

Constance de Jong

JOAN JONAS: Organic Honey's Vertical Roll



Joan Jonas
in Vertical Roll
Photo by Peter Moore,
1/5/73.

January 1973. Joan Jonas performs *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*.¹ The new year, the new appearance of Organic Honey . . . a likely coincidence that suits my purposes. A place to start from and work back to. The piece has a past and memory must serve you well.

There is a complicated history of comings and goings, appearances dis- and re-appearances. Joan works with an accumulating body of materials: costumes and props, sounds, images, activities and ideas . . . formed and re-formed into video tapes, films, in and outdoor performances. Materials are like components, from which to build. Indoor perfor-

mances are special cases; the occasion where materials come together most elaborately and where medias co-exist. These performances are contexts; compositions, in which elements become arranged. A double focus centers the composition. The solo performer and the live video medium are touchstones. The repertory of materials gathers around them; a series of performances was transpired from the interplay between them.

The first one, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*,² was performed February, 1972. The piece continues, changing and evolving through performance, growing into its present form, *Organic*

Honey's Vertical Roll. Over time there has been a build-up and a distillation. All along, the performer-TV interplay has remained central.

This relationship originated while making a video tape. The idea was to evoke a pictorial 'story', a self-exploration in visual images. The concern was to work alone, in private and in control of all the variables of the tape making process. After completing the tape and depleting the studio experience, she turned things inside out. Making a private, solo tape turned into making a public expose of the situation . . . the performances followed.

While working on the tape, the TV was a



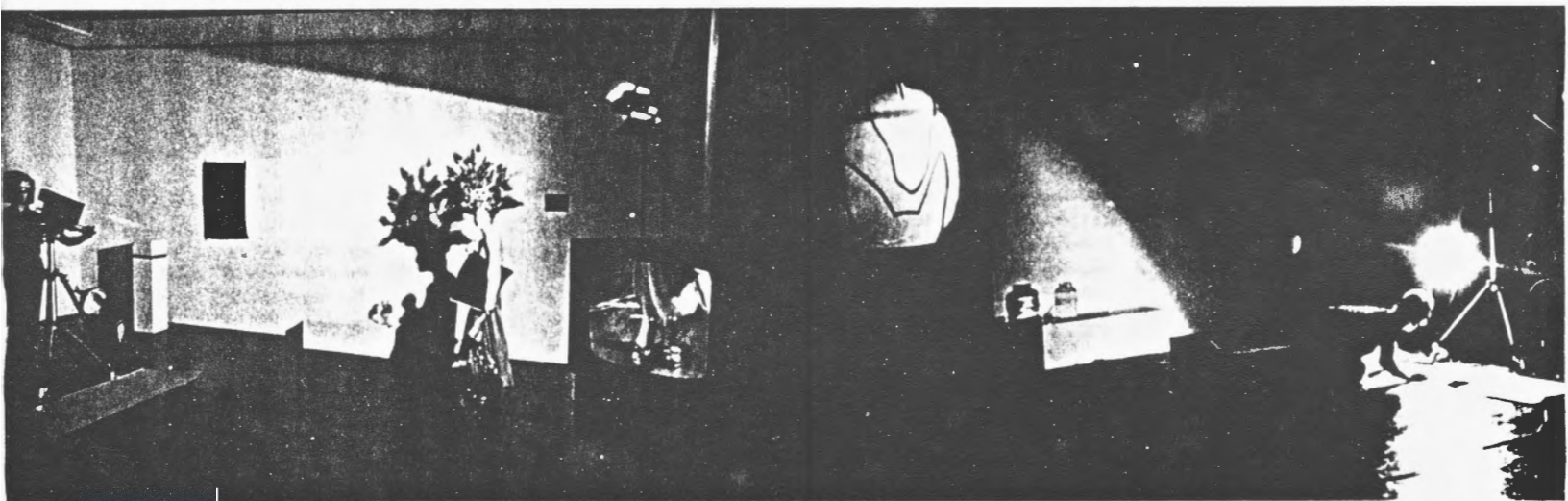
The suggestion carries into performance, where multiple identities are extensive. Joan/as performer/as character runs a gamut: from slowly, silently inspecting her naked self with a mirror to howling into a tape delayed mike, filling the space with echoes of herself. . . a black dressed and booted chanteuse. The exaggeration from one to the other is extreme and describes the first and last moments of the

piece. In between, disguises are put on and taken off. Images are made and identities change. And, mirrors make literal the metaphor of multiples: her image repeats into the reflected distance. Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni, Peter Moore.

mediumistic device; a magic, instructive tool. Used as an image maker to conjure herself, Joan played with it and constituted with it. The TV was both a toy and an other, both means and ends. Play took the form of fixing on her monitored image, exploring its visual relationship to objects and materials . . . her accumulated special effects. As a means of constituting, the monitor supplied an opposite: oneself given back. An intrinsic quality of the media — feedback — was taken metaphorically. It suggested

formance is presentational in style . . . mostly for the sake of the camera, rather than the audience. She plays to it, not us and is toward the audience through the equipment, the looking glass, the camera's eye, the electric eye of the TV. The live electrical transmission is paramount, displacing a live projection coming from the performer. This presentational mode describes the performance in style and intention. It is primarily pictorial, a presentation of imagery.

