

Douglas Crimp

De-synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances

At that moment in the late sixties when traditional art practices had given way to a multiplicity of new activities, thereby disrupting the continuity of a century of modernism, Joan Jonas began performing her works in the lofts, gyms, galleries, and vacant lots of lower Manhattan. Her events were not, properly speaking, theater or dance, nor were they directly related to contemporary developments known as process or site-specific sculpture; Jonas had, in fact, been a sculptor, but her new work represented a rejection rather than an extension of that medium. Indeed, it was the fact that Jonas's performances could not be assimilated to any previously known category of art that was their distinguishing characteristic. Yet at that time they were seen as a logical next step, and no one was concerned to ask what, exactly, they were. It simply seemed obvious that the potential for innovation within painting and sculpture had been exhausted, and that these traditional mediums were giving way to other, hybrid forms, particularly those involving temporality.

It is now, however, important to return to that situation and to recall that "logic," because the rupture that it effected in modernist practice has subsequently been repressed, smoothed over. The past decade has seen an unquestioning return to conventional art forms and all the values attached to them, most particularly the value of "individualism." In such an atmosphere, Jonas's performances appear to be marginal, peripheral, *eccentric*. But it is precisely this eccentricity that gives Jonas's work its meaning, for it is about the lack of a center. By this I do not mean only that there is no structural center to any particular performance, but also that there is no centered self from which the work can be said to be generated or by which it can be received. Both performer and spectator are shown to be decentered, split.

A single strategy, paradigmatic in this respect, informs all of Jonas's work. That strategy is de-synchronization, usually in conjunction with fragmentation and repetition.

(These latter were initially explored in the early performances with mirrors.) De-synchronization is first fully operative in the outdoor works, *Jones Beach Piece* (1970) and *Delay Delay* (1972). In those events, performers made loud noises by clapping blocks of wood together in wide overhead arcs. Because of the vast distance between performers and spectators, the gesture was seen well in advance of the sound it produced, making the gesture one of silence and the sound seem to come from nowhere. Both because of the number of performers clapping blocks and because the sounds were repeated with their own echoes, it was impossible to link sound and gesture. In this very simple way, Jonas enforced a separation between the spectators' sense of sight and hearing, making them aware of the contingency of perceptual experience.

De-synchronization was intensified and complicated by the use of video technology in the indoor performances. The videotape titled *Vertical Roll*, related to the *Organic Honey* performances of the early seventies, serves as an emblem for this activity. Here the de-synchronization of the monitor's receiving and transmitting frequencies causes the image constantly to scan vertically across the screen, disappearing off the top and reappearing at the bottom. The viewer is far more aware of this hypnotic vertical motion than of any movement internal to the image itself, which can only be glimpsed piecemeal. Moreover, the movements enacted by Jonas within the videotape are choreographed in relation to the action of the vertical roll. In the video performances, Jonas used the de-synchronized video image in a closed-circuit situation. At one moment in *Twilight* (1975) she and another performer drew halves of various figures on opposite sides of a blackboard on which a video camera was trained. In this instance, the images could only be discerned whole because of the de-synchronization, the two halves of the images coming together precisely at the moment when the vertical-roll bar was at center screen. These two opposite uses of the vertical roll—one to wipe away the image, the other

to constitute its visibility—insist upon the same reading: that the medium through which one gains access to the image, whether it be simply one's senses or a technological apparatus, is contingent, unstable.

