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# Dances With Mirrors

Ann Haskins · Saturday, July 13th, 2024

Until now, Los Angeles has never seen *Mirror Piece*, avant garde artist Joan Jonas' groundbreaking, site specific work. At 4 p.m., this Saturday and Sunday at the Getty Center, a pavane of mirrors manipulated by dancers will greet visitors in the tram arrival plaza in what is now *Mirror Piece 1 & 2 (1969/2024)*.

The work has had multiple versions since its creation in 1969, but not here. This current iteration was unveiled last month at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), in conjunction with a major MOMA exhibit of Jonas' work. LA isn't getting that exhibition, but thanks to long-time connections between the Getty and Jonas, she approved these performances at the Getty, the only one outside of New York.

Jonas was part of New York's avant garde that included Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, artists who used dance and choreographed ritual in their performative art. Originally performed in 1969, *Mirror Piece* challenged traditional theatrical experiences, raised issues of spectatorship when dancers used mirrors that reflected the audience as well as the performers, and foreshadowed many aspects of the current social media age.

In addition to granting permission, Jonas oversaw the preparations for this weekend's Getty performances. Her long-time collaborator, Swiss-based choreographer Nefeli Skarmea staged the Getty performance as well as the MOMA events.

**Sarah Cooper** oversees the Getty performance series and shepherded *Mirror Piece* at the Getty. Cooper spoke with Cultural Daily's Ann Haskins about the coup in bringing the work to LA and the enduring significance of this particular Jonas work. The interview has been edited for length.

Joan Jonas' Mirror Piece 1 & 2. Photo courtesy of the artists

**CD:** How did the Getty come to present *Mirror Piece 1 & 2*?

**Cooper:** For eight years, I worked at the MOMA in New York and one of my colleagues there, Emily Bates, has worked closely with Joan Jonas for nearly a decade. I had long thought *Mirror Piece* would be extraordinary here at the Getty Center. The relationships and history with MOMA, Emily Bates, and Joan's time at the Getty helped to realize this long held dream of mine.

Over my ten years with the Getty organizing the performance series, what was *First Fridays* evolved and is now *Ever Present*, focused on performing artists, be they musicians or dancers or filmmakers, all sorts of different alternative forms of experimental art, and not just on Fridays. I want to bring performances that are a map into the architecture, respond to the architecture, respond to the visitors. And *Mirror Piece* just seemed ideal because it transforms any location and becomes inherently site specific. Also, it plays with the dynamic of the public moving through this space.

I found out that as part of its Jonas exhibit, MOMA was bringing Nefeli Skarmea, the Geneva-based movement director that Joan has worked with over a decade, to produce *Mirror Piece* in New York. Since Nefeli was going to be in the US, we jumped on the opportunity.

**CD:** What is Joan Jonas' history with the Getty?

**Cooper:** A number of years ago, Joan was an artist in residence at the Getty Research Institute and is fond of the Getty. She had a very good experience working in the archives here. Joan was excited that we were able to do this and also that we brought LA's dance community into the cast. Joan was really helpful to us in our planning stages. After Nefeli went to New York to teach the dancers and coordinate the performance there, she came to LA in early June to teach the dance to a new cast of dancers that we recruited locally.

Joan Jonas. Photo courtesy of the artist

**CD:** Might Jonas be coming to Getty for the performances?

**Cooper:** She's been telling everybody that she wants to, but her assistant does tell me that her health may keep her away. Also, it's her birthday on our Sunday performance and I think that she may be trying to get up to her home in Nova Scotia. I haven't heard the final answer.

**CD:** Why is this work from 1969 still important?

**Cooper:** On one hand, many women artists of Joan's generation had been overlooked for so long, and there's been a real effort on the part of institutions to revisit some of these iconic performances. I've been particularly interested in performance that draws on our archives here at the Getty Research Institute. We have a lot of archival information related to performance in downtown New York in the 60s and 70s. It's not well known that we have such strong holdings in that area, including Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti, thanks to our curators at the Research Institute who that have been active in acquiring archives related to performance and dance. As the person here producing live dance and live performance, I always look to what the strengths are here at the Getty. I just think it's a wonderful way to celebrate the legacy of Joan, who's been such a trailblazer in so many different genres.

These performances are an opportunity to meditate on how avant garde practices flourished in one generation, what it means to our current practitioners here in Los Angeles to revisit some of those modes, and at the same time, a way to work with today's really interesting group of contemporary dancers.

