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Introduction

They’re out of fashion, but the Greeks, Romans, Symbolists, Pre-Raphaelites, and even the Romantics were on to something. Before the moderns tried to align art with ordinary life, the premoderns saw an artwork as an opportunity to create *distance* from life—by looking to the heavens, to myth, to symbol, to fantasy, to tragedy, or to extraordinary people and places.

If I had to encapsulate in a single phrase why Joan Jonas is on my mind, it would be because she believes in distance—what it is, what it can do, and what forms it can take. In the contemporary context, this feels like an important thing to get behind. It underlines a skepticism about the supposed (but illusory and dangerous) ways in which everything and everyone are seamlessly connected, and challenges the notion that art can ever really be merged with life. Instead, it insists that art’s very function, now more than ever, could be to *separate* us from existing (and often stultifying) forms of knowledge and politics, and provide the distance necessary for criticality.

Jonas doesn't pursue the "analytical distance" that artists such as Michael Asher or Hans Haacke have perfected, but prefers a distance that is less calculated and less predictable—one enacted via the body, live performance, technological feedback, site-specificity, vulnerability, animals, narrative, or abstraction.

In writing about Jonas's early work, the art historian Douglas Crimp notes that "the intimate quality of [her] performances —both in terms of their content and in terms of the relationship of spectators to performance—[has been] mitigated by various distancing devices."[1] More specifically, the art historian Cristina Natalicchio describes Jonas as an artist who is "able to *objectify the distance* that separates the viewer from a reality that is fragmented, multiplied, and out of synch" (emphasis is mine).[2] To turn distance into an object means to somehow make it palpable, perceivable, while maintaining its elusive and uncontainable qualities. It means creating a presence for an absence.

One of the first things from which Jonas sought to distance herself was her audience. In a trio of early ensemble pieces, for example, she placed her audience a quarter of a mile away from the performers (*Jones Beach Piece*, 1970); atop a cliff overlooking the performers (*Nova Scotia Beach Dance*, 1971); and on the roof of a Tribeca loft with a view of the empty lots and piers below (*Delay Delay*, 1972). In opening up these spatial and temporal disruptions, Jonas has said that she was "interested in dealing directly with the effect of distance on perception."[3] The sound made by striking

1 Douglas Crimp, "De-synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances," in *Joan Jonas, Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, 1983), 41.

2 Cristina Natalicchio, "My New Theater. Theater in a Box," in *Joan Jonas*, ed. Anna Daneri and Cristina Natalicchio (Milano: Charta/Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2007), 75.

3 Joan Jonas, "*Jones Beach Piece, Nova Scotia Beach Dance*," in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation, 1968-2000* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), 73.

wooden blocks together, for instance, was even distant from *itself*, since it reached its audience with a delay. Seen from afar, the performances merged illusionism with actual space and, therefore, wove psychic and emotional separations into the physical ones. "Nature," Jonas writes, "was given a psychological role."[4] Also central to her concerns was the fact that "distance flattens space, erases or alters sound, modifies scale"[5]—or, more formally speaking, "flattens circles into lines, erases detail, delays sound."[6] With the audience far away, visual and aural properties that seem stable are exposed in all their variations and contingencies.

Beyond creating a separation between herself and her audience, Jonas also works to insert a distance between herself. . .and herself. For example, while Jonas was eager to legitimize her position as a woman, she was careful to detach herself from the pre-scripted figure of a "female artist." In the context of New York in the late 1960s, she not only sought distance from a macho minimalism—its dogma, its politics, and its austere forms and aesthetic—but also from the predetermined "feminine" tropes of vulnerability, emotionality, or the autobiographical.

A first approach was to use masks and alter-egos: "By wearing the mask," Chrissie Iles has written, "Jonas sets femininity apart from the body and situates it approximately in the area of production."[7] A mask turns a face into another face—it leaves a face intact but keeps it out of view by covering it with another one. It separates the real from the represented.

4 Jonas, "*Oad Lau, Wind*," in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation*, 70.

5 "*Jones Beach Piece, Nova Scotia Beach Dance*," 73.

