

"Information Passes Through": Drawing in the Work of Joan Jonas

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Representation is an expression of the inner state, of the inner suppressions, the appearance of the inner object. The outer object alternates by means of the ego and in the ego with the concept, and what is produced is the view. The inner object alternates by means of the ego and in the ego with a body that is appropriate to it, and the result is the sign. In the former case, the object is the body; in the latter, the object is the mind.¹

It is a simple matter to begin with one of Novalis's many aphorisms and fragments, with these pieces of text, of thought, which say so little and yet intend so much that perhaps cannot even be expressed. The descendents of romanticism developed out of these aphorisms: their central motif of the "ego", of poetry, of the fragmentary, imbedded in a larger whole that can scarcely be grasped in its entirety. From the viewpoint of the present, the form seems transfigured but also to the point, the content and statement of the problem seem topical still – or once again. A reflection from the viewpoint of the present: in our case, that means from the perspective of a generation that is just as concerned with motifs, sources, and symptoms of identity. From the viewpoint of the present: that is to say at the focal point of this text, to track down the inherently important aspects in the performances of the artist Joan Jonas: body, ego, representation. The form that Jonas chooses is as complex as it is precise, but we were not at the performance, so our retrospective view is necessarily based on contemporary accounts. We are unavoidably thrown back upon Novalis, if we are to find any sort of concept or view when faced with the work of Joan Jonas.

Our focus here will be on Joan Jonas's drawings in particular, that is, on drawings as representation but tied to the larger context of performance. If we turn to the medium of

drawing as such, we encounter numerous prejudications that are directly connected with the function and aesthetics of drawing. Jonas's drawings, however, do not lend themselves easily to the verification of these preformed opinions, because the drawings result from a complex configuration of representation, body, and sign. Within this constellation, certain questions become compelling that reach far beyond the usual explanatory and interpretive models.² With what form of representation does Joan Jonas work in her drawings? Is it tied to a specific constellation that meanders between view and object, between object and sign, sign and body, body and representation? Can such distinctions and clear separations be maintained at all in this constellation, as seems to have been still possible for Novalis?

View and Object

Novalis's conclusion, which is not really a conclusion at all but rather establishes a premise, embraces what has gone before in a peculiar view: as part of an approach to the "ego" body and mind are conceived equally as objects. Both are given over to the observing act of comprehension. Joan Jonas works with body and mind as the fundamental elements of her performance practice, but interestingly she too speaks of herself in the third person – as a medium through which the information flows.³ This is a view that constantly returns within the framework of the artist's works, in the form of her own personality as performer but also in the intertwining of media in various schemes of representation. The latter plays a central role in her early performances in particular.

In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), the title alone pointed to a merger of representations in media. In a dia-

logue with her alter ego, Organic Honey, Joan Jonas articulated a multilayered construction of views in which drawing is subjected to a second feedback into the medium of video in addition to its performative, physical connection. In one sequence Organic Honey took magic objects – memorabilia like photographs, a mirror, and a doll – from a box. In the next sequence in the performance Joan Jonas – now unmasked – placed these props on paper and traced them in hurried outlines (p. 216). Gradually, a chaotic form developed from the lines repeatedly superimposed on the same surface. The act of representation was itself mediated, for Jonas did not look directly at the paper but at a monitor that simultaneously transmitted the movements of the drawing as they occurred. “In Organic Honey I called the drawings, ‘drawings for the monitor’ [...]. They derived from an interaction with the technology, the content of the work, and the rhythm and gesture of the performance.”⁴

For Joan Jonas this “drawing for the monitor” is a strategy that gives the performative act of drawing a quasi-objective view; for the audience at the performance, in turn, this view was visible on a second monitor at the edge of the stage, so that the viewer’s perception was subject to the same structural preconditions. In a later version of the performance, entitled *Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll*, drawing was linked even more directly to the structure of the medium. The artist drew a horizontally fragmented image of a dog’s head, which could only be seen as a whole on the monitor. The representation in the “monitor drawing” became the only reliable view.

In the performance *Twilight* (1975), and one year later in *Mirage* we find a similar arrangement of intertwining the media of video, performance, and drawing (p. 217). A monitor arranged vertically, a video projection, and the artist herself operated side by side as coequal visual points of reference. The performative act of drawing was visible in various sequences, both in Jonas’s own actions and in the projection. In *Mirage*, however, Jonas also used a film prepared in advance that showed her drawing.

In both performances Joan Jonas worked with various levels of representation. She thus emphasized not only the corresponding view but also the reassurance between the view and the performer (as object) and the view and the audience (as object). In essence, the point is

that the view can hardly be conceived in isolation but takes place only in the reassurance of the corresponding object (performer and audience) of observation and on the mode of representation. Representation is thus much more than just an expression of the “inner object,” and the view is more than a coalition of body and concept.

Object and Sign

For the moment, let us continue with the performance *Mirage*. Specifically, with the sequence in which Jonas chalked signs and gestures on a blackboard. We find there the metamorphosis of sun into moon with the additional symbolic significance of the male transforming into the female; we find the motif of endless drawing, that is, a drawing that describes a meandering line only to end at its starting point (p. 218); we follow the line of a sweeping rainbow form or a star that turns into a kind of magic square.

The gestures of drawing lead to archetypal, collectively transmitted or recollected images. Such images, which do not deny their symbolic content, are realized by Jonas as signs only to be erased shortly thereafter. “Information passes through,” Joan Jonas writes.⁵ The gesture of drawing is sign only for a moment, and it survives only as a recalled gesture. In the course of the whole sequence, however, not one of the motifs survives, everyone of them is eliminated again just a few seconds after it is produced, only to be followed by another one.

