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Joan Jonas

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This conversation took place in Joan Jonas's studio in New York in 2003.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Let's begin with your new video, *Waltz* [2003].
Joan Jonas: It's something I put together from work I recently choreographed as a performer for a Robert Ashley opera [*Celestial Excursions*, 2003], and afterward I decided to turn the images into something else. Last year in Canada, where I go every summer, I began to work the way I often do: just improvise and play. There were two things on my mind that you can't really see in the video. I kept thinking about Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings [1810–20]. It would be ridiculous to say that they are a real reference, but I was thinking about them. My other thought was about amateur theater, where people put on theater pieces in their garden, backyard, or barn. I remember that idea from my own childhood—theater and play. That was really the way I began this piece—just gathering the props and objects together and improvising. Then I set up the situation with a performer and some props, using the costumes I had from the performance, and I began making a series of images. I shot every day and just tried to build something up. The two men who are in the piece, Geoff Hendricks and his friend Sur Rodney (Sur), are both performance artists who happened to visit, and I asked them to just walk around—more just to move through the set, then they began to play a part as well, and that's how the piece came together. Of course, it didn't really come together until I edited it in New York.

HUO: In urbanism, Cedric Price had this idea of the non-plan, which involves self-organization and improvisation. So could I say of you that you're working from the idea of a non-plan?
JJ: Well, in one sense I had no plan, and in another I did. It varies with each project. I improvise to discover. Having no plan is more difficult, because when you come to the editing, you don't have any structure; you have to make a structure from the material. I find that very interesting, because I discover things about the content, or about the relationship of scenes, and this leads to surprising solutions. This is a piece that could have had many different results, and I'll probably use the material in other ways as well, in something else.
HUO: Could you tell me about the sonic dimension of the piece?
JJ: The music comes from the area I spend summers in Cape Breton in Nova Scotia, Canada. I very much like the music from there; it's like the folk music from Brittany and Scottish fiddle music. I asked a man up there who wrote this waltz if I could use it, and I called the piece *Waltz*, because it seemed a kind of neutral title in which anything could happen in relation to this music. The other sounds were just things that I recorded during the time I was videotaping the piece. I've mixed them together to suggest different, overlapping locations and the relationship between them.
HUO: Objects are actually in a certain way not just dead matter but they can trigger conversations, they may even be sending beams to each other. What is the status of objects in your work?
JJ: Well, I often collect the objects before I make the piece, and then get ideas from them and their relationship to each other. And these objects—a funnel, a

blackboard, mirrors—suggest a kind of magic show. Here, in a way, I wanted to develop the piece by actually using the objects, in more ways, like flashing the sun through the mirror at the dog who then disappears. So the objects will also suggest something that's going to happen, but never does. I like that kind of tension. The objects are props that become relations.

HUO: The set in this piece seems to be linked to some of your very early pieces. The set was very important in your early New York works.

JJ: In order to do a performance, even for the camera, I have to create a very specific place, kind of a little theater set within the landscape framed by the camera. I arranged the objects with the chair and table. All the objects that I find in Canada have the flavor of another time and place, and in each piece they have a specific function or reference. The paper curtain was another thing that defined the space. It started out as a flag, and then I turned it into a backdrop for the action. The idea of using red and white is something I've used in other work; red and white are basic colors in a certain sense, as in fairy tales. They also symbolize other things, like surrender or the planet Mars. At the time Mars just happened to be closer to Earth than it had ever been. That's not why I used a red flag, but Mars was certainly on my mind. In fact, at first I called the piece *Under Mars*, but that's kind of a corny title. I like *Waltz* better.

HUO: The props remain as a set once the performance is done. And then you bring the video and the props into a museum, in the context of an exhibition. What is the meaning of this form of "dance"?

