

THIS WEEK

No Longer a Nobody on Her Home Turf

By KATHRYN SHATTUCK

The New York Times

Published: February 15, 2004

Joan Jonas may be the quintessential New York artist, but until recently New Yorkers hadn't seen a lot of her. Born in the city, she embedded herself in the downtown dance scene of the 1960's and went on to become a pioneer of video and installation art, opening the way for scores of other artists.

The problem was that her work, which weaves together film, dance, body and process art with ancient symbols, feminist tenets and multicultural references, was mostly being developed — and appreciated — in Europe.

That is, until Valerie Smith, a longtime admirer of Ms. Jonas, joined the Queens Museum of Art and imported a tightened version of the artist's 2000 retrospective in Stuttgart, Germany, back to home turf, where it opened in December. The show received tremendous acclaim (and remains on view through March 28), but Roberta Smith of The New York Times had one reservation. "This celebration of Ms. Jonas's achievement should be tempered by some humility and embarrassment locally," she wrote, adding that the artist had been "profoundly neglected on native ground, even though her work sprang from its soil."

Beginning on Thursday at the Kitchen in Chelsea, Ms. Jonas, 67, will perform in New York for the first time in more than 10 years with "Lines in the Sand" (2002), based on Hilda Doolittle's epic 1951-55 poem "Helen in Egypt." Commissioned for Documenta 11, "Lines in the Sand" unravels the myth of Helen of Troy through the use of objects like masks, mirrors and costumes and media like live drawing, videotape and prerecorded sound. Egypt appears as both a real presence (photographs of the country in 1910) and a fake one (images of the Luxor casino in Las Vegas). Ms. Jonas takes a better-late-than-never view of the attention she is currently receiving at home. "Why do I think my time is now?" she mused in a recent telephone interview from her SoHo studio. "I don't know the answer to that, but I feel really quite happy about it. I thought I would have liked it five years ago, but now seems right because some of the work has developed in an interesting way."

It won't be the last of her on this continent, she pointed out. Ms. Jonas, who has taught at M.I.T. for four years, is developing a new work — this time, for the Renaissance Society in Chicago.