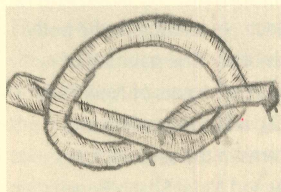


Barbara Clausen

Barbara Clausen met Joan Jonas in the mid-1990s in New York, and chose Joan's work as the subject of her doctoral thesis. Her essay focuses on Joan's drawings, a lesser-known, though integral, aspect of the performance work.



Joseph Wright of Derby,
The Corinthian Maid, 1782–4.
Paul Mellon Collection. Image © Board of Trustees,
National Gallery of Art, Washington.



Joan Jonas, knot drawing,
ca. 1983

Drawing Languages

In the canonical hierarchy of art history, the genre of drawing is habitually neglected. When the daughter of the potter Debutates of Corinth traced the shadow of her sleeping, battle-prone lover on the wall of her chamber, she invented, according to the ancient myth, the art of painting. Yet, in the Enlightenment, her glorious position as an innovative draughtswoman was reinterpreted in order to comply with the social hierarchy and restrictions of the eighteenth century. As a figure for the nature of art, she was to serve the male genius artist in her designated role as the subjugated muse, model, and material.

Throughout the centuries the art of drawing was assigned a preliminary and anecdotal role. From a historical and commercial perspective, painting and sculpture remained the center of attention, and far too little notice was taken of the discipline of drawing. In the course of the twentieth century the aim of integrating the process of origination into the representation of art emphasized the performative and mediating aspects of drawing, whether certificate or comic, text or squiggle, statistic or self-expressive sketch.

To draw a line or symbol, to trace a shape, always signifies a moment of inscription, expression, and reflection. As with text, the act of drawing is the expression of a thought which, beyond reflecting the artist's intention, can be read as a physical and temporal mark within a context of social networks and discourses. The visual presentation of script, from the hieroglyph to the billboard, is exemplary and emblematic of the infinite ways in which we perceive and understand the constantly changing representational codes of our surroundings.

Just as a word in combination with other words culminates in text, Joan Jonas' performative acts of drawing, created at the interface of text and visibility, result in a vocabulary of gestures specific and unique to her artistic practice over thirty years.

Despite its significant role as a genre, drawing is immanently in danger of disappearing between the lines. My primary concern in this essay is to outline the continuous and significant functions her drawings have assumed as pictorial medium, performative gesture, and narrative tool. Jonas' drawing, as gesture and linear language of forms, represent the foundation of her artistic vocabulary. Deeply rooted in her interdisciplinary practice, the drawings transform and shift, as both still and moving images, within different media. While her critical reception has more often than not split her work into the video art period and the fairy-tale period, her drawings are more representative of her incessant occupation with rituals, the deconstruction of historical and mythological narrative structures, and female representation.

When Jonas executes her signature shapes, circles, and symbols in front of the camera and her audience, we see the creation of an image within the framework of another image. With simple gestures she portrays and construes the relationship between subject and object, narrative and history, individual and society, time and space, sculpture and image. Her interdisciplinary politics of representation continuously questions the linear logic of history and fiction, as well as the social impact of pictorial traditions. Through this strategy, causes, causalities, and relationships are

deconstructed, rejoined, and newly articulated. The literal and metaphorical traces and inscriptions Jonas leaves behind on stage and in her videos represent and mirror the transformations of her self in relation to the protagonists she embodies.

II

Drawing a sign, watching a film, attending a theater performance, reading a poem, looking at a picture, or listening to music are events and experiences that in Jonas' art are linked. She not only looks for, but literally excavates, her working material, finding inspiration in mythological, historic, and contemporary stories, poems, and songs from a variety of cultural sources. Continuing to see artistic genres as open and hybrid forms she reveals and questions traditional boundaries and hegemonic structures to reflect social and cultural issues and signs of her time.

As with many female artists in the '60s it was important for Jonas to find a new understanding of space as a psychological and physical locus, and to question its social and historical significance. Integrating her working process into the early performances, at the end of the '60s Jonas created a series of performative movements which led to her language of signs and gestures. The concentration on the relationship between subject and object redefines the understanding and perception of space, the relation between the viewer and the sculpture. The physical transfer of one medium to another, as from drawing to video, performance, and sculpture, mirrored her translation and appropriation of rituals and narratives from outside sources:



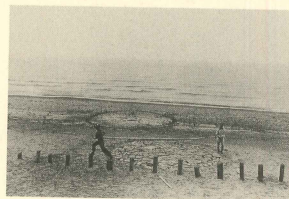
Organic Honey's Vertical Roll (1972)

PHOTO: ROBERTA NEIMAN



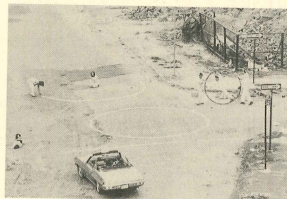
Twilight (1975)

PHOTO: DOUGLAS CRIMP



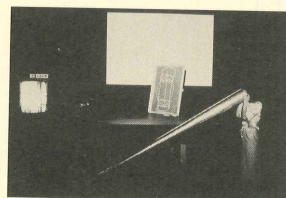
Nova Scotia Beach Piece (1971)