By ordering 'what' one was seeing, Joan ordered 'how' one was seeing. The monitor's small scale and its continuous changes keeps one's attention in accordance. Attention was strictly focused. . . on a place and to its timing. Accordingly, the perceptual exchange between 'what' and 'how' was kept narrow and specific. The exchange became more exaggerated when the actual visual scale was increased and when the image was static. This occurred towards the end, when a film interrupted the live perfor-



The TV presents another order than the live one. It increases and it details, changes in number and in scale. Live activity is doubled through its transmission on the monitor: it's in more than one place in the space. And, the activity is specified. Selected parts become details and/or bigger than life. More is seen, from where one is. For the audience, attention is at once focused and divided.
Photo: James Patrick, Gianfranco Gorgoni.

one who could become a multiple identity.

An electrical route — from camera to performer to monitor — comes into the performance in other ways than the metaphorical coincidence of media/content. On the set, a camera continuously selects and transmits part of the live activity. The camera provides an experience unusual to live theatre. On the monitor, activity is brought close-up and can be seen in detail. Detail is juxtaposed to the entire performing area and within that to the performer's presence. Parts are composed: in the three-dimensional space and on the space of the monitor.

The performing space — two separate rooms. A handheld camera pursues activity as it moves around in each room and follows it from one space into the other. A stationary camera covered a localized area when activity occurred there. Both were operated by Babette Mangolte.

The camera selects and everything comes out image: "Object as image, face as image, body as image, activity as image."² Accordingly, Joan's per-

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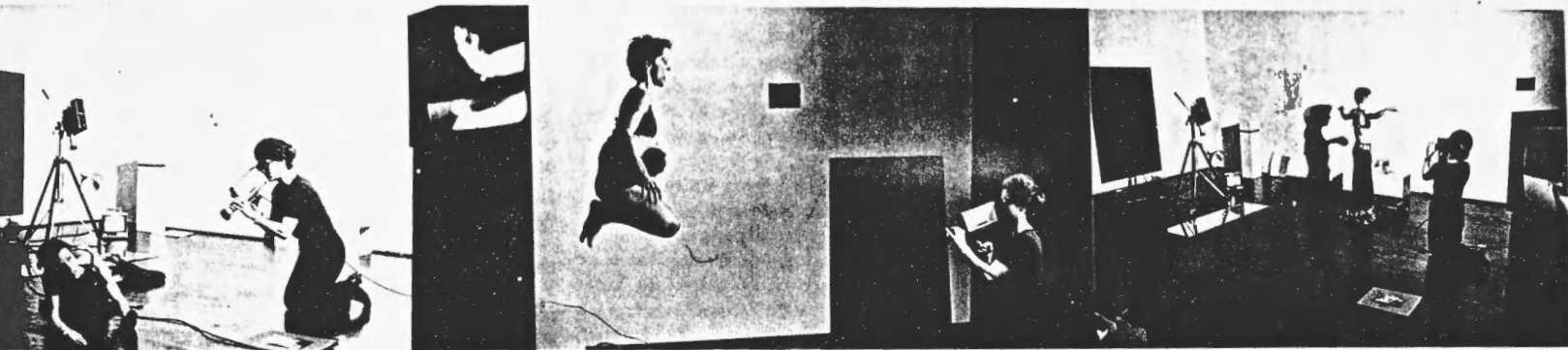
Video is the medium of presentation and in it Joan found a device to coalesce and structure a relationship between performer, activity, and image. Again, the discovery of usable phenomena intrinsic to the media came from working alone with the monitor. By adjusting the vertical hold control, the rolling bar on the TV screen was seen as a way to order and compose images. And, it was also seen as a means to inspire movement and activity fitting to that moving screen event. The vertical roll provides a framework for composing the monitored images; itself a compositional element in them. And, sequences of movement are specifically coordinated with the rolling bar.

The vertical roll came in and out of use. She exploits its purely visual properties and furthered its use into the temporal. By changing its speed and syncopating sound and movement to its rhythm, it punctuates the performance with various tempos. In spite of the variety of uses, the roll's function was consistent: as a visual dialogue between performer and monitor, and as a picture making device.

formance. Projected onto the wall, the vertical roll took up the total visual field. Consequently, its perceptual effect grew in proportion. It was pervasive and thorough, rather than focused and specific.

The film was projected long enough to allow for numerous responses to the single image. Whereas, most of the monitored images were demonstrational — ways to make a composition, ways to make one see something in particular — the film's use of the vertical roll was more general. It gripped the visual situation, but it did not determine it in one way. Consuming the whole visual field, the rolling image in effect could be hypnotic, and so invisible or it could remain on the surface of things, opposing the picture. Attention could go either way. . . settling into it or looking through it; passive or active. Not so much a choice, but a scope of responses.

