

# JOAN JONAS

Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt



## Mapping time

As once before, there was a woman at the beginning. Almost a year ago she captured my imagination in a piece at The Kitchen. Dressed in bright gauze with a mop of light-colored hair, she alternated between gaze and pose, dress and undress, drawing and erasing. Weaving amongst sparsely scattered props, she executed a well-rehearsed performance with casual grace.<sup>i</sup>

*Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt* (2002) marks Joan Jonas' return to The Kitchen with her first feature-length New York performance in over a decade.<sup>ii</sup> Like many young artists in the 1970s, Jonas experimented with works-in-progress at the frequent screenings and the quickly assembled live events that characterized the downtown Manhattan art scene. One such two-minute performance was recently discovered in The Kitchen's Archive as part of the documentation of the *Soup and Tart* series (1974) organized by Jean Dupuy.<sup>iii</sup> Two later fully realized productions - *Funnel* (1974) and *Juniper Tree* (Collaborative Version, 1977) - also found an audience at The Kitchen's Wooster Street location. Nearly three decades later, Jonas' and The Kitchen's parallel histories in live art and video intertwine again with this long awaited presentation.

The mapping of time forms a central paradigm in Jonas' extensive body of work that encompasses performance, video/film, installation, and drawing.<sup>iv</sup> Based on Helen in Egypt (1931), the epic poem by Imagist writer H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), *Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt* dramatizes the little known, but historically traceable possibility that Helen (daughter of Zeus, wife of Menelaus, lover of Paris) spent the Trojan War in Egypt, not Troy, and that "the Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion."<sup>v</sup> Overlapping tales co-exist in Jonas' enactment and questions begin to mount around this historical whisper. Several female protagonists embody these interpretations including the voices of Helen

herself, H.D. as Freud's "analysand" and other masked personae of Jonas' own making. Additional male and female performers fulfill manifold roles as story characters, camera/sound operators, and set builders. Sound and image are generated through live and pre-recorded sources. These repeated oscillations between the inside and outside of a work of art allow the representation of time to have fixed parameters yet to also be imbued with fluctuating meanings.

As in many other projects, *Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt* expands Jonas' artistic investigations into cultural and feminist theories of the "other." Her use of non-Western sources, feminine characters and animals provides shifting centers for the articulation of narrative. While distantly referencing Egypt through her grandmother's photographs, the dominant video derives from the modern-day Luxor Hotel and its Las Vegas environs. In moving this performance to a contemporary setting fueled by the commercialization of exoticism, Jonas releases the work from its original history and anchors her alternate telling within the more complex realm of imagined truths. The prescience of *Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt* rests in the objectification of the many lenses - personal, mediated, and patriarchal - through which we might know current times, be they preoccupied with our own private masquerades or the global trade wars of today.

Christina Yang  
Curator of Visual Art and New Media  
The Kitchen

The Kitchen presents

Joan Jonas

*Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt*

February 19-21 & 24-28, 2004

Performed by:

Ragani Haas

Joan Jonas

Sung Hwan Kim

Henk Visch

Sound / Video:

Astrid S. Klein, video jockey "vj"

Stephen Vitello, live sound mix and original compositions

Also on view through March 28, 2004

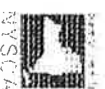
Joan Jonas: *Five Works*

Queens Museum of Art

Hours (W-F 10-5, S-S 12-5)

The Kitchen's presentation of *Lines In the Sand: Helen in Egypt* is made possible with the generous support of The Orenreich Family Foundation and the LEF Foundation.

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#### ARTIST STATEMENT

The true reason for the Trojan War will never be known. Tension between cities like Athens and Troy always existed, over trade and access to the Black Sea, for example, and this seems a more likely cause. I was interested in exploring the interlocking strands of myth, as a representation of the unconscious, and reality.

What interested me is that for centuries the accepted myth—a war fought over a woman—was preferred to a lesser-known, but more subtle and abstract version of absence. In this alternate version it is H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) herself who constantly questions the reality of her own myth. Helen does not exist as character but as a reference. For this work, *Lines in the Sand*, I constructed a score, consisting of fragments from H.D.'s epic poem *Helen in Egypt*, intercut with excerpts from her *Tribute to Freud*, which represents her analysis with Sigmund Freud in Vienna in the 1930s.

