

*Studio International, "Journal of Modern Art, July/August 1976."*

# JOAN JONAS'S PERFORMANCE WORKS

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During a sequence of her performance *Twilight*, Joan Jonas and another performer stood at opposite ends of a blackboard and drew halves of various simple figures on the vertical edges of a rectangle. A video camera was trained on the rectangle, which was the approximate size and shape of a nearby video monitor. On the monitor, placed for this sequence on its side, one could see the two halves of the drawing come together during those brief intervals when the band of a vertical roll was at centre screen. Prior to seeing the completed figure on the monitor, which registered a complete image due to the desynchronization of the frequencies of the camera and monitor signals, one saw a figure not only split in half but also reversed left and right, as a consequence of which one could not at first even imagine what was being drawn. Only by looking at the vertically scanning monitor could the audience view what was taking place directly in front of them in real space as a completed entity, that is, as a picture having the semblance of meaning. Such a sequence exemplifies the strategies of Jonas's performances.

'My own thinking and production has focused on issues of space – ways of dislocating it, attenuating it, flattening it, turning it inside out, always attempting to explore it without ever giving to myself or to others the permission to penetrate it. I have returned again and again to a specific set of formal/material metaphors with which to shape this space. The two most important of these are the mirror – with its capacity to interrupt and therefore to fragment deep space and its property of disorientation through left-right reversal – and the transmission of signals through a dislocating medium, such as very deep landscape that creates delays and relays of the signal, or the video feed-back, which both dislocates and fragments the signal.'

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. Almost simultaneously artists and their audience have begun to play an active rather than contemplative role with regard to works of art. On the one hand, objects like Robert Morris's mirrored cubes and Bruce Nauman's various corridor pieces demanded the viewer's participation. On the other, works like Morris's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* and Nauman's *Bouncing in the Corner* required the artist to perform in order to constitute the work. A primary condition of art in the seventies has been the exploration of the possibilities inherent in these two realms of performed activity. But in both cases – the object making specific spatial demands on the viewer and the performing artist as art object – the emphasis has been on the

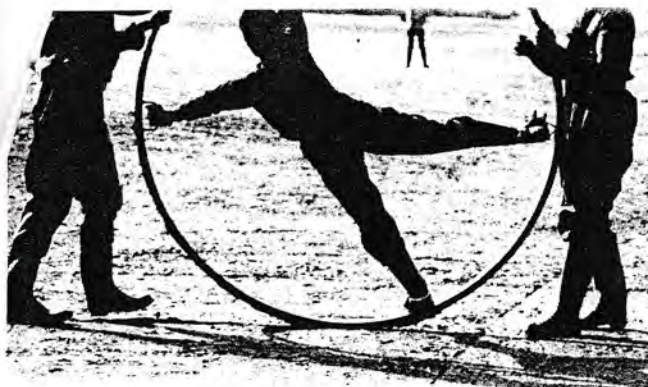
years she studied with various dancers of the Judson Dance Theatre, discovering that their work provided an alternative approach to visual art. As a result, Jonas's work became as closely related to traditional performance – dance and theatre – as to contemporary sculpture. If, however, the primary impulses of dance and theatre are respectively movement and narration, regardless of how fully transformed in avant-garde practice, Jonas was less interested in those problems. Fundamentally her allegiance was to a visual arts tradition, presumably dating back to her study of art history.

In 1968, Jonas began using mirrors to investigate spatial illusionism.

'In a solo in 1968 which germinated a series of pieces I performed in a costume that I made with different sized rectangular mirrors pasted on it. They reflected space and light, making a clinking noise as I moved in a stiff manner. I chanted lines from Borges involving mirrors multiplication, infinity. The piece went through various stages culminating in a film made outdoors in the snow on a beach. A man and a woman in mirror costumes moved on the distant horizon while other figures were blown about in and out of the frame by the wind which replaced the fans used in the indoor performance . . . After that I worked for several years with large mirrors carried by performers, used to alter the space and fragment figures.'

Mirrors were used in *Oad Lau*, 1970, and *Choreomania*, 1971. In the former, fifteen performers carried standard full-length mirrors on planes parallel to the audience. The performers were partially obscured, and those visible parts of them emerging in front of the mirrors were doubled. Fragmented body parts combined with reflections of the gymnasium floor and the audience itself. *Choreomania* was constructed around a single prop, a hanging, swinging wall partially mirrored and affixed with brackets that supported the performers climbing on its surface. The wall functioned as a projection screen for slides, a backdrop for actions performed directly in front of it, and a stage 'flipped up' perpendicular to the line of sight of the viewers. In both performances the audience, seeing itself reflected in the performance space, became an image of participation without actually moving from its privileged position. This subject/object dichotomy is one of the many metaphors Jonas has achieved through the manipulation of spatial perception. Velazquez's *Las Meninas* – the masterpiece of the mirror as metaphor for the complexities of spatial illusionism – is invoked and restated in terms of literal space.

