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**The meaning of mirrors in Performance and early Video Art**

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## 1. Introduction and research question

In her famous essay "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism" Rosalind Krauss uses the term narcissism to describe Vito Acconci's Video "Centers". She further claims that "the medium of video is narcissism"<sup>1</sup>, and that all early examples of video are "psychological states"<sup>2</sup>. She makes this analogy because of the use of the monitor/camera as a mirror, and the use of video as a form of self-reflection in general.

The concepts and terminology of Narcissism/Freud and the Mirror Stage /Lacan have been used widely (and sometimes with a negative twist) especially in the 1970s to explain and interpret the use of mirrors and the use of the monitor in performance, video art and film theory.

It is striking, that a number of early performance and video artists have indeed used mirrors in their performances and videos a lot. Actual mirrors, not "imaginary" ones, were used in a variety of ways. The mirror is a symbol for reflection, self-love and also for confronting the "truth", as in the German saying "jemandem den Spiegel vorhalten". But it is also a way of differentiating self and other, inside and outside, as well as reality and fantasy. The mirror is the sight of identification. According to Caroline Rupprecht the existence of the mirror represents the moment of mediation.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to take a closer look at two video artists and how they used mirrors in their work: Dan Graham with "Performer/Audience/Mirror" and Joan Jonas with "Mirror Piece I and II". In both instances Graham and Jonas used the mirror to confront the audience. In these early works they used the video camera mostly for documentation. To find an interpretation for their use of mirrors I will take a closer look at the writings of Freud and Lacan, as well as contemporary art historians. The 70s were a time of questioning identity and relationships. It is this aspect of "relationship" between artist/audience, self/other, "I" and society that the mirror signifies, that I would like to explore.

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<sup>1</sup> Krauss 1976, p.50.

<sup>2</sup> Krauss 1976, p.50.

<sup>3</sup> Rupprecht 2006, p.11.

## 2. Research status

### 2.1. A short history

In the 1960s artists were experimenting with painting, literature, music, dance and theater, crossing over and mixing different artforms.

For performance the body became important material in the work of art. After video became available, artist used the camera to study movement and gesture. In these early phases artists used video to document their performances. But even this material is influenced by the position of the camera, montages and cuts, and so also becomes a commentary, not just a documentation.

According to Michael Rush<sup>4</sup> artists have used the video camera as an extension of their own bodies and as participant in performances, linking the physical and the conceptual right from the beginning. Many early video artists used mirrors in their performances, like Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, and Dennis Oppenheim. They wanted to connect to the perceptual potential of the new medium and also to draw the audience into the process and art out of the studio. They wanted to leave the exclusive gallery settings, the “white cube”. The art space became a “laboratory”, early video art is multimedia, including performances, dance and film. Viewers were used as collaborators, and contrary to television-viewers, spectators had to leave their passive role. The line between production and reception became blurred. “At the birth of video art, artist turned the camera (and mirrors) on themselves [...] or on others, to investigate new meanings of time and identity or to create new definitions of space and perception.”<sup>5</sup> With the possibility of Closed-Circuit-Technology artists could reflect their own position, the position of the spectator and the medium itself. It’s all about liveness, simultaneity and instant replay.

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<sup>4</sup> Rush 2003, p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Rush 2003, p. 36.

## 2.2. Freud and Narcissism

The mirror, real or as a symbol, brings us to the concept of narcissism. It is important in this context, because Freud in his essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" talks about the development of self, identity formation and object-relations. "Freud's contribution, like Marx's, is central to understanding the relationship between the individual and society."<sup>6</sup>

Primary or "normal" narcissism is a regular course of human sexual/ego development, narcissism is a normal phenomena. The development of ego-libido and object-libido leads to the differentiation of self and other. We need a healthy egoism and we need an interest in the other, to be able to love. Freud goes on to explain that through the study of narcissism we learn, how sexual instincts in the beginning are connected to vital functions, they are connected to a "mother".<sup>7</sup> With second type narcissism, the choice of love-object is not the mother/the other. In this case, the subject is seeking itself as love-object (symbolized by the mirror reflection). This is considered abnormal.