JJ: The props acquire a kind of aura because they've been part of a performance. They're special. This piece has not developed to a point where I could put the props in a museum. I haven't finished with them, for one thing. But I don't just do that without thinking carefully about it. In past works, where I've used props in specific ways, either in the photographs or the video that are the result of the performance, when I put the pieces into a museum, the props have a presence. But there are a lot of objects that I wouldn't just put in a museum without giving them a specific function in relation to a specific performance. I've always collected objects. You know you can manipulate a group of objects; you can always say something that way. They suggest a sentence or a thought; that's what interests me about props. And when I pick up an object, it inspires me to move in a certain way, or to do something I wouldn't have normally done without the object.

HUO: You describe a precise and particular movement. You find these objects locally and then they begin to generate the action.

JJ: I'm very interested in specific things, like, obviously, mirrors and funnels, especially long funnels. I've actually made funnels, designed them and made them, which then become props; pieces, as you have seen, that also generate and direct sound. I made a piece called *Funnel* [1972], for instance. I started out with the idea of the funnel because the cone interested me, as a form. I thought I would like to work with that form in the sculptural sense, in relation to performance. Now, whenever I see an interesting funnel, I buy it. In Mexico, for instance, when I did my last performance, I went to the market and bought these huge funnels they use, that are made out of tin. Whenever I travel I collect things.

HUO: You are surrounded by many objects. How is your archive organized?
JJ: Yes, they are all stored here. I would like to store them more systematically. Frankly, because I collect so many of them, I want to put them away so I don't have to look at them. They have begun to crowd the space.
HUO: What is the purpose of the studio? How does travel affect your practice?
JJ: From the very beginning, in the late 1960s, when I began to do work for my very first piece, I was inspired by traveling. First I spent a year in Greece and lived for a few months in a small village in Crete where I witnessed the rituals of everyday life, including a three-day wedding in the mountains. I also traveled to the southwest of the U.S. to the pueblos of the Hopi where I was very lucky to see the Snake Dance. When I began to do performances, I had to think about who I was in a performance, what part I was playing, and why I was getting up in front of people. I have always been interested in the rituals of other cultures, and although I wasn't "illustrating" or quoting them specifically, I did consider specific actions and translate them into my own language—that is, I was thinking of making pictures, and in that way constructing, you might say, sentences. Going to Japan had an enormous effect on my work, as did going to Mexico. I'm always inspired when I travel. In order to stay in my studio all the time, I need to go out and bring things back from my travels.
HUO: So the studio is actually a receptacle. Do objects that you find when you are traveling affect your conception of a piece made on the road?
JJ: I do bring things here. But often I like to do something in another place and then bring it back in a camera. There are all kinds of ways to bring things back.

HUO: Speaking of your beginnings, you have said that you felt very close to the process exhibition organized at the Whitney Museum in 1969 ["Anti-Illusion: Procedure/Materials," New York]. There you basically found your context; you found the artists of your own generation. What was interesting is that the artists you mention are mostly related to sound: La Monte Young, Philip Glass, Steve Reich.
JJ: Hearing my first La Monte Young piece was a major experience for me—to hear that very abstract and nonlinear sound hovering in space. His pieces always lasted for hours. I had never heard anything like that before, in or out of a concert hall. It was a very pure experience. Then there was the work of Glass and Reich, with their very mathematical structures. When you listen to your contemporaries, you relate to the structure in a very different way than you do to [Johannes] Bach or [Ludwig van] Beethoven, say, because you can relate the structure of their work to your own work. I often thought of my early work as if it were music, an intuitive assemblage of elements rather than a story. But in relation to the process show, music is also time-based work, and that's probably the reason that I'm still very interested in sound now. Sound is very important in my work, and I construct the soundtracks myself. I was also really interested in the idea that you could know the process of something in the result. In my case I could translate that into a performance where you would see the process of image-making, instead of hiding it in the theatrical way or as in a magic show. I was interested in working with magic and tricks, but always showing how it was done.
HUO: In your early New York pieces, you often used mirrors as a way to reveal the way that illusions are