The simple, even primitive devices Jonas used for her early indoor performances were replaced by video, beginning with *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. After 1972, performances and videotapes became interdependent: the performances use the closed-circuit video system as the major structuring device, while the tapes use the content generated in live performance. During the early seventies Jonas also made a group of outdoor works. Just as video was to be the determining



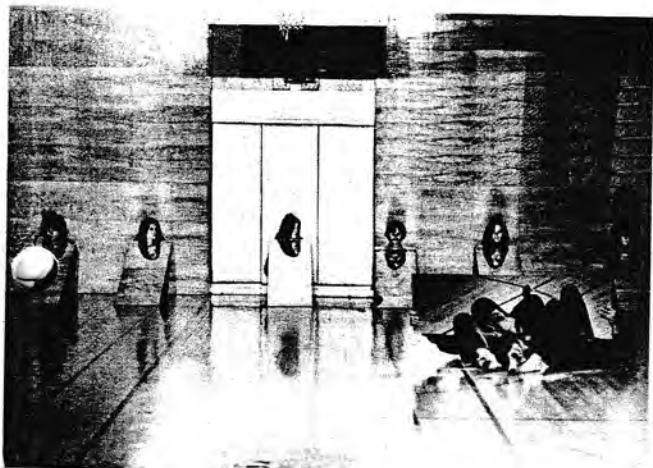
Richard Landry

*Jones Beach Piece* Long Island, 1970



Larry Bell

*Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* Ace Gallery, LA, 1972



Peter Moore

*Oad Lau* YMHA, 1970



Babette Mangolte

*Funnel* The Kitchen, 1974



Babette Mangolte

*Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* L'Attico, Rome, 1972



*Beach Piece II* Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, 1971

latten or otherwise distort the space of the indoor works, she was able to rely on the simple phenomenon of distorted depth of field in the outdoor works. She simply had to separate performance and audience by a great distance. *Jones Beach Piece* was performed on a large mud flat surrounded by dunes, with the spectators positioned a quarter of a mile away from the performers. Performers appeared from behind dunes, ran across the beach, then disappeared behind dunes on the other side, just as actors moved in and out of the film frame in *Wind*. Sound signal relays were made by clapping blocks of wood together while a costume made of tin made the sound of thunder. Running

patterns that were circular, perpendicular and parallel all appeared to occur on a single flat plane. During the entire performance Jonas stood on a ladder behind the performance reflecting the sun in the eyes of the onlookers with a mirror.

*Beach Piece II*, performed at Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, added the height and shape of the terrain to the distance between event and audience. The audience was situated on a cliff high above the beach where the performance took place. The beach appeared as a triangular plane at the narrow end of a funnel made by two banks sloping downward, thus reversing the normal cone of vision. Two circles drawn

in the sand and a row of stakes driven into it constituted the 'stage.' Balancing on the stakes while carrying poles, running the perimeters of the circles, and other activities both ritualistic and playful, animated the distant beach with shifting patterns.

The New York version of *Delay Delay* combined the signal relays of *Jones Beach Piece* with the overhead vantage-point of the Nova Scotia work. The sight was a vast area of lower Manhattan that had been cleared for construction. Standing on top of a five-storey loft building, the audience commanded a view of ten city blocks bounded in the distance by the West Side Highway, the Hudson River and the low skyline of New Jersey. The empty lots where the activities took place were marked with large signs indicating the number of paces away from the loft building, the farthest being on a pier in the Hudson, 610 paces away. Although the performance space stretched out before the spectators like a flat plane, many of the activities added to the numbered signs information about the actual depth of the space. Beginning under the West Side Highway, a performer clapped blocks of wood together in a wide overhead arc. The motion was seen, heard after a short delay, then heard again as it echoed under the structure of the elevated highway. Nearer performers' clapping sounds, those in lots 66 and 81 for example, could be heard simultaneously with their gestures.

