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 new 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 Helmerson and Chris Jonic, created a continuity of images that they brought from a series of separate but inter-reflective actions: fractured storytelling, door slamming, spontaneous gestures with objects and toys, bell ringing, bell stopping and bodies wearing mid-eastern shadris as they crisscrossed the floor. These actions were punctuated by bursts of loud sound and music from two adjacent set speakers. By Marlene Dietrich music and by short film segments reminiscent of Jonas' videotapes of the vertical self 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 bluish glow. Candlelight and uncovered electric bulbs were central sources of light 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 shot separately and which illuminated points of transition, were another source of projected light. Jonas developed the exploration of shape, both in the one and as a shape, as an additional basic element. Several ten to twelve foot tall cones of heavy cardboard paper were constructed for the performance. These were left 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 and 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 shadows 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. Jonas and Jonic, 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, lipsaw 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 set up and those events which was visually inaccessible. Much was acted out behind the screen — movements with the cones, a charcoal transmission of Jonas' face, a small monitor watching its own reflection with the ability of mirrors and the video image 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 was an element in the interweaving of images focusing on the same object — Jonas herself — both emphasized the two-dimensionality of the video image, and simulated the confusion of directly perceived reality. As a final emphasis to this seen/unseen exploration, the technical assistants will not enter into the center of the visible space near the end of the performance, contrastingly modern and familiar amidst the shadri-covered forms. Jonas acknowledged the importance of the 'behind the scene' element. Jonas emphasizes that both the seen and unseen are important to the audience.

Pushing beyond visual exploration of the perceived and the unperceived, Jonas hinted at the auditory. In 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 from 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, unfamiliar images, held down in everyday. Jonas evoked more of these unfathomable images when rocking and magnifying 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 image, Jonas creates an atmosphere, an experience through the senses, which summons conditions we contain within us as a tool, a diversion or a mental exercise, and Is important to all individuals. She points to the 'behind the screen' within ourselves which we cannot 'see' as she pushes us to experience all our senses, all our beliefs and values. Jonas emphasizes the function of awareness, expanded 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 the evident realities of experience and the collapse 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.