Self-love (in a normal development) leads to the ideal ego. Self-regard is an expression of the size of the ego. "Freud's starting point in describing the "I" was that of the conscious person whose entire intrapsychic life was powerfully influenced by dynamic, unconscious forces."<sup>8</sup> According to Freud the "I" is always striving for coherence, a unity between subject and object it once had, a striving for a completed picture of itself. "[...] sich selbst finden im Verlieren im anderen, [...] diese Bewegung findet ihren Ausdruck in der Spiegelmetapher, und ist verantwortlich dafür, daß der Narzißmus so stark mit dem Blick (gaze) assoziiert wird."<sup>9</sup>

I would like to add here, that the early 1970s were a time when psychotherapy was popular in the United States. People believed in a change of society through a change of consciousness, and were interested in political as well as personal change. There must have been an openness to psycho-

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<sup>6</sup> Turkle 1978, p. 659.

<sup>7</sup> Morrison 1986, p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Morrison 1986, p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Schneider 1994, p.127.

analytical topics, which connects to the interest in the use of mirrors in performance and video.

### **2.3. Lacan and the Mirror Stage**

Lacan and his concept of the “Mirror Stage” in child development is quoted widely and used for interpretation in connection with the use of mirrors in performance, video art and cinema. That makes sense obviously, not just because of the “mirror”, but because of its explanation here as the formation of the “I”, the forming of identity and subjectivity. “In the Mirror Stage, the infant who has not yet mastered the upright posture and who is supported by either another person or some device will, upon seeing herself in the mirror, “jubilantly assume” the upright position. She thus finds in the mirror image a mastery that she will actually learn only later. The enthusiasm is tied to the temporal dialectic by which she appears already to be what she will only later become.”<sup>10</sup> The mirror stage is further described as a decisive turning point, where the division between an inside and an outside happens, and a constitution of the self emerges. But this moment is also a moment of delusion and temporality, the belief in a projected image. “It is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification. [...] The first articulation of subjectivity [...], it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gallop 1982, p. 120.

<sup>11</sup> Mulvey 1975, p. 10.

### 3. Research subject

#### 3.1. Dan Graham „Performer/Audience/Mirror“ USA, 1975

Riverside Studios London GB, 1977

Video documentation

In this performance Dan Graham stands in front of a seated audience, in a large dance studio. The audience faces a wall-size mirror, which is behind Graham. Graham moves about in front of his audience, generally facing it. While he is moving up and down he is continuously talking in a kind of stream-of-consciousness way, describing his own movements, but also how the audience reacts to him. He describes it's external behavior. The audience is listening and can watch itself in the mirror. After about 10 minutes Graham turns around, now facing the mirror also. He continues talking, describing what he sees in the mirror, both of himself and the audience. He describes his gestures and what they might signify. The audience now sees Graham from the back and itself in the mirror. Graham keeps moving about, describing the audience's reaction. This continues for about 5 minutes. The audience is not free to move around. (Fig. 1)

This is how Graham describes his intentions: „The audience sees itself reflected by the mirror instantaneously, while the performer's comments are slightly delayed and follow [...] a temporal forward flow. First a person in the audience sees himself „objectively“ („subjectively“) perceived by himself; next, he hears himself described „objectively“ („subjectively“) in terms of the performer's perception. [...] Through the use of a mirror the audience is able to instantaneously perceive itself as a public body.“<sup>12</sup>

What is interesting in this performance/video is the use of language in addition to the mirror, since this reflects Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and his basic premise that identity is constructed in language.<sup>13</sup>

Ann Wagner sums up the relentless patten of the artist „as a production and enforcement of a continuous present for the lenght of the piece“.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Graham 1996, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> Rose 1986, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> Wagner 2000, p. 71.

