

"That's what we do— we retell stories." Listening to Joan Jonas

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While planning her shows in England this autumn, Joan Jonas took time to talk at length to Robert Ayers about some of the issues raised by her work. This transcript of their conversation, which was video recorded at Joan Jonas's home in New York City on September 17, 2004, has been edited by both Robert Ayers and Joan Jonas.

Robert Ayers: Joan, I'd like to focus in our conversation today on the pieces you're going to be showing in Southampton and London. Do you think I could begin by asking you about the relationship that exists between pieces that were originally done as performances or videos but which are now finding a renewed life as installations? How did that process begin?

Joan Jonas: Originally I had made some small installations, but never as major work. The work had concentrated on performance and single-channel video works. But in 1994, I was asked to do a retrospective show of five works plus one new work, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. I had to find a way to show the original pieces, and in thinking about it and talking it over with Dorine Mignot, the curator, we decided together that it wouldn't make sense to show drawings for example, separated from the original videos, objects, or "stage sets." So, because I'm a visual artist really, and I've always made my own stages and my own objects, I decided that the natural step would be to install each work—slightly adjusted—like a stage set, as it were.

RA: So the installations are a sort of stage set? Was that sort of set actually the starting point for the earlier performances?

JJ: In some cases I found a space—a gymnasium or a factory, or outdoors, for instance—while in others I constructed a place for the action: it really became my sculpture. I made a stage set for *The Juniper Tree* [1976], and the same for the *Organic Honey* series [from 1972]. I always had to begin with a defined place to perform. I was very conscious of what the audience would perceive.

In between the Stedelijk show and the Queens Museum show earlier this year it's been ten years. I was working out ideas in those years. By the time I got to Queens (and after a similar show in Stuttgart), I was playing a bit more successfully in arrangements between the main works. I continued to work on installations and showing in spaces that were mostly not theater spaces; and I continued to make performances, but instead of that being my main focus, it was a source for ideas.

RA: In England there'll be the installation version of *Lines in the Sand* [2002] in Southampton at the same time that the performance version is happening at Tate Modern. That was how it worked here in New York in the spring when the installation was part of the Queens Museum show and you were performing at the Kitchen. How do the two experiences work for you? Do you learn things about the installation by doing the performance, and vice versa?

JJ: Well, remember that I had already seen the two together at documenta in Kassel in 2002, so I had already gone through that process. I found new ways to deal with the material. I knew that the Kassel audience would see the installation, so because I didn't want to repeat the installation exactly, I purposely left video sequences out to include new scenes. I used some of the same elements, but I was thinking about

what the differences could be. Particularly in the use of time. In the installation the main tape is short, only twenty minutes, and the edits mostly fast, so the performance gave me the opportunity—which I missed in the editing of the installation—to deal with time in a different way, to lengthen time, to consider duration. An audience has a different concentration in a gallery space. They pass through. And of course live performers alter the material. So yes, I understood the piece in a new way.

RA: But I think this brings us straight away to something very particular about your work. I've always been struck by the fact that in your pieces, because there are always a number of elements at play at any one time, people are allowed to find their own connections between the various elements. Is that something that you do consciously?

JJ: Yes, I do. It's something that I've worked with for a long time. As soon as I started working with video I started working with the idea of layers: different simultaneous actions and images that related to and reinforced each other. I think it's simply that I got more interested in complexity and in building the links between things.

RA: But doesn't it also mean that no two people see the performance in the same way?

JJ: Of course. That's when people start having different experiences because they can't watch the whole thing. They watch one thing and they miss something else going on over here. I can't look at my pieces that way. I don't know what that experience is. I know everything that's going on. When I rehearse the pieces I'm looking at everything at once—and I can do that because I know it so well—so I'm looking at the all-over picture.

But it interests me that people can see the performance in such different ways—they can miss one thing and see something else—and that one person's interpretation and experience of it can be slightly different to the next. But I think that's what is true of all perception of art, even if you do see the whole thing at once.

RA: But does it worry you that there might be too much in the performance for any one individual to appreciate?