made. Interestingly, it's often broken mirrors, which reappear in *Waltz*.
JJ: My first idea for mirrors came from literature. I remember being intrigued by [Jorge Luis] Borges's descriptions of mirrors, that mirrors were mysterious and evil as well as beautiful. Mirrors *are* mysterious. They break up the space, they multiply reality, and optically they're very interesting. Mirrors also break, of course. I think that in those early works where I hit my image in the mirror and it shatters, it had a lot to do with me looking at myself and wanting to destroy something. Mirrors make people uneasy; in the performances, people were also made uncomfortable and tense by the glass, this heavy glass that might break. It wasn't dangerous at all, of course; we were all in total control. But I like that sense of tension mirrors create. I was intrigued by Borges, his world of labyrinths, his "The Garden of Forking Paths" ["El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan," 1941] and so on. Borges was a major influence on my work. I often take my influences from literature.
HUO: You obviously had a great deal of dialogue with Richard Serra.
JJ: Richard was a very close friend; we lived together for a while. One interesting part of my dialogue with him came from the fact that he was very interested in theater; he had a side that was inspired by theater. I liked, and like, his work very much, and he became interested in my work, and it was a wonderful relationship. I was just starting out, and I couldn't easily talk about my work but I just had to do it—and here was somebody who was very bright, someone with whom I could talk about it, who came to be interested in my work. We were both involved in the idea of perception,

an idea that was then being explored by many people. He was interested in the perception of figures around the edges of his walls, and that's where he got the idea of building a prop for a performance. So we sometimes collaborated together. For instance, he made a wall piece with a mirror on it for a performance I called *Choreomania* [1971].
HUO: In your work there's a lot of collaboration, not only with the actor but also beyond the art world, between the worlds of theater and dance.
JJ: There was a certain atmosphere in those days, the late 1960s, of everybody knowing each other. It was very intense; ideas were passed through the air, and everybody went to see everybody else's work. When I did a piece I would just ask my friends to be in it, like Susan Rothenberg, Gordon Matta-Clark, or Steve Paxton, who had a very special part in the film *Songdelay* [1973]. Now you can't do that as easily. The community is so much bigger, and people are also much more stressed and tired. Maybe you could with younger artists, but not with my generation. The other thing is that in those days, the dance world, the music world, the theater world, and the art world were in close proximity, exchanging and interacting with each other. There were workshops: Trisha Brown did a workshop in which I participated, for example. It was only later that everyone went off in their own directions.
HUO: The art world in the 1960s lived from this very interesting kind of pulling together of knowledge, developing a transdisciplinarity that worked. At a certain moment something went missing. What do you think went wrong? When segregation happens, it is a huge loss for the art world. When did it begin to break apart in New York?

JJ: It happened gradually in the 1970s. For instance, Trisha focused on the dance world, Yvonne Rainer became a filmmaker, and artists like [Claes] Oldenburg and [Robert] Rauschenberg stopped doing happenings. I think for visual artists performing is very hard; it takes a lot of energy and organization. All the visual artists went back to their studios and did their own work.

There was the geographic aspect: it was about New York, where most of us were concentrated below 14th Street. People came from all over. Dancers came from California; Ann Halprin had her own theater, or dance school, in San Francisco. Simone Forti went there, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown. Then they all came to New York. There were artists here like Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, and Robert Whitman. Then there were the composers who came here: Terry Riley, La Monte Young, Philip Glass came here, Richard Serra came here. Everybody came to New York. John Cage was here, there was Merce Cunningham, there was Black Mountain College and the Living Theater.