This lack of stability exists in the images Jonas uses as well as the mediums through which they achieve visibility. This is perhaps best illustrated by the very simple drawings she makes in many of her works. For the performance *Mirage* (1976), for example, Jonas repeatedly drew and erased lines on a blackboard (a film shown during the performance showed the same activity), making images whose ambiguous readings were reinforced by their being somewhat different with each incarnation. In one case, Jonas drew a circle, labeled it "sun," then inscribed a second arc within the circle, erased part of the larger circle, and left what was now surely a new moon with the label "sun." She is also particularly fond of drawing a heart with arteries that also looks like a head with horns. In this same performance, an analogous doubling of Jonas's own persona occurred in a beautiful videotape in which she constantly repeated "good morning" and "good night." One quickly became aware of watching, in the enforced voyeurism of seeing the moment of awakening and the moment before going to bed, the extreme compression of a duration of days and nights into the short space of a videotape. In this fractured and repeated time, what one finally came to sense was a profound split between the "good morning" and the "good night" personae, as if two separate selves were caught in an endlessly repetitive dialogue.

The splitting of the performer into separate guises parallels the rift that exists between performer and performed material. Jonas's images, while personally important to her, are often garnered from the public domain of culture. This accounts for her attraction to fairy tales as the "texts" of her recent work. For these stories are clearly not written by Jonas, or, for that matter, by anyone else. Fairy tales exist within the long traditions of their telling.

In *The Juniper Tree* (1976) and *Upside Down and Backwards* (1979), Jonas severs her telling voice from her performing body, using the dislocation of an audiotape; thus within each performance the tales are twice told. And moreover, this retelling of the tale that characterizes the fairy-tale genre also characterizes the performances, almost every one of which has been redone on numbers of occasions, with different performers, even different numbers of performers, in radically different spaces, using different mechanical and technological equipment and different props. The result is that Jonas's performances can never exist in the integrity of their scripts and descriptions,¹ just as the notion of art that we take away from these works is that it can now exist only in the process of its enactment, not in its integrity as object.

1 Despite the fact that each of Jonas's works develops and changes, and often radically, from one performance to another, only one script or description is published here [the 1983 Berkeley catalogue]. The sole exception is *The Juniper Tree*, for which two variants are included. One of these was exceptional in being made, on commission, for children; the other because it was a collaboration. Hopefully these variants of *The Juniper Tree*, together with the inclusion of photographic documentation from many versions of each performance, will provide some sense of the differences from version to version of all the works. It should also be noted, however, that there is one respect in which Jonas's performances rarely vary, and that is that their duration is almost always about one hour.

This essay was originally published in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, edited by Douglas Crimp (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum; in association with Eindhoven, the Netherlands: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983). It was developed from his earlier essay "Joan Jonas," published in *Music, Sound, Language, Theater: John Cage, Tom Marioni, Robert Barry, Joan Jonas* (Oakland, CA: Crown Point Press, 1980).

Synchronies of “De-synchronization”

Four years elapsed between my first and second essays on Joan Jonas. I wrote “Joan Jonas’s Performance Works” in the spring of 1976 for a special issue of *Studio International* on performance, and the very short essay “Joan Jonas” in 1980 for a catalogue of etchings published by Crown Point Press. The latter was very slightly revised for publication as “De-synchronization in Joan Jonas’s Performances,” the introductory text for the catalogue of Jonas’s work that the two of us collaborated on for the University Art Museum, Berkeley, and the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands. Although the second essay is apparently little more than a distillation of ideas I expressed in the first, there are some telling differences that suggest how other preoccupations in the meantime affected my understanding of Jonas’s work. Between these two short pieces on Jonas, I revised a different essay: in 1979 I thoroughly rewrote “Pictures”—published initially as the catalogue introduction for the 1977 exhibition of that title at Artists Space, New York—for publication in the journal *October*. The “Pictures” revision also entailed a Jonas revision. For the 1977 *Pictures* exhibition catalogue I wrote:

The shift in the conception of illusionism from a representation of something absent to the condition of our apprehension of what is present, and the psychologization of the image, were extended [beyond Minimal sculpture] by a number of artists using the medium of performance.... In particular, Joan Jonas adopted strategies for presenting the space of performance as illusionistic. Working outdoors, with performance and audience separated by great distances, she exploited such natural illusionistic phenomena as depth-of-field distortion and discontinuity of sound and image. In later indoor works, Jonas converted event into image using the simultaneous broadcast capacity of video....