PHOTO: RICHARD SERRA



Delay Delay (1972)

PHOTO: GIANFRANCO GORGONI



Mirage (1976)

PHOTO: BABETTE MANGOLTE

"When I started doing performances, I just worked with sculptural ideas, space and its relation to the object. To bring the specific act of drawing into my work was a conscious choice... I always found a way to make a drawing in most of the pieces."¹

Douglas Crimp has described Jonas' performative method of deconstructing the viewer's perception and illusion with the terms "de-synchronization" and "de-centralization."² By treating content and medium equally, she eliminates hierarchy, formal center and narrative climax. In her nonlinear narratives, she intersects the order of events and places, drawing our attention to the fragmented nature of our perception in relation to our understanding of identity and history.

Jonas converted spiritual and anthropological influences and literary sources into a reduced and minimalist language of gesture and pose. Her body language and choreographies, inspired by ritual and mythical tales, encompass a variety of gestures: the rhythmic beat of wooden blocks, the reflective, blinding effect of mirrors, and the movement of small and large objects, in relation to the body, from one place to another. The painting of circles and lines onto the streets of New York in *Songdelay* (1972), and the drawing and walking along patterns in the sand in *Jones Beach Piece* (1970) and *Nova Scotia Beach Piece* (1971), are indicative of Jonas' later use of narrative devices.

As in the acquisition of a new language, Jonas developed her pictorial vocabulary from one performance to the next, and by the beginning of the '70s, it was apparent that the movements of the body in relation to the

objects on stage — the exploration of space with sticks and poles, and performers pacing the stage and continuously climbing through a ring and around a chair, for example — were closely linked to the elements of her vocabulary of drawing.

The performer sees herself as a medium. Information passes through. — Joan Jonas³

Jonas' performance *Mirage* was seminal in the development of that drawing practice. Originally performed at the Anthology Film Archives in New York in 1976, *Mirage* deals with the transformation of signs and shift of cultural codes. As a performance and installation, the work consists of various drawings, songs, pre-recorded videos, film footage, fragments of a fairy tale, and game-like dance rituals. "I do think about drawing as a language," Jonas has stated. "It is as much a language as the use of objects. It is part of a language. For instance, in *Mirage* there is a film of me drawing a series of signs which stood for transformation. Like [the moon turning into a sun, the sign of the hurricane, the rainbow. They are about change."⁴

Through her own actions and presence, Jonas translates the immediacy inherent in the medium of recording and reproducing content through video into the genre of drawing. As she overlays and fuses formal elements with content, her body and self become the medium of transmission. With a broadly developed range of poses and gestures, she enacts the presence of her characters through her self, as she inscribes their stories and actions into the materials and space around her. Jonas draws on

a wide variety of surfaces, ranging from screens, veils, sheets of paper, blackboards, stones, canvases and objects, to the human body itself.

III

The transformations, displacement, and inner worlds of her imaginary characters are at the core of her interest. As she separates her characters from their context, she strips them of illusion and myth. With her reduced vocabulary of symbols, forms, and gestures, she reinterprets the stories, memories, and journeys of her protagonists. The artist compares drawing to storytelling: "One needs a list of objects to tell a story, and drawing is part of that list. Drawing describes the process and underlying content of the story told."⁵ Following that logic, her drawings may be read as an image-based text. In this sense Jonas' concentration on text and narrative beginning in the mid-'70s on was not a change of direction, but part of her development. Jonas used her performative drawing sessions as a way of commenting on and interpreting the texts of fairy tales and myths. For example, in both *Mirage* and *The Juniper Tree* (1976) she created a space in which her imaginary stories are deconstructed and their traditional gender polarities exposed.

By the mid-'80s, Jonas' performances concentrated on the cultural and historical deconstruction and contextualization of narratives and mythic figures. In the Icelandic legend of Gudrun in *Volcano Saga* (1985), an Irish epic in *Revolted by the thought of known places... Sweeney Astray* (1992), and the myth of Helen of Troy in *Lines in the Sand* (2002), she takes on the double role of storyteller and

protagonist. She slips into the narratives and characters with the help of her constantly shifting appearance and gestural patterns. Through her presence and her choreography of gestures and de-synchronized movements, she deconstructs the cultural and historical relevance of her own position in the shadow of her ambivalent characters and stories.

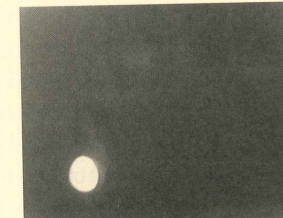
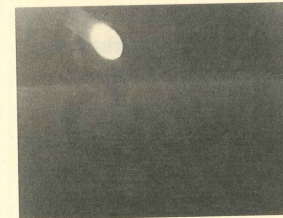
In *Mirage II*, made in 2000, more than twenty years after the original piece, she reconsiders the performance version by intercutting additional elements from the cultural and political context of the time. The result is a half-hour single-channel tape, where TV footage, documentation of her original performance, and clips from the '70s are assembled into a collage of moving images. In the last sequence, she contextualizes and translates the relationship between artist, medium, and gesture into a single, white spot. At first glance, the dot, like a fingertip, moves randomly across the black surface of the monitor.

