

JOAN JONAS IN SEATTLE

Seattle Katherine Grosshans

Joan Jonas, the second artist in the *Video Work* series at *and/or*, gave a performance of her *Native Dance* on October 17. The concept of the *and/or* series is to give the Northwest area both exposure to the work of nationally known artists and an opportunity to interact with the artists themselves. The only requirement made of the artists is that in some manner a video monitor is to be included in their work.

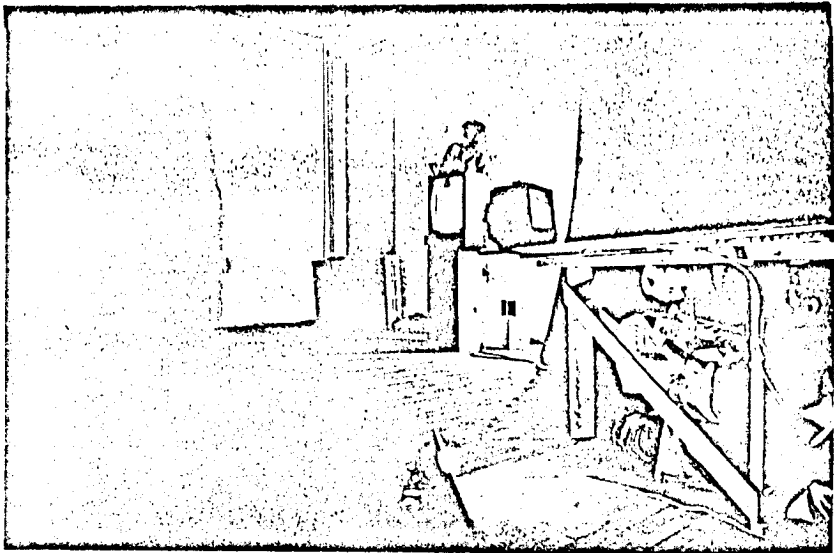
William Wegman, inaugurating the series, took the monitor as his format and presented his images directly through the video medium. The other artists still to appear — Peter Campus, Shigeko Kubota and Terry Fox — all include video to various degrees within their work but de-emphasize its centrality to their creative processes. Video has become one of many tools. And it was one of many elements within the piece performed by Jonas for her Seattle audience.

Native Dance was a non-narrative action collage of light, movement, shapes, objects and sound. Jonas and two Seattle artists, Karen Helmersson and Chris Jonic, created a continuity of images that they built from a series of separate but inter-reflective actions: fractured storytelling, door slamming, spontaneous gestures with objects and toys, bell ringing, belt slapping and bodies wearing mid-eastern *shadris* as they crisscrossed the floor. These actions were punctuated by bursts of loud sound and music from two opposite set speakers, by Marlene Dietrich music and by short film segments reminiscent of Jonas' videotapes of the vertical roll across the screen.

What made the performance comprehensible were the recurrence of basic elements and the interconnections and cross-references between separate actions. One element was the use of light and its correspondent negative — shadow. The television monitor was periodically a source of a



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bluish glow. Candlelight and uncovered electric bulbs were a centralized light source which, as it faded from the center of the tube, cast on the opposite wall long, milky-edged shadows of all objects and movement. The film sequences, always set off separately as if designating a point of transition, were another source of projected light. Jonas developed the exploration of shape, both in movement and as static form, as an additional basic element. Several ten to twelve feet tall cones of heavy backdrop paper were constructed for the performance. These were at first stacked behind a floor to ceiling screen, constructed of the same material as the cones, which split the performance area into a visible and a hidden space out of which figures and objects, including the cones, began to appear and disappear. Periodically during the performance, the audience was allowed a limited and directed view of this unseen space through a video camera placed to the side of the screen. The cones as shapes, protruding from behind the screen or carried into the open space, split the air with their elongated, phallic forms and cast corresponding shadows on the wall. The three performers were also evident as shapes when they appeared covered in the *shadris*, which allowed for no individual characteristics. Their forms, vacillating between a definition of shape and shadow, were indistinguishable as bodies. They became objects in movement.

