



Joan Jonas,
Two Women, 1972
(film stills)

Jacqueline Francis Three Women

Francis, Jacqueline. "Three women." In *Joan Jonas is on our mind*, edited by Frances Richard, 37–43. San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2017.

It's June 1, 1973. Carla Liss, Simone Forti, and Joan Jonas are in Jonas's Soho loft. There, we discover, they "drank and smoked and rapped," Forti sang, and in the background, Jonas's dog, the heterochromic Sappho, chewed up things. We know about this get-together because parts of their conversation appeared in the monthly *Art and Artists* in that same year.¹ The published excerpt, "Show Me Your Dances... —Joan Jonas and Simone Forti Talk with Carla Liss," is a record of a frank and animated discussion, albeit one with more than a few moments of tension: these arise when the three challenge each other's assertions about gender roles and characteristics, the effectiveness of their era's feminist movement, and the ways of being an artist. Liss, Forti, and Jonas don't come to resolution on any matter, and there should be no reason to expect that outcome anyway. Their interchange is like a dance, replete with back-and-forth rhythms, improvisation, and revealing solo turns. All this seems appropriate considering Forti's and Jonas's movement-driven practices, informed by their respective studies with Ann (later Anna) Halprin and Trisha Brown. It is a show and

tell, which makes *Art and Artists'* title for the feature, taken as it was from an epigram included in the text and attributed to Confucius—"Show me your dances and I'll tell you what kind of a people you are"—especially apt.

What "kind of people" were Forti, Jonas, and Liss in 1973? Forti states that her interests are myriad: she has moved from abstract expressionist painting to making happenings and dances, working in experimental theater, and studying evolution and the expressive gestures of animals, human and non-human. Jonas maps her journey from making Giacometti-inspired sculpture that felt too confining to more preferable creative territory, namely, "the area that was somewhere between dance, painting, sculpture and music." Both Jonas and Forti also have worked teaching art to children. Liss's extensive resume—writer, commercial film editor, experimental filmmaker, Fluxus artist, and arts administrator in New York and London—isn't laid out in the interview transcript. We learn of her history from a short biographical entry that ends the feature; still, her knowing questions and comments demonstrate her familiarity with and participation in avant-garde scenes on both sides of the Atlantic.

¹ "Show Me Your Dances... —Joan Jonas and Simone Forti with Carla Liss," *Art and Artists* 8 (October 1973): 14-21.

What is also clear is that feminist ethics, politics, and experiences undergird their experiences, but variably. For instance, Jonas initially rebuffs and redirects Liss's leading question—"Did you start taking your work more seriously simultaneously with the women's movement?"—before arriving at a concession that "the disadvantages [of being a woman] are the difficulties in being ambitious or aggressive or in pushing your work...in taking your work seriously. The movement has definitely helped me in that." In subsequent passages, Forti declares that "I have always felt that my spirit was a man" and "anti-women's lib is one my crusades." Liss and Jonas push Forti on these stances, and yet Jonas acknowledges an outlook that she shares with Liss:

I think there is a definite difference between men and women, in their sensibilities and in their ways of expressing themselves.

Jonas adds:

I really resent the fact that men are always the spiritual, the light, the heaven, and women are the earth, the dark, the damp... You don't have to be one thing or the other, you can be both things.

Liss offers a point-blank statement:

You know that the men have made the rules.

And later, in response to Forti's assertion that "Women put men through strange things," Liss proposes:

Men put women through strange trips. Everybody puts each other through strange trips.

The upshot is that nothing is easy. Returning to this conversation decades after the "women's movement" engendered feminist studies, and later, gender studies, we recognize a discourse in the making, one premised on acceptance of indeterminacy, performativity, and polyvalent narratives.

The ways that Forti and Jonas were navigating creative collaborations with artist peers—female and male—is told in pictures and words. Among the images reproduced in the article are stills of performers in Jonas's *Jones Beach*, shot on the mud flats of Long Island in 1970, and in the solo video performance *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* in 1972. Apropos the latter work, there is a production still of Jonas being filmed by the experimental cinematographer Babette Mangolte. In another photo document, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris are seen in Forti's *See Saw* at the Reuben Gallery in New York (1960); Morris was Forti's romantic partner at the time, and shortly thereafter he would be Rainer's. Both Forti and Jonas speak about productive relationships with men, and Jonas goes further:

I think I've been supported more by men than by women. Men have encouraged me because women can't do that for each other yet... I get along easier with men than women.

She follows with a description of *Two Women*, a silent, twenty-minute, black-and-white video made in 1972:

... I made a film last year of two women kissing each other which was partly erotic, partly an expression of my inability to be close to other women and to be tender with them or to talk to them because on some level I'm afraid of them. I have a much easier time talking to men because I feel they're open to me, that they come right up

and say what they think and I can deal with that more easily. That's not true of all women because I have [women] friends...

Jonas's remarks appear on the same page with a large, halftone reproduction of a frame from *Two Women*: it's a blurry close-up of the actors, Christine Kozlof and Penelope, who are seen in profile. They are embracing and about to complete a passionate kiss. In this shot, different from preceding sequences of the film in which Kozlof and Penelope stand out as distinct and individuated bodies, their forms seem twinned, like a mirror reflection of one person's head and shoulders.

Jonas makes use of the vertical-roll effect in *Two Women*, impeding the viewer's full access to filmed forms in the same manner as she had in the videos of 1972, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Vertical Roll*. Characterization is a critical operation as well: No less than Kozlof and Penelope do, Jonas performs intimacy and division, enacting these states in and of the self. The erotic—the term chosen by Jonas to describe *Two Women*—is also a performed aspect of the *Organic Honey* works. In these projects, centered on Jonas's own body, the metaphor of narcissism looms large. But, so too does the visualization of the other. If the conceptual artist Kozlof and the dancer Penelope, identifiable figures of the downtown New York scene in the 1970s, "are not" Joan Jonas in *Two Women*, neither are the exotically costumed and theatrical personae in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Vertical Roll*. This self-evident fact of differentiation parallels the distinctions Jonas makes about the emotional distance between herself and other women, as well as the philosophical divergence between herself and Forti. Jonas's "dances" show her to be, even at this early stage in her career, committed to exploring what is produced when space—filmic, performative, experiential—is

disrupted yet shown, through that disruption, to be a medium for generating contact.

The articulations of dissonance in "Show Me Your Dances..." sit alongside a shared and voiced conviction regarding the creative female imagination. Jonas credits the women's movement for empowering women to recognize their own visions, and she and Liss optimistically look toward more and greater expressions of these ideas. While Forti proclaims that she is already a visionary, Jonas speaks of that designation as an aspiration toward which she is working. The bold grasp of formal and conceptual innovation aligns itself for Jonas with professionalism, conduct that she defines as "keeping yourself together. Extending yourself in the world, extending your work in a strong way."

If some might think of keeping oneself together and extending oneself as opposing actions of gathering in and stretching out toward an impossible end, Jonas clearly did not. In the more than four decades since this conversation appeared in print, she has made work that consistently draws attention to shifts, fractures, and multiplicities in space and in the self. Such transformations are the subjects of Jonas's art, and they are "strong" ways, inseparable from the mediums, structure, and technologies that make them material. She invites us to know the dancer and the dance as distinct points on a continuum.