

A Pioneer in Layering Meaning

Joan Jonas' first return to NYC in a decade revisits Helen of Troy

BY BRIAN MCCORMICK

Joan Jonas is a pioneer of video and performance art. Her creations in the late 1960s and early 1970s were essential to the development of the genre, and remain influential to artists of many disciplines and generations. From her seminal performance-based exercises of the 1970s to her later televisual narratives, Jonas's work employs drawings, costumes, masks, mirrors, and interactions with the recorded image to explore the self and the body through layers of meaning.

In her installation/performance commissioned for Documenta XI, "Lines in the Sand," Jonas investigates these themes using the epic poem by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), "Helen in Egypt," which re-imagines the myth of Helen of Troy. The performance, which features multi-channel video projections, ritualized movement, and drawing, will be presented at The Kitchen where Jonas showed many of her early works, including "Funnel" (1972) and "Vertical Roll" (1972). "Lines in the Sand" will

be her first performance in New York in more than 30 years.

Much has changed in the last decade, with the explosion of digital media and the increased accessibility and affordability of technology, and it is rare now to see a performance that does not have some mediated effect or interlude. But Jonas, who now teaches performance at MIT, doesn't believe live performance or the interest in it is threatened by the phenomenon.

"People really enjoy seeing something live," she said. "To see real bodies move gives them something to identify with kinetically. When I started teaching performance, I wasn't sure people would be so interested. People love to get up and work in a space instead of being hunched over a computer. There is a basic human pleasure in a performance or a ritual."



"Lines in the Sand," performed in 2002 at Documenta XI in Kassel, Germany.

Jonas, who started out as a sculptor, first performed for some of the most influential artists of her generation, including Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, and Laurie Anderson. In her early works, such as "Wind" (1968), she filmed windblown performers passing stiffly through the frame. "Songdelay" (1973) drew on her travels in Japan where she saw Noh, a classical Japanese performance form that combines elements of dance, drama, music, and poetry into one highly stylized stage art.

"I've looked at rituals as part of everyday life. How did ritual begin in various cultures, how it is spread by other cultures," said Jonas. "In the 60s and 70s there was a much smaller [performance] community. It's more of a ritual to perform for friends in a non-institutional space, but even in such a space, it's still

performance and not theater."

"Theater is more character and text-based," she continued. "A lot of theater has gotten closer to performance, or has been influenced by it. In performance, in a way many of the activities are the same as in theater, but drawing, movement, and objects are used to represent the text."

The performances at The Kitchen are being presented in conjunction with The Queens Museum of Art exhibition "Joan Jonas: Five Works," through March 14. The exhibition includes a selection of the artist's most significant installations, a video room, and a survey of her drawings, photographs, and sketchbooks. The show brings together key works from Jonas' career including "Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy" (1972), "The Juniper Tree" (1976), "Volcano Saga" (1985), "Revolted by the Thought of Known Places" (1992), and "Woman in the Well" (1996/2000).