And there were many overlapping events. I don't know exactly why Allan Kaprow invented the word "happening," but it caught fire. Then there was Judson Church: there was the experimentation going on with dancers; there was "Nine Evenings" [69th Regiment Armory, New York, 1966] where Billy Klüver's series Art and Technology took place. That was a wonderful series of events. A lot of things were introduced. I think there were a lot of social reasons and also technological reasons for everything coming together. The idea of electronic music, for example. I saw two hours of Merce Cunningham and John Cage on TV the other night. It looked so much more radical then; it's not so radical now because it is familiar, but it is still vital. There are a few people now, like William Forsythe, who is fantastic, but back then was a radical moment, a real break. It was an important time, and everybody felt it. I went to everything because I was learning about and immediately excited by the whole thing. I thought, "This is what I want to do. Whatever it is—I don't know what it is—this is what I want to do!" I knew Henry Geldzahler—he was a friend of my husband's—and because Henry was working at the Met, he knew all these people downtown, so he would call us when Oldenburg was doing a happening or La Monte Young was doing a concert. That was how I came to see a lot of these things. I do think that in certain periods of art history, there are moments when people come together, like the Dadaists and the Surrealists. Things happen like that: they come together, then they move apart, and then they come back together again. That was a moment of people coming together.

HUO: You were always informed.

JJ: I was informed. I just saw everything; that was my education, my post-graduate study, and it was in the streets. For everything that I'm doing now, I would say that my education was definitely just the world, this world. For instance, I was very affected by the kind of work Steve Paxton and other dancers did, when they began working with everyday movement. For me, coming from a visual-arts background, that opened infinite possibilities. You brought up the word "collaboration," and in the broadest sense that's what it was. Seeing what people were doing, I felt I could just do anything. And I suppose there was something that started with John Cage, although you knew he went back to [Marcel] Duchamp, in a way. So that was a thread that runs through the twentieth century and which has become more and more pronounced and defined.

HUO: For Duchamp, of course, it is the viewer who is asked to do half of the work. What are your thoughts on the viewer?
JJ: It took me a long time to understand that idea specifically in relation to my own experience. It is, of course, true, particularly of my work, which can be interpreted in many different ways, because it is complex and layered, and different people see different things. So you have to let go, in a sense. I think Duchamp really let go of his work, which is admirable. As you grow older, you learn more and more how to let go of some of the control of perception, even though you steer it. I also believe that a particular performance can be seen differently from night to night, depending on who's in the audience and what the audience feels like. So in that sense performances vary. I think that as we move from country to country, from culture to culture, this becomes even more pronounced. We're interpreted so differently.
HUO: In the last three or four years, a new generation has been going back to performance again, and to the presence of the artist as performer. Many artists have told me that the way you actually relate to performance was for them very much a trigger. Many artists are also interested in the way you use film.
JJ: Well, there are two reasons I became very interested in film as part of my work. First of all, I love film, and Jonas Mekas's Anthology Film Archives used to be in Soho, right around the corner from where I live. I went there as often as possible. And when I began to do performances I wanted to go outside the art world, outside of those visual-arts references. I wanted to find references from other sources, and film became a main source because it involves the art of time and it involves structure, all the things that I am interested in. So I related my performance to film, and used the language of film in my performance. I worked with the structure of the montage, the cut.
HUO: What were the films you were seeing?
JJ: Because of my art-historical methodology, I always start from the beginning. I wanted to educate myself with the history of filmmaking. Anthology was the perfect place to be. I looked at early French film, early Russian film, early German film, and early Danish and Scandinavian film. Those mostly silent films really inspired me because they were much more about the image and the movement within the film, and less about the narrative. They're more abstract and poetic than a Hollywood film, which I love for different reasons. I loved [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder and [Jean-Luc] Godard and all the films from that period as well. But more abstract and non-narrative films were closer to my work, and were the films that inspired me at the beginning. I thought of my work as a series of metaphors, as if it were a musical piece, or like beads on a string—or like a film. I had to think of it in some other terms in order to invent my own way of making a performance.
HUO: The *Organic Honey* series [from 1972] for example.
JJ: I wanted to get away from minimalism. I was surrounded by minimalists, but I wanted to define my own language. I had gone to Japan with Richard Serra. We went to see the Noh theater and the Kabuki. I couldn't understand the language of this incredibly rigorous dance theater, so it wasn't about the psychology or the story. It was about the dance, the movement, the props, the music, the sound. It was 1970, and I had just bought my first Portapak. That video

