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"Joan Jonas: Drawing/Performance/Video" at Location One

By: Simmy Swinder

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, erase-memory erased.

– Joan Jonas



Joan Jonas, Still from *Double Lunar Dog*. Courtesy of Location One.

In "Drawing/Performance/Video," Joan Jonas, former senior artist in Location One's artist residence program, was asked to select her performance pieces that related to drawing. Upon viewing these, I was immediately reminded of the 1956 documentary *Le mystère Picasso* (Jonas assured me she saw the film after beginning her career as a video performance artist). In *Le mystère Picasso*, French director Henri Georges Clouzot situates the camera in front of a transparent screen which Picasso then paints on from behind. While Clouzot was documenting Picasso's artistic process, Jonas's process is the actual documentation; the artistic act of producing a work becomes the work itself. Jonas claims that she was preceded by a period when artists and dancers frequently

collaborated, leading her to consider how different people use movement and how one's body can be utilized as an artistic tool. It's no wonder then that Jonas's markings are made with the grace and force of a professional dancer. She often works with composers Alvin Lucier and Jason Moran to create accompaniments to her video art, making the musical component integral to her work.

A pioneer of video performance, Jonas is one of the most significant female artists to emerge in the late 1960s. Her performances fall in the category of conceptual art; they are laden with symbolism and self-reflection. Through her drawings and performances, Jonas strives to give an abstract idea visual form and dimension. She began her artistic practice as a sculptor and continues to think like one: her video compositions are deeply founded on the use of space as a medium and toy with the idea of spatial ambiguity. The sets of her performances become sculptures in their own right. One such performance was *Left Side Right Side* (1972), first performed at Leo Castelli Gallery in 1973. Here Jonas filmed herself and a mirror image of herself—introducing an element of self-portraiture—The final image the viewer is left with is tripartite: the artist, her reflection, and a video. In this way she directly interacts with her viewer and successfully splits her identity. Jonas was inspired to incorporate mirrors by the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, who wrote frequently about labyrinths, the infinite universe, reflection and mirrors. This concern with personal identity is evident in Joan Jonas' work and could be safely said to be a precursor to how Cindy Sherman uses photography as self-portraiture to address the same issues.

Ontological questions of self-knowledge are raised in *Double Lunar Dogs*, a 25-minute video first performed in 1983. Based on Robert A. Heinlein's fiction novel *Universe*, it takes place on a spaceship wandering aimlessly through the universe, occupied by a group of five men and women from a past society who cannot remember where they come from or what their mission is. They attempt to piece together their collective memory by painting each other and uttering incomplete phrases but are rebuked by the "Authority" for their futile attempts to regain a fading memory of earth; its "a story of love" and "romantic" ancestors. The video also contains images of a hand slicing a human brain in half, symbolizing the people on the spaceship losing a significant part of their inherent human sensitivity or even just memory. Such surrealist elements reminded me of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 surrealist film, *Un Chien Andalou*. It comes as no surprise that Joan Jonas's work is full of art historical similarities. Jonas is a renaissance woman in a time when broad knowledge is more common than in-depth knowledge. Her literary symbolism, historical and mythological references and philosophical angles are intellectually stimulating and makes for a cohesive body of work. Artists of her rank are rare and I urge others to see first hand what the work of a pioneer looks like.

"Joan Jonas: Drawings/Perspectives/Film" runs through May 8th
26 Greene Street
Take the 6, N, Q, R, W, J, M, Z, A, C, E or 2 train to Canal Street
Gallery Website: www.location1.com