



Joan Jonas NY Times January 2010

ART REVIEW | JOAN JONAS Still a Renegade After All These Years



Angel Franco/The New York Times

A video image from Joan Jonas's "Mirage," the latest installation of a piece conceived in 1976.

By KAREN ROSENBERG
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It helps to think of time as cyclical, or at least non-Western and nonlinear, when encountering Joan Jonas's "Mirage" at the Museum of Modern Art. The latest installation of a piece conceived in 1976, it suggests that Ms. Jonas's art has a longer-than-usual lifespan because it's constantly being reborn.

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Angel Franco/The New York Times
The show, at the Museum of Modern Art, consists of six moving-image works.

"Mirage" began as a performance at Anthology Film Archives, inspired by Ms. Jonas's trip to India in 1975. In two subsequent presentations, in 1994 and 2005, it evolved and expanded to include films, videos and various sculptural components.

Undeterred by the piece's unwieldiness, [MoMA](#) acquired it in 2007. This is the first exhibition of "Mirage" since it entered the collection, and the seventh installment in MoMA's Performance series. The installation was supervised by Barbara London, an associate curator in the department of media and performance art, with input from Ms. Jonas. The museum will also screen some of Ms. Jonas's films and videos on April 29 and 30.

In its current form at MoMA, "Mirage" consists of six moving-image works arranged in a loose circle and accompanied by a series of props: metal cones, chalkboards, a mask and a wooden hoop, among other objects. Performance, drawing, dance and video combine and recombine in arcane but thrilling ways.

All of this makes an argument for performance art as a continuing experience, rather than a one-time event — something that can be integrated with other mediums and updated constantly. It also suggests that Ms. Jonas, who is in her early 70s, is thinking about her legacy.

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The moving-image works — projected 16-millimeter films and videos, as well as other videos displayed on monitors — mostly date from 1976. They include a side-by-side pairing, “Mirage 1” and “Mirage 2,” that anchors the installation. Some of the surrounding works, like “Good Night Good Morning,” are classics in their own right.

The space, MoMA’s media gallery, isn’t ideal. On the second floor, it funnels crowds between the atrium and the contemporary galleries. One benefit of this setup, however, is that tourists looking for the [Tim Burton](#) survey stumble on something at least as witty and electric.

In “Mirage 1” (1976), Ms. Jonas draws, erases and redraws Gnostic symbols on a chalkboard. The action in “Mirage 2” (1973/2000) is harder to follow: Ms. Jonas blows into a large metal cone, interacts with a rabbit and does strange contortions on a rock formation. She also incorporates a newsreel of President [Richard M. Nixon](#) on a state visit abroad, with commentary from [Dan Rather](#) and [Walter Cronkite](#) — a gesture that grounds her mysterious rites in Watergate-era notions of secrecy.

The other films and videos in “Mirage” compete for attention, some more clamorously than others. “Volcano Film,” a compilation of eruption footage projected on a giant screen, works as a kind of scenic backdrop — you can watch it out of the corner of your eye. But “Good Night Good Morning,” in which Ms. Jonas repeatedly addresses the camera, demands more sustained viewing.

Myth, ritual and border crossing are the common denominators. Structural ties like the “roll,” the lines that appear on a malfunctioning analog television screen, figure prominently. Also relevant is Ms. Jonas’s habit of turning the monitors on their sides, a neat trick that forces you to think of them as sculpture.

In “Car Tape” she points her camera out the window of a moving vehicle, but the roll keeps interrupting; the landscape can’t be apprehended for more than a few seconds at a time. That this hiccup proves deeply frustrating, on a physical and ontological level, suggests that the car governs our sense of duration more than we like to think.

The syncopated, jumpy quality of “Mirage” is to some extent typical of early video art, but it also feels remarkably current. It’s easy to forget that Ms. Jonas was one of the first artists to use video — sometimes live feeds, sometimes recorded — in her performances. Younger artists like Robin Rhode, who films himself interacting with his own drawings, are hanging on her coattails.

You can see Ms. Jonas in action, at Anthology Film Archives and elsewhere, in a series of photographs. She plays hopscotch, slips through hoops, dons masks and strikes yogic poses.

“Mirage” isn’t as overtly multicultural as some of Ms. Jonas’s later works. If you aren’t familiar with the tribal rituals of New Guinea, for instance, you might not know that the chalk drawings in “Mirage 1” relate to the Melukean Book of the Dead.

Yet part of the beauty of this installation, and of Ms. Jonas’s work in general, is that it’s cryptic without being inaccessible. You don’t need to have seen her 2003 retrospective at the [Queens Museum](#), or her recent project on Dante for Performa 09, to find a way into “Mirage.”

To some extent, that’s because you never really know what she’s up to. So many contemporary artists seem intent on demystifying every part of the art experience, in written statements and telegraphed homages. Ms. Jonas, to her credit, keeps things unpredictable and open-ended.

“Performance 7: Mirage by Joan Jonas” continues through May 31 at the Museum of Modern Art; (212) 708-9400, [moma.org](#).



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