camera became a major tool for many artists, because it was the first time you could sit in your studio by yourself and see immediate results. I started out just playing with identity and disguise and objects in front of the camera. I thought of it as making a film. So I started to make little scenes and put them together. I had read something about Marilyn Monroe in front of the camera; somebody said that what you see in the camera, or in the film, is totally different from what you see when you watch the filming itself. This led me to start showing the process of the image-making. That was also when I started doing the video performances. I had to invent a character, but I was very shy and had no experience as a performer, so I went out and bought a mask in an erotic store and disguised myself as someone else. And I called myself "Organic Honey," a phrase I had read on a honey jar. Again, I suppose, it all comes from childhood theater: I began to perform in my loft for friends, for whoever was there, and then developed the performance with video.
HUO: On your own.
JJ: Yes. I wanted to be able to present a solo, and not have to depend on groups of people.
HUO: Have you ever used puppets in your work? Obviously you use a lot of dolls.
JJ: There's a puppet right over there, that skeleton. I haven't used it yet. I've always wanted to make a puppet piece. There are so many references in my work to objects from childhood, and certainly every child has puppets; I did. In a way, in my work, maybe people become puppets. In *Songdelay* there's this part where a woman puts sticks in her pants and does a little dance. It's very much like a little puppet. I like sticks; I always have sticks in my pieces, sticks and poles, extensions of the body. These are all things you can hold onto and extend into space. I find poles very beautiful; they're lines. And for circles I use hoops. These are graphic elements that are simple and basic, that you can define space with.
HUO: The relation between people and objects in your work seems almost mystical. When we were talking about your dog earlier, I thought of Rupert Sheldrake, who works with telepathy between humans and dogs. Not that your dog is an object—in *Waltz*, she's really a protagonist.
JJ: Oh yeah, my dog is a character. She is a comedian and a natural performer. I never ask her; she just gravitates towards the action. It's very strange; she somehow knows what to do. The relationship between animals and humans is very mysterious, and I think it's very important, especially in this world right now, the planet we're living on. Animals, because they're becoming more scarce, are more and more important. When I first incorporated the dog into my work, it was the same thing then as it is now: the dog just entered into the space of performance. I grew up with dogs; there was always a dog in my life. But beyond that, I had to think, "Why is the dog in my piece?" I related it to an animal helper; in mythology there's always a horse or a dog, or a crow, a pig, a cow. For me it was always the dog, the magical intrusion of the animal.

I definitely believe in telepathy. I was always interested in people doing experiments like reading minds and so on, and I have always been interested in the idea of magic shows and fortune-tellers. I used to like to have my fortune told. For a while there, I was having my fortune told all the time. I've stopped doing that now, because I do not enjoy the idea of somebody

putting an image in my head. I'm too susceptible to that. But I always thought of myself as an electronic sorceress. That was one of my roles. I rehearse my work only at night, and when I rehearsed, which was really performing for the camera and finding images, I stepped into another space that was not the same as my everyday space. You could almost call it a séance. And that grainy quality of early video was so strange, even otherworldly. That was the aesthetic that we all really liked. Filmmakers hated it, of course. I think it's also linked to the end of the nineteenth century, beginning of the twentieth, parallel with developments in the technologies of looking and recording, with all the spiritualists and spiritualist practices with mirrors. People were doing all these theatrical pieces, like those with the tilted mirror creating an illusion of a ghost. That's another way of being interested in exposing the process, exposing the magic. But it's still magical in a way, even if you expose it.

HUO: A lot of this uses children's poetry and fairy tales, as in *The Juniper Tree* [1976/1994].