The result ... has been that a group of younger artists sees representation as an inescapable part of our ability to grasp the world around us.¹

This exposition was compressed for the *October* version of “Pictures” into an epigraph quotation from Henry James’s

ghost tale “The Jolly Corner” (1908)—“The presence before him was a presence”—followed by: “An art whose strategies are... grounded in the literal temporality and presence of theater has been the crucial formulating experience for a group of artists currently beginning to exhibit in New York.”² While I want to say something here about how my attention to the *Pictures* artists changed my understanding of Jonas, I should also underscore the fact that it was my involvement with Jonas’s work that led to some of my formulations about *Pictures*.³

To put it directly: I moved from thinking about Jonas’s work in terms of spatial illusionism to thinking of it in terms of split subjectivity. That’s a big shift. The first—illusionism—is a property of the object itself: in this case the performance, or the performance image. The second—split or de-centered subjectivity—involves a *relation* between subject and object: between performer and performance, between spectator and performance. Before writing about Jonas in 1976, every essay (excluding reviews) I’d published on contemporary art was about painting. And so too, in a sense, was my first essay about Jonas:

By presenting real space as an impenetrable illusion in her performances, Jonas has made the experience of performance equivalent not only to film and videotape—the other two mediums she works with—but also to painting. At issue in her work, then, is an ambitious relationship to the history of painting and a reversal of the spatial priorities of most contemporary art, including that of most other performance works.

Performance art has evolved over the past decade in direct response to Minimal sculpture’s shift in aesthetic emphasis from pictorial to real space.... [T]he emphasis has been on the complex nature of actual space.⁴

Although it was obvious that Jonas’s work also dealt with actual space, she appeared to want to remake that space into an image, a *picture*. This progression from the real space of Minimal sculpture through performance art to the

representational space of pictures was precisely what I tried to make clear, as a historically determined lineage, when I rewrote "Pictures" for *October* in 1979. I explained what I was doing in still another essay, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism" (1980), that I wrote concurrently with my second essay on Jonas.

I traced the genesis of [the Pictures artists'] concerns to what had pejoratively been labeled the theatricality of minimal sculpture and the extensions of that theatrical position into the art of the seventies. I wrote at that time that the aesthetic mode that was exemplary during the seventies was performance, all those works that were constituted in a specific situation and for a specific duration; works for which it could be said literally that you had to be there; works, that is, which assumed the presence of the spectator in front of the work as the work took place, thereby privileging the spectator instead of the artist.

In my attempt to continue the logic of the development I was outlining, I came eventually to a stumbling block. What I wanted to explain was how to get from this condition of presence—the being there necessitated by performance—to that kind of presence that is possible only through the absence that we know to be the condition of representation.... I effected that transition with a kind of fudge, an emigraph quotation suspended between two sections of the text. The quotation, taken from one of the ghost tales of Henry James, was a false tautology, which played on the double, indeed antithetical, meaning of the word presence: "The presence before him was a presence."⁵

Simultaneously there and not there, the self both comprehended and alienated in a mirror image, the subject de-centered: my language in both "Pictures" essays clearly reveals my encounter with post-structuralist theory. And that theory—Derrida and Lacan especially—resonated with Jonas's performance works, which continued to absorb me throughout this entire period. Through both theory and practice, I saw subjectivity anew, as a delay.

1 Douglas Crimp, introduction to *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977), 5.

2 Crimp, "Pictures," *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979): 77.

3 This fact was apparently lost on Douglas Eklund, whose only mention of Jonas in *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) is as one of the artists for whom Babette Mangolte worked as cinematographer before she shot films for Jack Goldstein.

4 Crimp, "Joan Jonas's Performance Works," *Studio International*, July/August 1976, 10.

5 Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October*, no. 15 (Winter 1980): 92.