I first made an installation and then a performance, both of which drew these threads together into an interlocking series of tableaux, like a labyrinth where one tableau leads to another, shifting the scene between different times and imaginary (or constructed) locations. Each is a version of the original source, interpreted by H.D. and translated into my particular visual/aural representation, reading the cultural and mythological through personal narrative (the domestic) and my body as a performer.

The primary location of *Lines in the Sand* is Egypt, and like the double or pluralism of Helen is represented by a real and a fake. The fake is in Las Vegas, and the real is in the photographs of Egypt taken by my grandmother in 1910.

I have presented variations on the original production, working with different casts in Boston and Mexico City which, in the process of developing a work, interests me. In New York, I am happy to have been able to assemble the original cast from the Documenta XI premiere. At the time, Paul Miller aka. DJ Spooky and I designed and collaborated on the sound track. For The Kitchen's version, Paul's basic structure remains and, I am pleased Stephen Vitello will collaborate with his own compositions. Paul's sound accompanies the "rope dance" with additional source music noted under production credits.

--Joan Jonas

#### PRODUCTION CREDITS

*Lines in the Sand*: Helen in Egypt was produced and first performed at Documenta XI (Kassel, Germany) in 2002 with original sound mix by Paul Miller aka. DJ Spooky. New York sound sources include music by The Bata Repertoire for Equun in Pobe, The Carter Family, Winstn "Scotty" Fitzgerald, Karsh, Paul Miller, Harry Parich, Erik Satie, and Stephen Vitello.

Photographs of Egypt: Florence Dimond D'Olier

Video camera and editing: Joan Jonas

Additional editing/ camera work for installation version: Pia Lindeman, Erik Moskowitz

Assistant to the artist in Las Vegas: Kirsten Weiner

#### GRAPHIES

**Ragani Haas** was born in Stuttgart, Germany, in 1969. She has studied at the Eberhard-Karls University in Tübingen (1990-95) and at the Staatliche Akademie de Bildenden Künste in Stuttgart from 1995-2001, where she first met Joan Jonas. Since 1999, she has performed frequently with Ms. Jonas, including performances throughout Germany, the Netherlands and Poland. Since 2001 she has worked as an independent artist and leads many art teacher and children's workshops at the Landesakademie Schloss Rotentels, Karlsruhe, Germany. Since 2001, she has also been a member of forschungs-gruppe\_f in Switzerland/Germany.

**Sung Hwan Kim** was born in 1975 in Seoul, Korea. He received a B.A. both in Math and Art from Williams College, Williamstown, MA (2000) and received his Master of Science in Visual Studies from MIT, Cambridge, MA, in 2003. He has screened his films at the Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA; the Asia Society, New York; the Corcoran Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Podwil, Berlin, Germany. He had his first solo exhibition at the Total Museum in Seoul, Korea, in 2003, and will participate in the Busan Biennale (2004). He is currently an artist in residence at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

**Joan Jonas** (b. 1936) is one of the most important video/performance artists to emerge from the late 1960s and 1970s. Working in New York as a sculptor, by 1968 she moved into what was then considered new territory--mixing performance with props and mediated images. After studying art history and sculpture, Jonas received her M.F.A. from Columbia University, New York, in 1965. Her first performance retrospective was at the University Art Museum, Berkeley (1980) (Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, 1981). She has exhibited at The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, MA; The Kitchen, New York, and Pat Hearn Gallery, New York. Jonas has had major retrospectives at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1994), and Stadtgalerie Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany (2000), and was included in several Documenta exhibitions, most notably Documenta XI (2002), for which she was commissioned to create *Lines in the Sand*. She has taught at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, since 2000. Jonas's videos are represented by Electronic Arts Intermix and are also in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Important installations include *Revolled by the Thought of Known Places...* and *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* are in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. *Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt*--her first New York performance in over a decade--is presented in conjunction with the Queens Museum of Art's exhibition, *Joan Jonas: Five Works* (currently up through Sunday March 28, 2004). It is the first large survey of her work in New York.