JJ: Yes. That was the first time that I actually chose to do a narrative. I was commissioned to do a piece for children at the ICA in Philadelphia, and it occurred to me that it would be most interesting to do a fairy tale. With the help of a couple of friends who are writers, like Susan Howe, I picked "The Juniper Tree." As soon as I entered the world of fairy tales, I became involved with storytelling and a different kind of narrative. Other pieces had a kind of mythical narrative, but this turned into a literal narration. "The Juniper Tree" is a strange story, and very complex. I'm always interested in history—again history, tracing things back to the beginning—so the way I began to work with "The Juniper Tree" was to read about

the myth of Osiris. I really do believe that these myths came to Europe through Asia, but they also came from shamanistic practices.

HUO: You do your autodidactic research through your travels?

JJ: Through my travels, and a lot of reading. I knew some of it already because I was always interested in mythology. *The Juniper Tree* started out as a collaboration, with two people who worked in the theater, Lindzee Smith and Tim Burns, and then a dancer, Pooh Kaye, and a singer, Linda Zadekian. We collaborated on the first performance; it was like a Chinese opera. Then I did a solo, in which I played all the parts. We've been talking a lot about collaboration, but I can't collaborate all the time! I have to go back to my solitary existence in my studio in order to get my feet back on the ground. But that was a very important collaboration, that first version of *The Juniper Tree*. In the end it got too theatrical. I became more involved with the idea of theater in the late 1970s and 1980s, which was problematic, because the theater got to be too much.

HUO: It started out as a performance, then moved toward theater; did you every think about making it into a film?

JJ: Yes, and I'm sorry I never did. That was a project that I didn't carry through to its conclusion, and it would have been interesting. I could also have made a film of *Organic Honey*. I would never go back and touch that one, though I have gone back into the material in other pieces, like *Mirage* [*Mirage*, 1976; *Mirage II*, 1976/2000], for instance. One thing that I constantly think about right now is making a film.

HUO: A feature film?

JJ: A feature film might not be distributed and then disappear. I'm not interested in that, and I like working within the context of the art world. I just made *Waltz*, but it is only six minutes long. And I've stopped asking, "Is this too long for the audience?" This is something you have to think about in galleries and museums, but I want to make something as long as I want it to be. In the 1980s we were asked to make pieces for television, and they always had to be twenty-eight minutes. That kind of time constraint inhibits you. I'm interested in making something very long, but that takes time. For instance, Morton Feldman made very long pieces, and they're beautiful. There's a student at the MIT Media Lab who made a sound piece that takes something like a year to play. It's obviously an idea related to technology.

When I went to Japan, the idea of time came to interest me somehow; in those Noh dramas you sit for four hours. Jack Smith dealt with time; his pieces were often four hours long. I knew him, and when we returned from Japan we went to see his performances at midnight every Saturday. He had an enormous effect on me. He was a brilliant theater artist and filmmaker, though relatively few people saw his work because he was so eccentric.

HUO: He also raises the question of identity and many notions of the self.

JJ: Oh, yes. He dressed up and disguised himself.

HUO: This idea of identity is very interesting. I was just reading a book by Zygmunt Bauman [*Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, 2003] about the fact that identity is a fairly recent issue. In the nineteenth century the great sociologists wouldn't consider identity as a subject, and then suddenly in our time it became a burning topic.

JJ: That question has come up for me too, specifically in *Organic Honey* but also because of my involvement with film and theater. When you go to a film, and you identify with the characters in the film, you enter that make-believe world. If you identify with the idea of being an actor or performer, you have to think about another identity. I didn't know about [Jacques] Lacan's mirror stage when I started doing my mirror pieces. Aside from the visual, formal, artistic, or literary references, I think I was looking for my identity, looking at the mirror and asking, "Who am I?" If you look at yourself in the mirror in relation to performance, or look at yourself in the camera, you have to ask that question, because you're not who you think you are. It's the double, and has to do with construct and artifice, and also with your own psychology. Whenever you do a piece where you have to play a role—as in *The Juniper Tree*, where I had to play the mother—it brings up all kinds of questions about your identity: who you are, and why you identify with this role. But as a matter of fact, you have to keep a distance from the role.

