968 I produced my own pieces. There were not so many curators searching for new young artists. I mean, there were some and they were important, but it was Artists who gave each other significant support. In the early '70s Castelli- Sonnabend Tapes and Films began to show and distribute artists' tapes and films. People doing this kind of work were partly supported by grants and partly by invitations to show work in festivals and shows. I made my own posters, my friends and I would go around Soho and put the posters up, we would address all the envelopes and send the invitations out. We gathered or developed our own audiences, and it was the beginning of a certain kind of performance in the art world that continues today.

The following is a statement I made at that time about this aspect of stepping from sculpture into performance:

I didn't see a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film or a dance. A gesture has for me the same weight as a drawing. Draw, erase, memory erased. While I was studying art history, I looked carefully at the space of painting, film and sculpture, how illusions are created within a framed space and how to deal with a real physical space with depth and distance. When I switched from sculpture to performance, I just went to a space and looked at it. I would imagine how it would look to an audience, what they would be looking at, how they would perceive the ambiguities and illusions of the space. An idea for a piece would come just from looking until my vision blurred. I also began with props such as a mirror, a cone, a TV, a story. The objects I use are not literal adaptations of the elements in the story or concept, but are symbolic, archetypal. The cone was an instrument to channel sound to the audience: I could whisper into their ears, look through it, listen to it, yell through it, sing—always directing sound to a place. *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* evolved as I found myself continuously investigating my own image in the monitor of my video machine. Then I bought a mask of a doll's face which transformed me into an erotic seductress. I named this TV persona "Organic Honey". I became increasingly obsessed with following the process of my own theatricality as my images fluctuated between the narcissistic and more abstract representations. The risk was becoming too submerged and making merely solipsistic gestures. In exploring the possibilities of female imagery, thinking always of a magic show, I attempted to fashion a dialogue between my different disguises and the fantasies they suggested. I always kept my eye on the small monitor in the performance area in order to control the image making. (Scripts and Descriptions)

To continue discussing the *Organic Honey* project... here you see a Hopi Kachina Doll in a set arranged for the camera. I visited the Southwest to see the Hopi snake dance in the late '60s — an experience that affected me deeply. However I didn't refer to this experience until 2004 in *The Shape The Scent the Feel of Things*. I use props that I acquired to fashion an image. When I first started to do video performances I started to work with smaller props than I had worked with in the outdoors or in the mirror works. At first the objects that I used were

things that I had in my life, that my grandmother had given me, for example, because they told a story, or objects that I found in the flea market, because they were interesting. All along I was very interested in film and how moving images were made—I used the structure, the idea of the cut and montage to produce a work in time. This process was then, because of the medium of video, more direct than working with film. I translated ideas of film into the peculiarities of video. I worked with small objects in relation to the camera to create narrative. In this *Organic Honey* work, the subject was the female image, if there was such a thing. I explored possibilities. At that time feminism, questioning female identity, was a central subject of many female artists. Every one was affected by that movement directly or indirectly. In this case, *Organic Honey* was the name I gave myself and I created this persona or alter ego by dressing up and using fans and masks which were a reference to my experience in Japan.

We are going to switch now to *Glass Puzzle* (1974). I want to talk for a minute about the main structure of those video pieces that used the closed circuit of the video system. The camera focused on the images I made, with objects, or on me, in a space which would then appear on the monitor. I wanted to show the process of image-making to the audience and in the performance the audience saw simultaneously the live, big picture of the performance with the close-up, which was a detail of the live action seen on the monitor or in a projection. The sequence of close up images on the monitor or in the projection offered parallel narratives. The camera was part of the performance and the camerawoman was another performer whom I directed.

When I made *Vertical Roll* (1972), it was made by videotaping what the monitor portrayed (including the vertical roll), i.e., the sequence of images that were transmitted to the monitor by a first camera, which the cameraperson was operating in the performance space, to videotape my movements. The second camera taped the monitor because you could only record the vertical roll by recording off the monitor. All moves were for the camera in relation to the vertical roll.

Glass Puzzle was a piece that came out of this process and was never itself a live performance. It was, however, related to my performance called *Tunnel* in which I made a paper set out of photographic backdrop paper and wooden poles. The set of *Glass Puzzle* incorporated elements from this set, but with Babette Mangolte on camera, it developed into a new work. Like *Organic Honey* it was about the relationships of the monitor and the camera, and the performers in the space. That's something else that is no longer with us - the monitor and the space of the monitor, the space of the closed-circuit—that physical space. I was talking to the artist Julia Scher about this and she said her students in Cologne have no experience of this kind of electronic space... now there is this term, "real space", referring to virtual space, but then there was actually a real space, of the performance, of the monitor, of the closed-circuit. So I was very interested in that space of the monitor and I imagined myself being able to crawl into the monitor, it was a box. It related to the larger space of the performance and also the space of the outdoor work. All of these spaces were framed eventually by the camera, of course. As I said before, I learned about the idea of framing by looking at paintings.

The piece *Glass Puzzle* was shot in a loft in which there are basically two scenes: a camera, filming off the monitor in which you see the reflection of a living room, furniture, and a window recorded by a second camera — we worked with the reflexions over the video image which was sometimes turned on and off as an effect. The second scene is the space or construction that I made with black and white paper in which the two women moved, walked, crawled, sat, rolled. So we were playing with the reflections and those spaces, creating different illusions and layered ambiguities of space, which interested me. This piece is inspired by the photographs of the photographer E. J. Bellocq who photographed prostitutes in New Orleans at the turn of the century. He photographed the models, the prostitutes in their rooms, and it appears that they're waiting for men. They are all posing with their objects. They are standing in front of white sheets or pieces of paper hanging as backdrops. I was very inspired by those photographs and at the time I was questioning the roles that women play. This was one of the roles that I thought of and so this piece shows women, by themselves, and what they might do while they're waiting in particular with tin butterflies, cones, a dog, and etcetera.

Now we'll play the next piece, it's about six minutes long. I'll just say a little bit before we start to play it. I will use it as a late example of the fourth medium, I mentioned earlier, narrative. It's a fragment from the performance of *Lines in the Sand* which was commissioned by Documenta 11, and which was first shown as an installation in the show. It's based on the poem by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle). "Helen in Egypt", which involved the myth of Helen of Troy. According to an ancient legend, Helen never went to Troy, she went to Egypt instead and therefore the Trojan War was fought for an illusion. One of the things that interested me about this story is that this war was fought for reasons that were not told. It was probably a trade war. The location for much of the action is Las Vegas, because there is a casino in Las Vegas called Luxor. It is a large glass pyramid with really vulgar sphinx in front of it. Representing Egypt in Las Vegas relates to what is an aspect of America. I alternated the Helen poem of H.D. and *Tribute to Freud*, the text that she wrote about her analysis with Freud in the '30s. I'm showing you this before I finish because it refers to the '30s. I became drawn to that period before the Second World War because I thought or think that we are in that period again, in a sense.