JJ: No, it doesn't worry me, not really. It doesn't look so complex to me, but I guess it is. I work on the different visual and aural threads—I work on the video editing and that layer, and then I work on the performance layer. One of my main concerns is how the work is perceived—what it looks like to the audience. I really would like people to understand the piece, but I can't really get too involved with this issue, I can only make something that is interesting to me, and that means something.

I also think that it comes from the whole history of performance art, or of happenings anyway. It doesn't come out of nowhere. The happenings involved several things going on at the same time. In the happenings there wasn't such a logical connection between the actions. And I was also thinking of the three-ringed circus, like other artists were in the early twentieth century. That wasn't narrative—it was really based on actions, a lot of actions—but I'm trying to build a narrative out of these things. It's a poetic narrative, which is not necessarily linear. It's really about me wanting to say certain things.

RA: Yes, it always seems to me that when we apply the word "narrative" to your work, we have to put it in inverted commas. It's the same with the word "theater."

JJ: I think my pieces have become closer to theater because theater itself has changed a lot in the last thirty or forty years. Some theater has been influenced by performance art. Don't you think? I think there's a sliding scale between say, a purely conceptual piece and theater. I love theater, but I don't want to do theater. For me, the difference between my work and theater comes down to the way that theater works with text, and acting. In my work performing is not acting, it's like behaving, or simply action, and it's not working with text in the same way at all.

RA: Well, if acting was the principle, presumably you wouldn't be able to use masks as much as you do?

JJ: I started using masks when I went to Japan in 1970. I saw a lot of Noh theater and Kabuki. Eastern theater and the work of other cultures had a tremendous influence on me. I came back and I made my first outdoor piece, *Jones Beach Piece* [1970], and I started working with video while working on the *Organic Honey* pieces. I really started using masks then because of Japanese theater. Masks served several purposes: one was to hide my face because I wasn't trained as a performer—I never performed before I started working in this context, in the art world. Actors, the good ones, can create a character. They have a certain control over their face and their speech. I don't have that. It takes a lot of skill and work. I do perform a lot, and I also worked as an actor with the Wooster Group, but I'm not really an actor. I could have a blank face but I can't do anything else with it. And I didn't want to be myself, Joan Jonas. I didn't want to have people look at me and think, "It's her." The minute that you put a mask on you erase the recognition that the audience has of a person. I liked the idea that I could cover my face and

become another persona. I liked the visual effects of masks, and I liked the fact that you could introduce strange characters. But it wasn't always about the psychology of those characters. In the outdoor pieces, when I used a hockey mask, it was really about creating a vision. The minute I started using masks I realized their transformative nature, as anybody would: that when you put a mask on, your body language is altered. The effect of wearing a mask interests me a lot and I still use them. Over the years I've found different masks for almost every one of my pieces. I think they are incredible, very powerful devices. The mask inspires me: if you put a mask on you can enter a different world.

RA: Yes. In fact, wouldn't it be fair to say that *Organic Honey*, who almost became your alter-ego at one stage, came into existence when you put her mask on?

JJ: Well, *Organic Honey* did have psychology. In *Organic Honey* I really created a character using the mask. I worked on *Organic Honey* for two years. I began to produce videotapes out of the process of performing. In other words, while I was performing I worked out ideas for single-channel videotapes. They were a translation of the performance, and they were works in themselves. They weren't just a document. Then I would take that material and put it back into the performance. *Organic Honey* generated a number of single-channel works, and also particular ideas in relation to the technology of video. Some actions and the costumes came out of the performance, some from the process of making a tape. When I made *Vertical Roll* [1972] for instance, I introduced the structure of the vertical roll, and the movements that I had worked out, back into the performance.

RA: Yes, and movement has always been one of the key elements in your performance, hasn't it?

JJ: It's always interested me as a performer to work out movements relating to props and music. It's pleasurable. It's something I really like to do. So yes, I'm very interested in movement.

RA: But it also seems to me that there are particular sorts of movement that interest you most. And those are somewhat ritualized activities—dance comes most obviously to mind—out of which the human body might conjure new meanings.

JJ: Well, from the very beginning in the mid-1960s when I decided that I wanted to do performance, I saw a lot of work by dancers in New York: Simone Forti, Lucinda Childs, Deborah Hay, and Yvonne Rainer. They were dancers and they worked in collaboration with visual artists. Also, if you perform you have to move in a certain way, and the kind of explorations they were doing—because they were working with everyday movement and very simple things—I could actually do. I didn't have to be a trained dancer. I also looked at rituals of other cultures.