HUO: To come back to what you were saying in the beginning, it's also related to Borges and the idea that at the end of a film—or a conversation, like this one—we are no longer the same person as at the beginning.

JJ: Yes, that's true. I'm having my students at MIT read Borges, and the effect is interesting. He's so profound. I always wanted to work with one of his stories, but I find them so particular that it would be very hard to turn one of them into a piece. They're so particular to his time, his place, and even to the names in the story. But the idea of "The Garden of Forking Paths" is always relevant to the present, to the time we live in. He altered my perception of the universe.

HUO: You've told me about teaching at MIT; it's something that you've given quite a lot of time to. I imagine teaching has become more important for you over time.
JJ: Well, as I learn more how to teach, how difficult it is—it's difficult to find a way to work with students that's important to them—I work in different ways; I try to create situations for them where they can learn how to construct things, how to translate their thoughts into images, and so on. But the other day I had a workshop where I had them drawing on the wall. I set the camera up so it really looked beautiful. I liked it because it was nice for them to know they could participate in this kind of image-making; it was like writing on the wall, or drawing in a cave. So the students can inspire me in that way, but they are also important to me because I can share things like that with them. Some of them become friends. There are also different ways of working with students, the more advanced ones, for instance, like the students I have met at the Rijksakademie, and also at MIT, and also at Stuttgart. They become part of your life, and I think that's very important.
HUO: Drawing has played such a big role in your work, particularly in the period between 1976 and 1980. The production of drawing perhaps in a way replaced the production of video. And ever since, there has been an ongoing activity of drawing, and even when video comes back, the drawing is always alongside it.
JJ: I have always liked to draw. I find new ways or reasons to draw in each piece. I like to draw in a performance because it inspires me in a way that I hadn't thought of before. Subjects or stories, actions, and movements generate ideas. And because I am interested in history, of art, painting, and sculpture, drawing is a kind of

image-making that has become part of my visual language. I draw more and more now.
HUO: Do you also have a daily practice of writing? I know you write texts that are like scores or descriptions for your performances.
JJ: There's one piece called *I Want to Live in the Country* [1976], where I wrote a kind of a diary, and purposely wrote in a certain way. But mostly I don't use my own writing; I use other people's. James Joyce, poets, the Imagist poets, like William Carlos Williams. There's a whole list of them.
HUO: Why William Carlos Williams?
JJ: I like that early period of modern American poetry. It's a condensed form of thought in words. Poetry also has a form that you can see on the page, which is a visual thing, and that's why I'm interested in Williams and others. Those poets also express something about the American sensibility. I read a lot; I love to get lost in novels. Somebody recently told me about a Russian filmmaker who combined *Anna Karenina* [1877] and *War and Peace* [1869]. I like that idea. The double narrative.

I'm always thinking about how I can take on a story, but it's so difficult. It's taken me many years to learn how to deal with stories. I was just reading [Andrei] Tarkovsky, and he says the first thing early filmmakers did was to make all these novels into films, which is really the wrong way to do it. He's against that way of working; his films are more poetic and more abstract, and he wrote his own scripts.
HUO: Have you ever rewritten scripts?
JJ: No, just fairy tales.
HUO: Tell me about your favorite stories.
JJ: There are many. In *Upside Down and Backwards* [1979], for instance, I chose two Grimm Brothers' stories:

"The Frog Prince," which I rewrote in reverse and then intercut with "The Boy Who Set Out to Learn Fear." That piece is about symmetry, a boy and a girl, and about fear, and sexuality. That was interesting. I was writing then, but sometimes my writing sounds too romantic to me, and I like irony and humor.