In her videos and installations, Astrid S. Klein plays with the movie goers' and TV watchers' well-trained and complex memory of genre conventions. She deals with the rich and diverse fund of role constructions and narrative patterns offered in motion pictures and TV-series, as well as computer games. In her work fragments of dialogue and sounds from motion pictures are mixed with her own recordings forming a new soundtrack. Klein reverses the ordinary use of synchronization techniques in feature films. Rather than adjusting sound to fit the film material, in her work images are adjusted to fit the pre-recorded soundtrack, thus image is synchronized live with sound. In the short and reduced video episodes Klein herself plays one or several roles. With a voice not her own she addresses the viewer, turning her or him into a co-player, into the other. In a performative way she dissolves and transforms standardized constructions of identity in using herself as material, as a surface.

**Henk Visch** was born in 1950, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. After attending the Academy for Fine Art and Design from 1986-1972, Visch joined a street theater group and worked in a piano restoration workshop. During a visit to New York in 1979 he decided to become a visual artist. Back home he rented a studio to work. His first show is in 1981, which is accompanied by the statement "about starting a relationship with things". From 1982-83 he had a studio at PS I. From 1984-87 he taught at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam. In 1986 Visch wrote *Silence please*. He represented the Netherlands at the Venice Biennale, 1988 and participated in the *Dokumenta IX*, Kassel, (BRD) 1992. Visch was professor at the Staatliche Akademie der bildenden Künste, Stuttgart (BRD), 1995-2001, where he met Joan Jonas as a colleague professor. Coming exhibition: May 26, Gallery, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo: *The Immortals*. Info: www.henkvisch.nl

**Stephen Vitello** is an electronic musician and media artist. Recent exhibitions include the 2002 Whitney Biennial, *Ce qui arrive* at the Cartier Foundation, Paris, curated by Paul Virilio, *Yanomami: Spirit of the Forest*, also at The Cartier Foundation and solo exhibitions at The Project, NY, and The Project, Los Angeles. His sound work, *World Trade Center Recordings: Winds After Hurricane Floyd*, has been presented at museums and on public radio internationally. CD releases include *Scanner/Vitello* (Audiosphere/Sub Rosa), *Bright and Dusty Things* (New Albion Records) and a forthcoming collaboration with David Tronzo (New Albion Records). Since 1988 he has collaborated with musicians, visual artists and choreographers, including Pauline Oliveros, Tetsu Inoue, John Jasperse/White Oak Dance Project, Rebecca Moore, Tony Oursler, Nam June Paik, Scanner, Yasunao Tone and Frances-Marie Uitti.

*Don't Miss...*  
**TV DINNER NO. 18: Joan Jonas**  
 February 26 (Thu) 6-8pm Reservations required (includes dinner)  
 Tickets: \$30/\$25 for Students, Seniors, Kitchen Members

Moderated by David Ross, curator of Jonas' first 1980 retrospective, *TV Dinner No. 18* celebrates the artist's extensive career encompassing performance, video, installation, and drawing. The informal discussion will also include art historian/critic, Rosalee Goldberg and artist, Sue DeBeer. Large-scale screenings will be featured and a vegetarian dinner will be served.

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**Selected Monographs**

Douglas Crimp, editor, *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*, University Art Museum, Berkeley and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1983

Johan-Karl Schmidt, *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation 1968-2000*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001

Valerie Smith et al, *Joan Jonas: Five Works*, Queens Museum of Art, Queens, New York, 2004

**End Notes**

- i I first saw Joan Jonas perform at The Kitchen (NY) in Robert Ashley's *Celestial Excursions* (April 2003).
- ii Variations on a Scene was performed at Wave Hill (NY) in 1990. *Lines in the Sand* was first produced at Documenta XI (Kassel, Germany) in 2002.
- iii Thanks to EAI and Stephen Vitello, The Kitchen's Archivist, for making this discovery.
- iv John Miller's "Lines in the Sand" essay in the recent *Joan Jonas: Five Works* exhibition catalogue provides a provocative critical reading of the performance and installation in which he states that "the ultimate territory to be mapped is no less the terra incognita of femininity," p.123
- v H.D.: *Helen in Egypt*, New Directions Press, New York, 1961, p.1

Thank you for your time!

Editor: Davida Singer



Joan Jonas

Lines in the Sand: Helen in Egypt

Presented by The Kitchen

February 19-21, 24-28, 2004



the kitchen

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