The performance *The Juniper Tree* (1976), which is based on one of the Grimm brothers’ fairytales, used a narrative strand as a starting point. The rearrangement of this story was based on an associative approach in which drawing is both symbolic and structural. In the eponymous fairytale a woman gives birth to a son, however, she dies after having given birth to the child. After her husband remarries and his second wife bears him a daughter, the relationship between the son and his stepmother is filled with hate. In the end the stepmother murders her stepson and offers him to her husband as a meal. Joan Jonas transposed this bloody story into a performance in which she played the roles of the daughter, the good mother, and the evil stepmother. During the course of the performance, to music by Simone Forti, countless portraits of the

two children are produced in red and white, "as red as blood, as white as snow." The color symbolism gradually dominated the site of the action like a kind of stage set and became, as it were, a kind of representative authority: drawing is symbol, stage, plot, and story at the same time. It resulted from both the inner and outer contexts.

The recurring motif of appearing and disappearing finds its equivalent in drawing, and it can serve as a metaphor for the process of understanding, of transforming, of remembering, as well as for the recognition of hidden, archetypal images that nevertheless disappear as well. This latter aspect of recognition in particular is inherent in the symbol-filled drawings, and it emphasizes the activity of the "inner object" that drawing ultimately creates. In the work of Joan Jonas this achievement of recognition is embedded in the performative act of drawing, and this brings it into the proximity of the view. Novalis's separation of the concepts of sign and view is thus undercut and set into fluid motion.

Sign and Body

In one of her most recent works, *In the Shadow a Shadow: My New Theater III* (1999), Joan Jonas used various expressive forms of drawing as essential components of a performance. First, there was a series of drawings that structured, as it were, the sequence of scenes in the performance: "I found nine field stones that were shaped like heads. I shot a sequence in which I vigorously marked with chalk the faces I could see in each of the stones [...]. The drawings were used as markers and intercut the ten minute video loop, setting a rhythm and a structure. The chalk faces disappear from memory and stones remain." In another sequence Jonas drew a portrait of her dog, Xena, then of herself, while wrapped from head to toe in a canvas, sketching the contours of her body with charcoal as if blind (fig. 54).

In one and the same performance Jonas alternated between various modes of representation. It was an alternation between sign and body, inscription and attribution, gesture and meaning. The artist drew herself, a kind of self-portrait created without any visual reassurance but simply on the basis of tactile understanding; the legible sign of this contour operated on the level of an authentic,

but no less abstract, gesture. But how then can drawing be understood here as an expression of the "inner object"? In the act of portraiture the drawing becomes the medium of a dialogue with the person opposite; the contour of the dog captured in outline links the highly personal view up to an almost archetypal recognition. But should we then simply assume a view stands behind this? The faces sketched in chalk on stones peddle a mythic, archaic motif of drawing; they link the image recalled, its unconscious realization, up to the ritual of the performative act.⁶ But is this the formulation of a view or of a sign? The relation of body, mind, view, and sign in this performance is like a movement in which all of the motive forces are imbedded equally. At the very latest it is clear by now that the production of view and sign most certainly does not follow predetermined constellations. Imbedded in these motions a sign is produced from the act of drawing, a meaningful element from the physical gesture, a recognition from the gesture, and a view from the sign.

Body and Representation

One might be inclined to assume, then, that Joan Jonas has not a preferred mode of representation. She seems to want to suggest this view when she remarks in retrospect, "I didn't see a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film, or a dance. A gesture has for me the same weight as a drawing: draw, erase, draw, erase – memory erased."⁷ And one is tempted to add: Joan Jonas's drawings owe their existence to an elementary connection to the gesture. For in the gesture the drawing is linked up to the body, to the "ego" – as a gesture of recollection, as a gesture of appearing and disappearing, and as a trace of the body itself. It thus appeals to both the inner and the outer object, as well as to their coalition in view and drawing.

Novalis' complete aphorism ends in a conclusion we have left unspoken until now: "Common consciousness," he writes, "confuses the result, the view and the sign, with the body, because it does not know how to abstract things, is not active but only passive of necessity, only half, not whole."⁸ Nota bene: Jonas does not blur any categories or terminology, rather she emphasizes an attitude that rejects or reformulates causalities in this embrace. It is precisely this rupture of strict divisions and prevalent

interpretations the gives Joan Jonas's drawings their meandering quality. It is a meandering between vision and object, between object and sign, sign and body, body and representation.

- 1 Novalis, "Aphorismen und Fragmente, 1798-1800", in: Michael Brucker (ed.) Novalis, *Aphorismen*, Frankfurt am Main and Leipzig 1992, (96), pp. 134-35; this edition is based on the first publication in: Ernst Heilborn (ed.), Novalis, *Schriften: Kritische Neuausgabe auf Grund des handschriftlichen Nachlasses*, Berlin 1901. Within this essay Novalis' concept of 'Anschauung' in the original version will be translated as 'view'. It is meant to describe a view that is basically nonintentional and not necessarily following a meaning.
- 2 No in-depth analysis of the significance of drawing in Joan Jonas's oeuvre has yet been published.
- 3 Joan Jonas, "Closing Statement", in: Douglas Crimp (ed.), *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968-1982*, exh. cat., Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California; Eindhoven: Stedelijk Museum 1983, p. 139: "All of my performances are concerned in part with the image as metaphor. There is an emotion in the image that cannot be translated. The image contains it. The performer sees herself as a medium: information passes through."
- 4 Joans, 1983, p. 138
- 5 Jonas, 1983, p. 139
- 6 "Drawing is a ritual used in my performances." Joan Jonas, 1983 p. 138
- 7 Jonas, 1983, p. 137
- 8 Novalis, "Aphorismen und Fragmente, 1798-1800," in: idem, *Aphorismen* (note 1), p. 135