Like the inscription of light on photographic paper, the dot leaves a blurry trace on the surface of the screen as it dashes around. Through her gestures she creates figures and shapes that appear and dissolve at the same time. In this sequence the relationship between the moving image and the gesture of drawing conveys Jonas' multiple presence as author, material, and subject of her work. Being at once inside and outside her work, she takes on the role of a cultural mediator, shifting between subject and object.

Without being autobiographical, Jonas transcends the private by doubling her presence within the performative space, thus enforcing a distance between her self and her appearance.



The Juniper Tree (1976)
PHOTO: BABBETTE MANGOLTE



Mirage II (2000)



Lines in the Sand (2002), video

In her video *My New Theater III, In the Shadows a Shadow* (1998), she is both artist and protagonist of her own work, using physical gesture and her own body as writing material. By tracing the form of her body with black paint onto a white sheet as she lies under it, she slips into the role of creating subject and created object. As she draws the contours of her body, only her arm, sticking out from under the sheet, is visible. The thick, rough lines of the drawing form an imprint of her body reminiscent in shape of a skeleton. Like in the dot in *Mirage II*, the artist portrays her presence through the gesture of drawing. Jonas' blind retracing of her body recalls Derrida's description of drawing as an expression of the invisible within the visible world, becoming a physical memory and phantom of the nonexistent.⁶

Jonas devaluates the material existence of her drawings by erasing her drawings from the blackboards, crumpling the sheets of paper, or layering them on top of each other.

The inscription and the inevitable erasure, blurring, and veiling through the gesture of drawing is as significant to Jonas' later work as her representational strategies of the inner and outer gaze in regard to her self-presentations were in the early '70s. In so doing, she questions the very conception and value of originality and reproduction in art, thereby reflecting (and reflecting upon) her own social and economic role as an artist.

The deconstruction and presentation of her own artisanship as a contingent and social construct enforces her position as a mediator and translator of the traditional female strategies of representation she selects from history, literature, and art. In *Lines in the Sand*

the thematic analysis of the intangibility of one's own identity as a social construction is mirrored in her insinuated confrontation of H. D. with her interpretation of Helen. The veil, dream and drawing symbolically stand for the unconscious, and for her protagonists' memories of the Trojan War as they unravel their own fates — and illusions. Through her drawing, Jonas, who embodies both the narrator H. D. and Helen, marks the transition from one scene to the next, as well as the physical and temporal transformations of her characters.

When Jonas draws a pyramid and Sphinx from a photograph of her grandmother's "grand tour" to Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century (as her double, the young Helen, draws a sketch of the Nile delta on a small blackboard clutched to her belly), we see a parallelism of action that establishes the parameters for the performance. Observing this scene, the viewer becomes a witness to a temporal and physical journey that represents a fusion of the authors (Jonas and H. D.), through their transformation into their common fictional character Helena. On stage, H. D., as an interpreter of Helen, is confronted with the reflection of her own illusionary perception. Jonas inscribes herself through the visuals she creates in her videos, and draws herself into the dreams and memories of both H. D. and Helen by blending the borders between fiction and history. As narrator of the story, she takes a further step back, to resurface through the de- and re-construction of her own presence. Jonas thus appears as simultaneously an integrated and absent figure in her own work.

Jonas' work exemplifies how issues of author and artist raised in discourse from the '60s still remains critical to her own practice, whether

drawing, use of narrative structures, or critique of traditional female representation. Through a complex layering of stories and disciplines, collecting and gathering different readings of cultural representations and traditions, she produces multi-faceted spaces. Through this work, Jonas, who has often collaborated with younger artists, musicians, and writers, has developed her own responsibility as an artist and author, relentlessly questioning the ways the private can function and integrate itself artistically within the political.

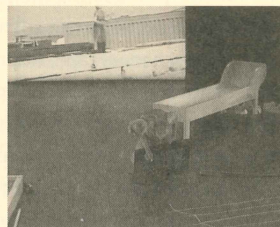


In the Shadow a Shadow
My New Theater III (1998)

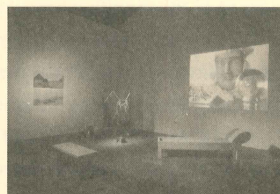


Lines in the Sand (2002)

PHOTO: WERNER MASCHMANN



Lines in the Sand (2002)



Lines in the Sand (2002)

NOTES

- 1 Conversation with the author, May 3, 2003, New York.
- 2 "De-synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances," Douglas Crimp (ed.), *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, exhibition catalogue, University Art Museum (Berkeley, 1983), p. 8.
- 3 Joan Jonas, "Closing Statement," in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
- 4 Conversation with the author, May 3, 2003, New York.
- 5 E-mail from the artist, 2000.
- 6 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, (Chicago, 1993) p. 60.