In the film, Joan effected perception in general, as well as one's awareness of content. Here, the bar worked as a kind of interference, a surface event that toned the potential eroticism of the filmed



Her activity works against and with the rolling bar: hands separated in fact, clap together on the screen/Joan jumps with the roll, in and out of the picture/turning slowly, the body becomes the subject-object of the camera's slow moving attention as it patterns a continuous series of pictures. Photo: Gorgoni, Moore, James Patrick.

scene. It made oblique what was in fact very straightforward: two women were kissing each other for ten minutes. The rolling image disturbed their intimacy and their actions. That is, it disturbed our view of their intimacy. By inference, a notion of voyeurism is precipitated.

An overtone of voyeurism threads through the performance, in counterpart to the performer's distanced presence and her self-addressed behavior. Most of the time there was a removal, a coming out from behind: from another room, herself in appearance only, on the front room's monitor: her presence from behind a mask, or mirror, or camera. At the same time, the presence was overwhelmingly up front. One became accustomed to contradictions side-by-side. There was a relation between extremes. Exposure and privacy, indulgence and presentation, concealing and revealing account for the manner of performing and the meaning of the actions.

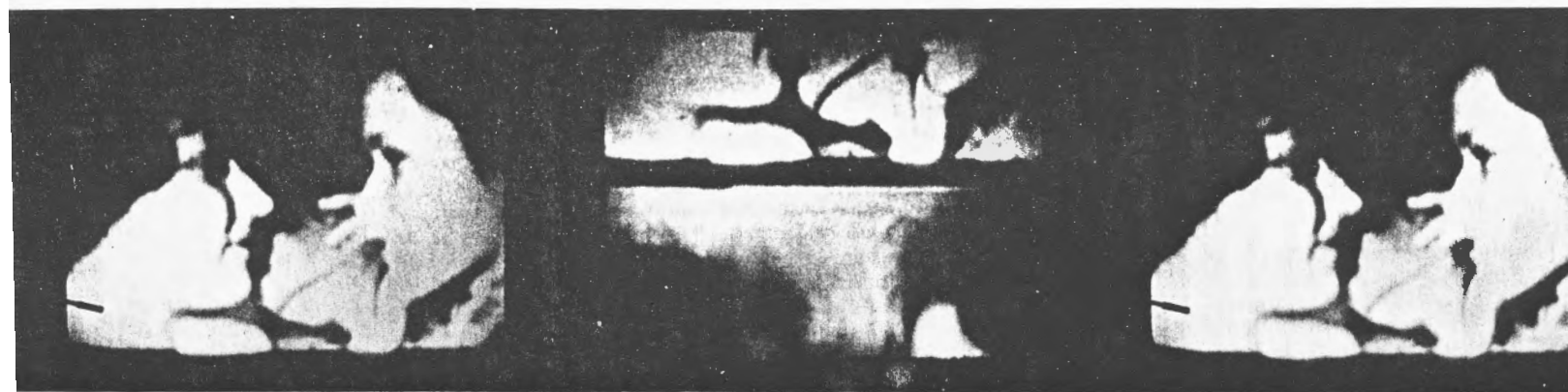
The 'pictorial' narration goes without words and most of Joan's performance was mute. But, all is not silence. In the absence of speech, her voice communicated non-verbal messages. She howls, striking a connection and/or identification with a dog image that keeps recurring in picture form. The audio-to-visual association characterized her way of faceting activity into cross-references and repetition protracts the references. The howling episode occurs twice. On a pre-recorded tape, two images of her face — a full screen close up and one smaller in profile — howl to each other while Joan, standing next to the monitor, howls along. It prophesied the final solo, where through an audio tape delay, the effect is reproduced; different yet recognizable. Other sounds denoted what goes unspoken, adding an extra but inarticulate dimension. She uses noise and music in its conventional capacity to engender or inflect emotional content: sprightly music played in harmony to a vamping pass across the room; an

ominous bull-roarer accompanied a solemn stare at her mirrored and multi-reflected features. In contrast, some passages are in total silence. Still others, by nature issued their own sound — a spoon banging against a mirror.

In the end, a network of relations unifies the performance. Given the acuity of the vertical roll to structure and order parts, it did not precisely define an over-all construction. It was supportive, but never a complete articulation. Like other elements that re-appeared, it was an underpinning. Taken as a whole, the performance was an aggregate of associations. Sounds, images, costumes, activities, etc., came and went, more than once. The string of vignettes passing by becomes interconnected by memory serving you well.

1 Performed January 5, 6, 7, 1973. Leo Castelli Gallery
Camera Babette Mangolte. Technical Carlota Fay Corday and Kurt Munkacsí.

2 Quotation by Jonas from conversation



The file is a transfer from tape: a fixed frame continuously rolls/ten minutes of intimacy/two women talking and kissing/silent. The film's larger scale corresponds with its slower time: longer in length than most other images in the piece; slower in experience because of the fixed frame and the minimum of action.