Much of the activity in *Delay Delay*, like that in the two previous outdoor works, had the appearance of the self-contained, inventive games that children play. Observed from great distances that eliminated detail and made them absolutely silent, it became abstract and mechanical, like puppetry or certain scenes in silent cinema. One performer in *Delay Delay* controlled her stiff, jerky walk with two bamboo poles inserted in her pants' legs, criss-crossed in front of her body, and grasped at the top by outstretched hands. Two others moved in relation to each other like the slider-crank mechanism of an internal combustion engine. Carrying a pole between them, one walked around a circle painted on the street as the other walked back and forth along a straight line painted adjacent to it. A recurrent image of Jonas's outdoor performances is a figure rolled in a giant hoop, arms and legs outstretched holding its perimeter like Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*.

In its Rome version the activities of *Delay Delay* were altered in response to the constant flow of the space between performance and audience, each standing on opposite sides of the Tiber. Jonas was in a boat between the two, alternately rowing and drifting to demark the rhythmic contractions and expansions of the performance.

When Jonas began working with video equipment she allowed herself the indulgence of fully exploring her own image. It had become something of a cliché at the time, when many artists were first using video, that it was their own images which most fascinated them: video was the technological reflecting pool of Narcissus.<sup>3</sup> By 1972, Jonas had developed the material for her first video performance, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, a work that explores narcissism. Self-possessed, Jonas retained the sense of privacy of her own studio, where the video monitor afforded her the opportunity of seeing herself as a distinct other. That other became Organic Honey, Jonas's alter-ego.

Separated from Jonas and the other performers by both physical distance and electronic equipment, the viewers simultaneously watched the live activities and images on the video screen and monitor. Jonas self-consciously played to the video monitor, watching her image just as the audience did. The camera controlled the details of what would be seen, although

monitor 'Silver spoon striking Joan's image – inward and outward blurred silver hitting itself.'<sup>4</sup>

Jonas performed *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (later versions were called *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, referring to that peculiarity of the video feedback system described above) on eight different occasions over a period of two years. In 1974, she made a new performance using videotapes and closed circuit TV. *Funnel* recreated the reverse perspective of *Beach Piece II* by making the walls of the set converge at the back. The space therefore appeared to be much deeper than it actually was, like the trompe l'oeil of the stage of Palladio's Teatro Olimpico. Like *Organic Honey* the performance was viewed simultaneously in reality and in a monitored image. The tendency of the video image to appear flat was increased by back lighting that made the images flat silhouettes, sometimes in negative. This was a dramatic contradiction to the fake perspective of the set. Jonas described the spatial manipulation in the performance:

'Visually, the receding and converging walls and the narrow confines produced a fully ambiguous kind of depth, exaggerating or diminishing my scale, according to where I stood and, depending on the relationships of certain props, flattening the space from front to back. Two cloth curtains hanging from the ceiling divided the space into three parts. During the piece, the curtains were progressively removed to finally reveal the whole space of the set. The progression of the piece was thus from front-to-back of the space, and, as the curtains were removed, cones and horizontal bars and finally hoops were revealed. Size and placement of the cone defined a scale that continuously changed. They were used as props; as instruments they augmented sound, focused it, and directed it across the space. Two bars hung from the ceiling, swinging back and forth hypnotically throughout the piece. It was their movement that tended to flatten the set's space.'<sup>5</sup>

The set for *Twilight*, 1975, performed at the Anthology Film Archives in New York, offered even greater possibilities for manipulation. Jonas used a series of spaces beginning directly in front of the audience: the space between front-row seats and stage, the raised stage, and the dim, chaotic backstage room. The movie screen at the rear of the stage articulated the space. Its dimensions and proportions could be altered electronically. It could act variously as light source, projection surface, and as transparent scrim when the backstage lights were on. To its left and right video monitors showed events in all parts of the space.

One of Jonas's most hauntingly beautiful images was used in both *Funnel* and *Twilight*. Performers wear Afghani dresses in which the veil is incorporated into the head-dress of the garment. They are completely hidden under the flowing silk, pleated like Fortuny gowns. The hulking, ominous forms on stage become flat, dematerialized shapes on the monitor. These figures raise long white cones to their lips and hum exotic, mournful sounds, like the call of a muezzin or the howl of a wolf. Like most of Jonas's performance images, they are mystifying, full of associations made tentatively, then dissolved. For just as Jonas's performance spaces are impenetrable, ambiguous and constantly shifting, so are the images that those spaces enclose.

<sup>3</sup> Joan Jonas (with Rosalind Krauss), 'Seven Years', *The Drama Review*, Volume 19, Number 1, March 1975, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Jonas, 'Show me your dances . . . Joan Jonas and Simone Forti talk with Carla Liss', *Art and Artists*, Volume 8, Number 7, October 1973, p. 15.