There was sound as an element in addition to light and form. Again the cones were fundamental as carriers and directors of sound, mostly obscure murmurs and cooing from the *shadri* figures. At one point the cones were knocked over behind the screen, the action not directly described by sight, but by the loud, hollow sound as cones hit the floor and by their falling shadows on the wall. Voices, yells, laughter and fragments of speech were interjected periodically. Doors slammed, a record played, and a television set was turned on to be heard but not seen. All these created an overlapping of sound much as the light sources, shadows and objects were overlapped.

The recurrent elements in their various expressions reinforced a number of recurrent considerations which, jigsaw puzzlelike, were hinted at and perceived in an equally intuitive, patchy manner. The most readily understood of these was the contrast established between the action directly seen and that which was visually inaccessible. Much was acted out behind the screen — movements with the cones, a charcoal drawing, a showing of objects and pictures — which could not be seen directly but were transmitted through the interpretive channels of either the video camera or the wall shadow or sound. Visual sensibility often became secondary to auditory, or even to intuition. The performers and the cones continually passed back and forth through the visual barrier established by the screen, causing a like rotation in sensory use in the audience.

Jonas, earlier expressing a narcissistic fascination with the ability of mirrors and the video monitor to reveal aspects otherwise invisible to the self, now has the monitor watching its own back. The video camera was focused on the space directly behind the monitor and where some of the objects and actions were also placed. Jonas began the performance by alternately sitting behind the monitor, speaking soundlessly to the video camera so that she was only visible as a silent

image on the monitor, then standing up as she spoke audibly, but not long enough for her words to carry meaning. As she stood up her face was seen suddenly in color and direct while her torso was visible only in black and white on the monitor. This jack-in-the-box intermixing of images focusing on the same object — Jonas herself — both emphasized the two-dimensionality of the video image, and confirmed the confusion of directly perceived reality. As a final emphasis to this seen/unseen exploration, the technical assistant walked into the center of the visible space near the end of the performance, contrastingly modern and familiar amidst the *shadri*-robed figures. By acknowledging the importance of the 'behind the scene' element, Jonas emphasizes that both the seen and unseen are important to all actions.

Pushing beyond visual exploration of the perceived and the unperceived, Jonas hinted at other obscurities. Through the use of toys and children's games, she called up various hazy, partially subconscious childhood images, normally unreconcilable with the present moment of conscious, admissible action. As a reversal of the *shadri*-covered body forms, the three performers periodically came front screen with the *shadris* thrown back over their heads, accompanied by Marlene Dietrich music and bright lights which allowed for eye contact with the audience. They enacted an obviously seductive stance, an invitation to involvement as compared to the distance and self-centeredness of the rest of the performance. But these bodies, even with faces exposed, were, because of their proposed and direct sexuality, as objectified as the *shadri*-covered forms. Their directness allowed for little active response, only a reference back to indefinable, submerged images, held down in the everyday. Jonas evoked more of these unfathomable images when rocking and moaning, nude and center stage on the top of a platform under the soft light of a small monitor, she curled herself into the fetal position inside a wood hoop. Her nudity, her position, her movement came together to create a powerful impression of vulnerability which contradicted the sexuality of her nakedness.

The sense one brings away from this performance is of a spiritual, almost ritualistic collage of meaning and actions. By the selective use of her chosen elements, Jonas creates an atmosphere, an experience through the senses, which summons conditions we contain within us as a collective people and as individuals. She points to the 'behind the screen' within ourselves which we cannot 'see' as she pushes us to coordinate all our senses and as she emphasizes the function of awareness, ever utilized and expanding. Understood in this way, Jonas appears to be moving away from the use of art as a tool, a diversion or a mental exercise, and is perhaps bringing it full circle again to one of its original functions and meanings — as a sensory transmission of perceptual, perhaps spiritual experience from one mind to another, a ritualistic expression of both the evident realities of experience and the collage of indistinguishable/uncontrollable aspects of the performance in which all participate. □

Katherine Grosshans is editor of the catalogue for this series of exhibits and performances at *and/or*.