

Article by Susan Morgan; appeared in "Neuland", annual book of New Music; W. Germany 1984

Jana Haimsohn's work is almost ethnographic in nature, an atmospheric account of somewhere foreign. Through her performance we find ourselves being familiarized with an undetermined place, its environments, peculiarities, and inhabitants. Haimsohn is at once anthropologist and native guide, as fluent in her street smart attitudes and flip commentary as she is with shrill bird like calls and murmured incantations. Like a tale told 'round a campfire or a journey down a river through a rain forest, we are continually enchanted, frightened, informed. Her work conveys a created world that unfolds in gesture and sound, not in literal constructs. She does not arm herself with the charts and statistics of a visiting lecturer, rather, she takes us there. Following the basic rule of good fiction, 'show don't tell', she transports us with drumming, stories, dances, and songs. It is not a fictitious region that is revealed. All the activity is indigenous to Haimsohn's own experience and memory. But unlike art that is rooted in self analysis and the rendering of daily personal experience into myth, Haimsohn's work is less specific and more significant. Like a taste or a remembrance, it is a strong experience that is at once vague and vivid. Haimsohn has succeeded in producing an original and undetectable hybrid.

"All I ever wanted to do was sing and dance and act. I used to make up songs when I was a kid, I used to walk around the house singing and dancing. When I was very very little I made up songs like 'My True Brain', which my older brother and sister have never let me live down."

Jana Haimsohn has unearthed childhood dreams and brought them to fruition. Born in New York City in 1952 and initially trained as a dancer with classes in ballet, modern, and improvisation followed by the study of tai chi chuan and yoga, Haimsohn returned to her other desire, singing, in 1973 after dislocating her elbow in an accident. Beginning to work with sustained vocal sounds and harmonics, she gradually added movement. The result was not the separate or parallel activities of 'singing and dancing', the sound and movement interacted and belonged to one another. Haimsohn's body would propel or modulate the sounds, the focus would shift and the sound would bring out the movement. Haimsohn teaches herself through her own work,

listening and reaching a greater understanding. She is the authority on her dreams. The process is not a repeated formula, instead it is about opening up and discovering the surprises in the dream. By using nonsense language that led into rhythmic singing or chanting, Haimsohn discovered what she calls 'the highs', the very high notes she reaches in an extraordinary range.

"Someday I'll be grateful that I can't do things in a regular way."

From late 1974 to 1978 Jana Haimsohn participated in many of the collective art events organized by Jean Dupuy in New York. Dupuy would give a theme to a group of artists and each would contribute an individual work. The work might be a drawing, an object, or a short performance. Haimsohn met Don Cherry while they were both taking part in Dupuy's 'Chant Acapella', an evening of performances. Listening to Haimsohn's 'high' sounds, Cherry suggested improvising his trumpet with her singing. Until this time Haimsohn had not worked with jazz musicians. (Her first solo concert in New York in 1976 had featured Antonio Zepeda playing Mayan Indian drums; in Munich, Haimsohn had performed with tabla accompaniment.) Haimsohn found Don Cherry's great talent enhanced by his capacity to create a strong contagious musical atmosphere. Charlie Morrow of the New Wilderness Foundation produced a short tape of Jana Haimsohn, Don Cherry and Olu Dara's improvised work. In 1979 Haimsohn and Cherry did five duo concerts in Europe. During these concerts each did a solo section first and then returned for a set performing together. It was through Don Cherry that Haimsohn became familiar with the music of Ed Blackwell. Originally from New Orleans and a jazz tradition, Blackwell has lived in Morocco and travelled through Africa. In an unorthodox and brilliant manner, Blackwell plays specially tuned set drums that produce the sound of hand drums. "His rhythms are so rich that they make you have to dance and sing with them." Ornette Coleman has described Blackwell as "...Having one of the most musical ears for rhythm of anyone I have heard..."