HUO: You also like epics and sagas, obviously, which are related to fairy tales. You started a series of works based on sagas in the 1980s with *Volcano Saga* [1985–89].

JJ: Yes, I took science-fiction stories for *Double Lunar Dogs* [1980], and the Icelandic saga for *Volcano Saga*, and translated them into half-hour videos for television, as well as performances. In my opinion they were problematic. I like *Volcano Saga*, though, and it was a long, fascinating process. I spent five years involved in it, though not working all the time on it. There are many reasons why *Double Lunar Dogs* failed, one being my new fascination with special effects. But there are interesting things about it, too. The 1980s was a learning period for me.

HUO: You have often spoken of the 1980s as a complicated time for you.

JJ: It was a combination of my own state of mind and the shock of the scene shifting, at the end of the 1970s, from the kind of work I had been doing, to focus on the gallery system all of a sudden. I later saw, of course, that I could have shifted, too; I could have started doing installations then. In fact, people asked me to do shows, but I refused, because I had this perhaps immature idea against doing things in galleries.

HUO: Did you stay behind with the idea of going underground?

JJ: It wasn't that purposeful. For me it was about the transient, fleeting moment. Maybe it was unrealistic of me. In any case, I continued to do performances. I was working very hard. When you're an artist, you're involved in a certain "connectedness." But sometimes you can lose that connection to your surroundings. So in the 1980s, I partly lost touch. I kept producing work; there was more funding in the 1980s for video artists, we got huge grants, and we had access to TV studios for post-production. Of course, I think the 1980s were an important time for artists. It was also a reaction against the 1970s, so artists in the 1980s—many of them sympathetic to me, friends—had to react against the kind of work that I was doing. That was difficult for me. And then when the 1990s came, I was very glad the 1980s were over, too. But when I look back, I have much more sympathy towards the 1980s, and I understand that era much better. I feel close to many of the artists of the period.

HUO: The saga you began in the 1980s continued with *Revolted by the thought of known places... Sweeney Astray* [1992–94].

JJ: Yes, there was definitely a connection. Iceland was partially settled by Irish monks, and this felt closer to home. I had wandered far, been influenced by more distant cultures, so I continued to follow a thread through a western European tradition of the narrative. From Iceland it was easy to go to Ireland. I was doing this project in Amsterdam, for the Stedelijk Museum, and Rudi Fuchs asked me, "Why don't you do a big theater piece?" I chose *Sweeney Astray*, an Irish epic poem, and a medieval one, in a version by Seamus Heaney. I had become interested in that period and its epics. *Sweeney Astray* is about a king who went mad in

battle, crazed from the effects of war, which seemed like a relevant subject at the time.

HUO: And directly from the epics you went small, with the miniature theaters of the *My New Theater* series [1997–2006].

JJ: At the time I felt that I didn't want to continue to produce these big pieces like *Sweeney Astray*. And I also thought that perhaps I would no longer do live performances, so I wanted to make my own little theaters that would travel around without me. I saw this miniature theater in Holland—actually Holland is kind of miniature, anyway. It was a children's theater, and it was wonderful. I think that's maybe where I started thinking about miniature theaters.

HUO: *Lines in the Sand* [2002] is also a freestanding work.

JJ: Again, sometimes things come from the outside. Okwui Enwezor asked me to do it for documenta. He came to look at my work, but as he's a writer, he's also interested in literature, of course. He said, "Why don't you do something with an epic poem?" I found a piece by H. D., the Imagist poet Hilda Doolittle, called *Helen in Egypt* [1961]. I was very happy Okwui asked me to do it, because that piece became another kind of transition for me. You know, all during the 1980s I couldn't afford to have a camera, though I had the Portapak in the 1970s. In the 1980s the technology of the camera became too expensive for artists, or for me at least. And then when the Hi8 camera came along in the 1990s, I was able to have my own camera again. I've become more and more involved with my own camera work, and since I don't want to be in front of the camera as much, I'm actually behind the camera more and more.