*Dan Graham* lives and works in New York, originally he studied philosophy, worked as a photographer and producer and wrote about art and art-theorie. He is one of the pioneers of performance and video art. He explored the conceptual framework of viewing and being viewed. Later on he became interested in architecture and interactions in public space. His writing is central to his oeuvre.

### **3.2. Joan Jonas „Mirror Piece I and II“**

Mirror Piece I New York University, Bard College 1969

Mirror Piece II, New York, 1970

First performed in 1970, Mirror Piece II was never recorded on film, but later enacted and filmed.

In both Mirror Piece I and II, between 15 and 17 performers including Jonas herself, holding heavy glass mirrors and pieces of transparent glass slowly move around in a large gymnasium. The mirrors are facing the audience. The movements of the performers are choreographed and they form patterns. The mirrors fragment the space, the audience and the performance. Because of the size and weight of the props the performers' movements are slow and careful. The constant danger, that the mirrors will break, creates a sense of anxiety among the spectators. Jonas wears a mirror costume, small mirrors are sewn on to her dress, which jingle when she moves. The audience through reflection in the mirrors becomes part of the performance. In another section bodies are carried around like a board or glass. Two women roll across the floor with a sheet of glass in between them, the performers „mirror“ each other through the transparency. (Fig. 2) In Mirror Piece I in addition a female performer lies on the ground, she is naked, at least those body parts, that we see of her. She is holding a mirror in an upright position just below her waist. Her legs and the mirror face the audience. We don't see the upper part of the woman's body or her head, we see a fragmented body with 4 legs and 2 arms. The mirror is used to create new configurations out of familiar parts. (Fig. 3)



Jonas says about it: “The mirror was the first device I used to alter the perception of an audience in relation to the performance space.”<sup>15</sup>

She describes her own experience with the use of a mirror as follows: “I was interested in how an audience might feel uneasy as they were caught looking at themselves in the performance. In a way, narcissism is the nature of the medium.”<sup>16</sup>

“[...] the mirror provided me with a metaphor for my investigations as well as a device to alter space, to fragment it and to reflect the audience, bringing them into the space of the performance. [...] In 1970 I began to make video tapes. This device enabled me to add another reflexion. [...] The monitor is an ongoing mirror.”<sup>17</sup>

*Joan Jonas* became known for her pioneering work in performance and video art. She studied sculpture and art history, was influenced by the work of Trisha Brown, with whom she studied dance, as well as John Cage and Claes Oldenburg, particular in their exploration of non-linear narrative structure and form. Jonas’s own work has frequently engaged and questioned portrayals of female identity in theatric and self-reflexive ways, using ritual-like gestures, masks, mirrors, and costumes.

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<sup>15</sup> Jonas 2010, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Jonas 2010, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, Jonas 1990, p. 367.

## 4. Interpretations

I would now like to take a look at how different art historians have judged the meaning and use of mirrors in performance/video. The focal point in the discussions is about the relationship of “mirrors and video”, or “monitor as a mirror”, or a “screen as a mirror” comparison, as well as a comparison of TV and video. Lacan’s theory of the Mirror Stage is used extensively especially in the 70s to construct meaning out of a relatively new medium.

As I said in the beginning Rosalind Krauss equates the monitor/camera with a mirror and establishes the whole medium of video as a psychological model, by which she implies, that it is not art. “The agency of reflection is a mode of appropriation, of illusionistically erasing the difference between subject and object.”<sup>18</sup> In my opinion this is a misinterpretation of narcissism as well as the use of the monitor.