In 1976, Haimsohn received a Creative Artists Public Service (CAPS) grant from New York State for her work in multi-media performance. She received another CAPS grant in 1980 for music composition and the same year was awarded

a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in choreography. In 1981 Haimsohn received an NEA grant for her performance work, and in 1982 she received an NEA jazz study grant. Haimsohn's solo work gives her the opportunity to develop and explore a language invented to define itself. She has no precedents or formulas to follow. The pianist Mal Waldron, (well known for both his own work and his work with Billie Holiday, Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane) has said "...I keep a very open mind whenever I play... Charlie Mingus drummed into my head very early on, not to imitate anybody, that what jazz was about was individuality... Free jazz is free in that you're not restricted to any set tools that you must use to construct this house, but a house should be built when you're finished..." Haimsohn's work exemplifies that individuality and breaking through restrictions.

Working with Waldron, Haimsohn at one point hoped to "learn to sing standards", but the improvisational work had a more essential draw. Haimsohn was very happy for the opportunity to work with Mal Waldron, a generous man and musician. Waldron listens and provides a strong foundation of chords and repetitions which modulate rhythmically and build gradually, over which Haimsohn's voice can move freely and gather momentum. In 1981 Haimsohn performed in duos throughout the United States with Mal Waldron, and with Ed Blackwell and pianist Don Pullen--- all masters of improvisation.

"Don Pullen is an amazing, powerfully gifted musician. I wish I could hear him play every day. His music reaches down inside me and gives me such a lift."

Though still involved in solo work, Haimsohn performed in her first trio in Los Angeles (1982) with Blackwell and Waldron. Her continued work with Don Pullen has included various musicians--- the bassists Sirone, Fred Hopkins and Andy McCloud, and the drummer Victor Jones. In September of '83, Haimsohn will perform in Europe, this time with Don Pullen, Steve McCall on drums and Andy McCloud. She will then present a number of duo performances in Europe with Mal Waldron. In the context of improvisation, Haimsohn's language is developed into a vocabulary that can be envisioned and understood by other musicians. The vocabulary has become more clear. Still closely linked to improvisation, Haimsohn's work with Don Pullen moves toward collaboration. Elaborating on concepts in rehearsal, their

performances are not so much just the lucky impromptu meetings of the past. If a house is to be built as Mal Waldron says, this work is a rendering of it. It is an innovative and remarkable plan.

"I dream about flying alot. And I dream about dancing. I can do amazing things in my dreams and they feel so good. Gravity is NO problem in those dreams. I dream of, or rather I long for the singing too. Singing also seems like flying to me. I remember thinking that when I was a child. When I'd hear certain singers, and especially when their voices would open up and let go fully with a clear high sustained note that was unafraid and generous, I'd get chills and sigh, and I knew it was like flying."

In performance, Haimsohn is wearing a black skirt tied sarong style. Her shoulders and feet are bare. She wraps her legs around a conga drum, singing and playing. She positions herself behind a music stand and reads poetry, or rather enacts poetry, instilling a life force into an activity/the poetry reading, that is generically flat and bloodless by description; She transforms it by stringing together alliterations, stretching sounds, repeating phrases. She puffs out her cheeks, rolls her eyes, switches accents. Her arm leads, her hip takes over. The stance becomes a character, a situation. "There's more to the visual than meets the eye. I am really much bigger than I look" she asserts at one point, and we are then aware of her size. Haimsohn is very small, slender and muscular. There is an economy to her appearance and a naked honesty in her voice, but nothing is obvious. She is at once unguarded and mysterious. The stories she tells are intricate and detailed without being specific. They are full of demands, exaltations, questions, and couched apologies. When she dances she appears to be sparring with ghosts, with some ancestral imaginings. At times she is still, seductive as deep water. "We could fly, I know it, I felt it in a dream" she reads. Her voice soars, her arms glide away from her body, a life of their own. She can fly, I know it.

---- by Susan Morgan, Associate Editor of Real Life Magazine----

((Note: All unattributed quotes in the article are by Jana Haimsohn from a recorded conversation with Susan Morgan--- June 17, 1983. New York City))