6 Joan Jonas, quoted in Andrea Jahn, "The Encounter with the Gaze Behind the Mask," in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation*, 61.

7 Chrissie Iles, "Reflective Spaces: Film and Video in the Work of Joan Jonas," in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation*, 159.

For *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), Jonas took on an invented persona she has described as an "electronic sorceress," which is itself a reference to a mythical figure whose powers allow her to be in the world but not wholly of it. For *Mirage* (1976), she used a Mexican mask.

But, for Jonas, a mask is more than an object worn over a face. "The video monitor's screen or the projected image," she notes, "was another mask for the construction or deconstruction of persona."[8] When conceived as a mask, a closed video circuit inserts a distance between a body and an image of a body. During her live performances, the artist often points a video camera towards a specific spot and connects it to a live projection in a closed circuit; it then becomes a prop with which she and her performers can interact in real time. The presence of the performing body is accompanied by the presence of that same body *elsewhere* on stage, doubled and slightly farther away. While standing in front of an audience, Jonas distances herself by performing for the camera instead. In her words: "Here there was also distance—even in the close-up."[9]

The artist's expanded notion of the mask began as far back as some of her earliest performances. In *Mirror Piece I* (1969) and *Mirror Piece II* (1970), performers held (and therefore *hid behind*) large mirrors. In crowded gymnasiums in New York, the performers managed to create a sense of distance: the mirrors were not only props, but also shields that kept the performers separated from their audience, who, in turn, saw glimpses of themselves mixed with glimpses of parts of performers' bodies in a fluid series of interruptions

8 Anja Zimmerman, "The (Im)Mobile Trap of the Reflecting Surface: Self-Construction and Image Construction in the Work of Joan Jonas," in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation*, 98.
9 Ibid.

and fragmentations. For *Mirror Check* (1970), Jonas stood nude in front of her audience and inspected her body with a small handheld mirror. In this case, the artist is fully exposed and any distance from her audience seems impossible. And yet, even in video documentation of the piece, our gaze is directed towards what the artist is looking at—the mirror—rather than towards the artist herself. Without covering an inch of her body, she creates a mask, or at least a decoy, that places an invisible barrier between her body and her audience. Here, once again, there is distance—even in the close-up.

Later in her career, Jonas understood that masks can also take the form of stories, myths, and rituals. "Story is the external shell for narrative," David Antin once wrote—a story is a mask, a distancing device that wedges itself between the real and the represented and between an audience and a narrative.

The sources of Jonas's stories are distant in time and place: an Icelandic saga from the thirteenth century (*Volcano Saga*, 1985); a medieval Irish epic (*Revolted by the Thought of Known Places...Sweeney Astray*, 1992); an ancient Gaelic tale (*Woman in the Well*, 1996-2000); a 1955 poem by H.D. (*Lines in the Sand*, 2002); and a 1923 essay by Aby Warburg (*The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, 2004-06). In these works, the distant past is made to inhabit the moment of performance, each affecting the other.

Rituals, as a form of human behavior, performance, ceremony, and even daily life, bring together fact with fantasy. Whether they emerge out of respect for ancient civilizations or out of obsessions with everyday habits, they inhabit, complicate, and animate the space that separates objects

from subjects. For Jonas, rituals can be distancing devices, not only because they use stories as masks, but also because they don't distinguish the rational from the irrational. Her interest in paganism, in the form of the Hopi Snake Dance for example (*The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*), stems from its ability to distance itself from rationality.[10] The inevitable gap between art and life—and the rituals that animate it—constitutes the arena for her work.

Elsewhere in this book, Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer discusses Jonas's recent video *Beautiful Dog* (2014). To make this piece, the artist hung a GoPro camera from her dog's neck and had him run around the beach. Animals have long played a major role in the artist's work, and to imagine the world from a dog's perspective will always be to imagine the world at a distance. However, Jonas's demand for distance doesn't mean rejection or unavailability; but rather maintaining a sense of exchange, an allowance for difference, and a space for invention and imagination. It means creating a presence for an absence.

10 "The entire practice of art is embedded in rain and hunt magic" (script for *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, scene 11), *Joan Jonas: The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, ed. Lynne Cooke (New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2006), 38.