Kathy O’Dell pretty much agrees with Kraus in her opinion of video being narcissistic and takes it a step further. She makes a comparison to Lacan’s Mirror Stage, which says that the mother is a witness to the process. O’Dell assigns this witnessing function to the audience in performance based videos.<sup>19</sup> She goes on to say, that Acconci, Graham and Jonas through the use of video in performance examined the Mirror Stage for us. Graham in his later installations with mirrors used time-delay a lot. According to O’Dell this signifies the past-present-future split in the Mirror Stage.<sup>20</sup>

Margret Morse in her essay “The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between” mostly talks about video installation art of a later period, but I think a lot of her observations can be applied to the use of mirrors in performance as well. She calls it an “art of experience”<sup>21</sup>, both the artist and the viewer experience something, the viewer/visitor becomes a partner.<sup>22</sup> The mirror shows him/her that he/she is “there”, something can be learned from the

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<sup>18</sup> Krauss 1976, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> Hall, O’Dell 1990, p. 138.

<sup>20</sup> Hall, O’Dell 1990, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> Hall, Morse 1990, p. 153.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, Morse 1990, p. 155.

body itself. In performance the artist occupies the position of the subject.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the mirror the screen is a plane through which we step into a world on the other side. Shifting relations between body and screen Morse writes about in another essay "Body and Screen". She makes comparisons to the theater and the concept of the "fourth wall", and then also a connection to Lacan. She claims, that the capacity to succumb to illusion happens during the Mirror Stage, we accept that the image in the mirror is "me", when it is just a reflection.<sup>24</sup> (In my opinion, this is not quite what Lacan says, he says that the wholeness of the reflection is temporary and a mis-recognition.) This identification with our mirror image allows us to borrow other masks. When video uses a face-to-face symmetry, she calls this a mirror position, which supports assumptions about identity and subjectivity.<sup>25</sup>

Film theorists use psychoanalysis and Lacan's theories a lot to emphasize their point. Christian Metz argues that we would not understand film at all, without having first gone through the Mirror Stage.<sup>26</sup>

Laura Mulvey writes about cinema in a patriarchal culture and a feminist critic of it, but again some of her observations can be deployed to the subject of the mirror in video as well. The tool of psychoanalysis explains "looking" as a source of pleasure, as well as being looked at.<sup>27</sup> Pleasure can also be gained by looking at another person as an object. Sexual stimulation can happen through sight, in a patriarchal setting the male look is active, the female look is passive - she is looked at. Mulvey uses Lacan's mis-recognition in the mirror, which leads to the development of the ideal ego and in a next step to subjectivity, to explain what happens between the viewer and the screen in cinema. Here she draws similarities between the (film)screen and the "mirror". The male viewer recognizes his ideal ego in front of the "mirror"<sup>28</sup>. Film is controlling the dimensions of time, space and the gaze. A complex interaction of looks (voyeuristic, exhibitionistic) is specific to film.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hall, Morse 1990, p.159.

<sup>24</sup> Morse 1999, p. 63, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> Morse 1999, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> Metz 1975, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Mulvey 1975, p.8.

<sup>28</sup> Mulvey 1975, p.12.

<sup>29</sup> Mulvey 1975, p.18.

We can find another feminist perspective about the imaginary and sexuality in Jacqueline Rose's book "Sexuality in the Field of Vision". For her the mirror is a link to the unconscious, and therefore a link to sexuality.<sup>30</sup> Her approach is psychoanalytical. She quotes Lacan extensively and his views on subjectivity: "[...] the idea of the mirror should be understood as an object which reflects – not just the visible, but also what is heard, touched and willed by the child."<sup>31</sup> In one of the chapters in the book ("The Imaginary") she writes, that the Mirror Stage is the focus for the interdependency of image, identity and identification. "We have only to understand [...] the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image."<sup>32</sup> Finally she is discussing the spectator's relation to the image on the screen in cinema. This relationship is dual. One screen is the one on which the film is projected. The other is the internalised screen which introjects that imagery.<sup>33</sup>