**CD:** You mentioned LA dancers were recruited for the Getty performances.

**Cooper:** I helped Nefeli identify LA's experimental, radical dancers and choreographers and have them be a part of this performance. So, our cast reflects back on the city and some of the avant garde activities that have been carrying on the legacy of people like Joan Jonas and Simone Forti and Tricia brown. So it's, it's kind of an exercise to connect past legacies with the future

generation.

**CD:** Where should visitors look for the performance to happen?

**Cooper:** This is going to be in the Arrival Plaza, right at the top of the hill where people get off the tram. There will be a designated space for the performance. Some people may be coming to see it because they know about it, but I suspect a whole lot of people are going to stumble on it when they come out of the tram. We're going to have a couple of rows of chairs, and in front of that, there will be floor cushions, plus there will be standing room. People can stand, sit on chairs, sit on the ground, and fill in the space.

Just like the rest of the Getty art on display, visitors can catch a peek at *Mirror Piece 1 & 2 (1969/2024)* and move on, or linger and reflect on Jonas' exploration of being a spectator and becoming part of what is reflected.

Joan Jonas' Mirror Piece 1 & 2. Photo courtesy of the artists

**CD:** Commentators have considered Mirror Piece a breakthrough exploration of spectatorship. When the mirrors reflect the other dancers, the setting, or the sky, the audience watches as spectators. The moments when the mirrors reflect the audience, the reflected audience members become part of what is watched, participants for the other spectators. Is this what led to the 'kiss camera' at sports events.

**Cooper:** In many ways. Joan's fascination with the mirror is related to her fascination with the closed circuit TV live feed. She was part of that generation of the artists that were really grappling with the role of media in their lives. It became an opportunity for her to understand how perception was altered with television and video and also through reflection. So I think that that's not too far away from our cell phones.

The work is like a reflection loop, which is similar to some of the experiments that Joan Jonas did

with video, because she was using a closed circuit video so that she would dance, and then it would be on the screen of the TV at the same time, and using that to limit the perception of the body, sort of cut it into pieces.

Joan Jonas' Mirror Piece 1 & 2. Photo courtesy of the artists

**CD:** How does spectatorship considered in 1969 come into play today when people are spectating on their phones 24/7, where everything is reality show or an Instagram post? Was Jonas presaging social media?

**Cooper:** The work has an element of self-awareness that now people take for granted. The traditional theatrical experience is one where you're in the dark and the lights go down, and you're supposed to be transported into what's happening on the stage. Jonas breaks down that barrier by inserting the visual reference of the audience themselves into the performance space. As an audience member, you're aware of your reflection in the mirror, being on the same level as the performers, and being in the same environment of the performers. You're in this 360 degree environment that is being reflected. And so it definitely presages the sort of experience that people now have when they go to concerts or restaurants and are constantly using their phones to look or post. Jonas' work really self implicates the audience in a way that is interesting, and it will hopefully make people really meditate on those dynamics. It's just fascinating to me how this performance continues to have space for interpretation that is relevant in every iteration, in every new environment, because it is in a different space with a different audience.

**CD:** You've thought a lot about this piece in bringing it to the Getty this weekend. Are there other important aspects we haven't talked about?

**Cooper:** The thing about *Mirror Piece* that we maybe haven't chatted about is it was a way for Jonas to dissect some gender hierarchies, and that is built into the piece, because there are two male dancers that are part of it, and the rest of the cast is female. This was a early work, so that was like something that was like on her mind, definitely the objectification of the body, and this sort of separating body parts through the mirror reflection had to do with the male gaze, I would say. So I feel there's an interruption of the gaze that the mirrors do that is definitely an exploration of gender.

**CD:** Thank you for your time and all this insight.

Dancers in *Mirror Piece 1 & 2 (1969/2024)* include Chantel Murphy, Freeda Electra, Lillie Yokom, Eloise DeLuca, Abriel Gardner, Vera Rodriguez, Julia Eichten, Nayomi Van Brunt, Jay Carlon, Alexsa Durrans, Mamie Green, Kayla Aguila, Devika Wickremesinghe, Joey Navarrete-Medina, and Kirsten Michelle Schnittker.

## *Mirror Piece 1 & 2 (1969-2024)* at Arrival Plaza, Getty Center, 1200 Getty Center Dr., Brentwood; Sat.-Sun., July 13-14, 4 pm, free. Getty.

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