RA: Yes. I was fascinated by *My New Theater I: Tap Dancing* [1997] that was included in the Queens Museum exhibition, the one with the dancing feet.

JJ: Yes, the dancer from Cape Breton. He's a step-dancer from a Scottish and Irish tradition that exists in Canada. I was very interested in his style, which is an older style. I was also attracted, as I always have been, to folk traditions: the idea that people can perform every day. Everybody can make those dances, and dance them. In our culture it's different. That's been lost.

RA: You've included a different *My New Theater* here though, haven't you? Though it's obviously related?

JJ: The *My New Theater* pieces are video sculptures, little poetic video works. I made two in my studio up in

Nova Scotia. I saw the space and shape of the box as an extension of the studio. So it's as though you are looking into a miniature world. That's the indoor space, and then I also include landscape space. This one, *In the Shadow a Shadow (My New Theater II)* [1999] was made with another performer, a dancer. The soundtrack is the Kurt Schwitters piece, *Ursonate* [1922–32]. It's really like a small poem.

RA: What do you mean by that, a poem?

JJ: I work in different ways. Often I begin with objects and sound, or a place, like in *In the Shadow a Shadow*. By contrast, I began *Lines in the Sand* with that very complex text by H. D., *Helen in Egypt* [1961], and her *Tribute to Freud* [1956]. I started with a text, then went to Las Vegas and shot video, and then I came back and put it together here in my loft, editing, and also shooting new scenes to insert, and constructing it that way, with the text as a structure underneath. But with the *My New Theater II* a small text was developed. Those two pieces were made in different ways, but they were both made by building up images and then finding ways to connect them, making a kind of poem. When I say "poem," I don't mean that they are "poetic." I mean the concept is partly the structure of a poem. They're put together like you would a poem, which is the way that I put all my pieces together.

When I started doing performances I had studied poetry—especially twentieth-century poetry—and I was interested in the formal structure of poetry. My models were also film and music; time-based forms. And so I worked with the language of film as well—the edit, the cut. But the poem in particular is something you see on the page, like a haiku. How do you make an image? Well, I think about poetry when I think about images.

How do you construct? It's like a haiku, you put one thing next to another and it makes something else, a third thing. That's what I mean when I say "poetry." All of my work is concerned with that. That's how I work.

RA: Can I just go back to what you were saying about folk culture a couple of minutes ago, when we were talking about the dancer in Cape Breton?

JJ: Yes. I was interested in the relationship between my performance art and that culture.

RA: Well, that was very much the starting point for my question. You commented upon his relationship with his culture. How do you think that we—performance artists working here in New York City in 2004—relate to the culture that we're a part of?

JJ: I think it's really a subculture. I have a relationship to the art world, or the performing world, whatever that encompasses. I don't think I have a relationship to the culture at large. I don't have access to a larger public. I would like to have, but performance art is even more incomprehensible than sculpture or painting. However I do think there is another audience out there, and some performance artists are tapping into that public. Their work relates to popular culture.

RA: And you persevere with performance as your principal artistic focus, as your way of expressing meanings. Does it come back to this issue of narrative that we were talking about?

JJ: In the late 1970s and 1980s I started working with narrative texts, with fairy tales, with stories, but performance is not straight illustrative storytelling. It's manipulating the narrative in different ways. *Lines in the Sand* is not a linear visual narrative. It's made up of images that I have brought to the text. It is my interpretation of that text.

RA: This was rather what I was getting at, because it seems to me that your work does have a potential meaning for that broader audience, because it's about presenting meanings in new ways, or telling stories in new ways.

JJ: That interests me a lot, how those stories are retold in modern or contemporary terms and how they can mean something to us. This is what I have to deal with, because I have to interpret them. It's something that I've dealt with a lot over the years: how stories have come down to us in fragmented forms. For *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* [2004–06], I went to Arizona and I was thinking about memories of the American landscape, by which I mean memories from before the Europeans came here. The southwest is a perfect example of different cultures layered on top of each other, and next to each other. I'm very interested in how stories are retold, of course. That's what we do—we retell stories.