Yvonne Spielmann takes a refreshing non-psychoanalytical position in her essay "Selbstreflexion im Videobild". In a way she takes off on Krauss (without mentioning her) by dividing the topic into self-reflection of the medium (Selbst-Referentialität) and self-reflection of the artist. One is a medium-specific reflection, the other a narcissistic situation.<sup>34</sup> To her video is a medium for reflection because of its technical conditions. Because of these conditions video has an immediate presence. She follows two lines of thought, one is the mimetic doubling (Bild und Abbild), the other is the technical-instrument based dimension. A specificum of the video picture is simulation and dissimulation.<sup>35</sup> In Closed-Circuit-Installations the self-reflection of the artist and the self-reflexion of the medium can become one. Spielmann then discusses early performances of the 1970s. To her these artists applied not only the "mirror" function of the medium, but also the aspect of monitoring, both in an attempt of self-control of the medium.<sup>36</sup> Self-reflection can be criticism on cultural models, an examination of distance and closeness, public and privat. "[...] Konzepte der Selbstreflexion setzen bei

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<sup>30</sup> Rose 1986, p. 52.

<sup>31</sup> Rose 1986, p. 53.

<sup>32</sup> Rose 1986, p.173.

<sup>33</sup> Rose 1986, p. 190.

<sup>34</sup> Spielmann 2005, p. 238.

<sup>35</sup> Spielmann 2000, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Spielmann 2000, p. 159.

der Vermittlungsfunktion des Kamerabildes an, wobei der apparative Status des Bildes zum einen durchlässig (Fenster-window) und zum anderen als Sichtschranke (Spiegel-mirror) definiert ist.<sup>37</sup> She does not equate the camera with a mirror, but points out the function of the video-picture as being a window and a mirror at the same time.

According to Spielmann the medium of video shows a change in the status of the picture especially through the use of self-reflection.

Because of its attributed "mirror"-function, video is treated as an object with complex relations to the broader social order. "Video influences our physical, perceptual, and psychological relationship to the world."<sup>38</sup> Dan Graham is quoted as stating that TV might be metaphorically visualized as a mirror in which the viewing family sees an image [...] of the American family itself.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Spielmann 2000, p. 159.

<sup>38</sup> Hall, Fifer 1990, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, Graham 1990, p.17.

## 5. Discussion

I think it is obvious that mirrors were important to both Jonas and Graham. We can see that from the fact that they both put “mirror” in the title of their pieces. Besides using mirrors, they have in common, that they use language and their own body in their work. Both artists went on to use mirrors and started to incorporate video soon after these early pieces. In those we can watch what they are already interested in, and went on to explore. Graham was interested in time and time delay, the difference between mental intention and external behaviour, change of perspective and he had a more analytical, empirical approach. Jonas was interested in fragmentation of space and image, and female identity. Her performances had a poetic character. Both also used the video camera for feedback on their own position and the reaction of their audience.

Graham and Jonas clearly wanted to interact with the audience, although these early pieces have a theatrical touch. Graham and Jonas still have a relationship to the proscenium arts, like theater and film, in that they relate to spatial and temporal dimensions. Both used the mirror to define or question their relationship to the audience. In a way, their work could not exist without the audience.

In my opinion the relationship between artist and audience in both pieces also has elements of an exhibitionist and voyeuristic exchange. This is more noticeable in a later piece of Jonas’s (*Mirror Check*, 1972), where she stands naked in front of an audience and examines her body with a small hand-mirror.

“Graham’s occasional performances extend his anthropological probing of social environments and his exercises in self-awareness. [...] In performance/Audience/Mirror Graham encouraged spectators - or participants - to see themselves both as individuals and integral members of a crowd or community. In this work, the mirror contributed to a confusion of boundaries

between private and public that has become fundamental to the fullscale structures Graham has made since the late 1970s.”<sup>40</sup>

This is when Graham incorporated mirrors into architecture, creating video controlled environments, with mirrored walls, in which he confronted the viewer with time delayed images of the viewer or images of another room. Spielmann does not consider those relevant for video art.<sup>41</sup> To her they are perceptual experiments, changing of perspectives between different video cameras, but not relevant to the aesthetic of video.

Jonas uses a unique vocabulary in her performance concepts, combining performance, dance and an observing video camera. She also puts her own (female) presence visibly into the apparative process. She presents her body and thus her “self” to be seen as an aesthetic category. What interests her is the monitor *next* to the mirror, which, through instant feedback, gives the viewer two time experiences.<sup>42</sup> Jonas said in an interview, that the visible fragmentation in the mirror image reminded her of cutting and pasting in film editing. Each viewer sees different “slices” and puts them together in a different way.<sup>43</sup> “I was interested in the discrepancies between the performed activity and the constant duplicating, changing and altering of information in the video.”<sup>44</sup> To her the mirror becomes a metaphor for visual representation.

Lacans concept about the Mirror Stage is used to interpret the use of the mirror in video art almost exclusively. The mirror is so much a metaphor for the Western concept of the “self”<sup>45</sup> that there seems little room for other considerations. Even artists themselves use “narcissistic” quickly in combination with mirrors, it has become a cliché. <sup>46</sup> The mirror is always connected to psychology and self-consciousness. But sometimes the mirror is just a prop, or as with Jonas, a sculptural object.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Swenson 2009, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Spielmann 2005, p. 142.

<sup>42</sup> Jonas, Schneider 2010, p. 64.

<sup>43</sup> Jonas, Schneider 2010, p. 61.

<sup>44</sup> Schmidt 2000, p. 103.

<sup>45</sup> Graham 1979, p. 30.

<sup>46</sup> Schmidt 2000, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Jonas, Schneider 2010, p. 62.

Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out in her book "The Second Sex" how the mirror is of different importance to a man or a woman. I am hesitant to say it, but Graham's work is decidedly "male", and Jonas's work is decidedly "female", on her part on intention.

I would like to end with a quote from Margaret Morse: "The practice of the period was indeed to disturb the waters: if electronic media introduced new possibilities for presence, it did the same for absence, and even more for the play between the two. The boundary between having and loosing one's image was one that was crossed over, back and forth, like a scar that reminds one of one's own mortality."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Morse 1999, p.72.



## 6. Conclusion

Mirrors were used by both Dan Graham and Joan Jonas in their performances in the early 70s. Much has been written about the meaning of that use, especially with the emergence of video and the comparison of video and the video monitor to a “mirror”. Interest at the time in identity, self-consciousness and psychoanalytical theories was keen especially in the USA and England. I am assuming that this is the reason for interpreting the use of the mirror mostly in psycho-analytical terms. The theories of Freud and Lacan were used extensively to think about the mirror and the “self”.

Graham and Jonas kept using mirrors in their work, I think latter on in a more differentiated way. Graham went on to combine architecture, mirrors and the public space. Jonas included mirrors in her performances as a prop and was interested in comparing the mirror and the monitor as a means of representation.

Regardless of what function we assign to the mirror, what we compare it to, or equate it with, it always points to a relationship. The mirror has no meaning by itself. Only in connection with a vis-à-vis, the self and others, subject and object, inside and outside, reality and imagination, the “I” and society emerge.

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## 8. Illustration evidence

Dan Graham, Performer/Audience/Mirror

Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=RjiLZ\\_AOtOA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=RjiLZ_AOtOA)

Figure 1:

Anne Wagner, Performance, Video, and the Rhetoric of Presence, October, Vol. 91, 2000, MIT Press

Joan Jonas, Mirror Piece I

Video <https://vimeo.com/77162791>

Joan, Jonas, Mirror Piece II

Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD\\_QHxN1aEE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YD_QHxN1aEE)

Figure 2: Johann-Karl Schmidt, Joan Jonas, Performance Video Installations, 2001

Figure 3: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/joan-jonas-mirror-piece-i>

## 9. Illustrations



Figure 1  
Dan Graham  
Performer/Audience/Mirror  
Video Documentation  
USA, 1975



Figure 2  
Joan Jonas  
Mirror Piece I  
Video Documentation  
Loeb Student Center  
New York University, 1969



Figure 3  
Joan Jonas  
Mirror Piece I  
Foto Documentation, Performance View  
Bard College, New York, 1969