

Transmission

Joan Jonas

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My work consists of fragments and chance as much as materials and technology. In the late 1960s, after studying art history and sculpture, I became inspired by the idea of performance and began to work with time as material, transferring my concerns with drawing and the object into movement. At the time, “I didn’t see a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film, or a dance.”¹ Now, in 1998, working in video, performance, installation, sculpture, and drawing, I experience the forms as overlapping, not totally separate.

1 Joan Jonas, *Scripts and Descriptions*, 1968–1982, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley, CA: University Art Museum; Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983), 137.

While I was studying art history, I looked carefully at the space of painting, films, and sculpture—at how illusions are created within a frame. From this, I learned how to deal with depth and distance. When I switched to performance, I went directly to real space. I looked at it, and I would imagine how it would look to an audience. I would imagine what they would be looking at, how they would perceive the ambiguities and illusions of the space. An idea would come from just looking until my vision blurred.²

2 Ibid.

At this time, in 1966, I visited Crete to research the Minoans. (I was interested in the imagery of early art forms—like the Cretan mother goddess.) I went to a wedding ceremony in the mountains that lasted for three days. The men sang songs to each other as guests arrived.³ I was always interested in folk culture—the dance, the music, the objects—because it is a part of everyday life. I was especially interested in this particular wedding ritual because performance is not a space separate from ongoing activities of daily life. My own performance came from trying to communicate this experience to my audience—my community. That intent, and the community itself, would change over the years, but that’s where I started.

3 Joan Jonas, *Works*, 1968–1994, ed. Dorine Mignot (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1994).

At that time, I also traveled to the Southwest to see the Hopi snake dance. My reaction was complicated. I remember now the profound effect this dance—a ritual with live snakes—had on me, as well as the architecture of the pueblos and the amazing desert landscape. At the same time, I remember noticing that the audience of mainly white tourists wore huge squash blossom necklaces they had purchased at the pawn shops. I couldn’t avoid the nonchalant display of these displaced symbols. Somewhat naively, I understood the reality of loss.

Were we an intrusion? Of course. The event was changed by our presence. Not long after that, outsiders were not allowed to witness the snake dance ceremonies. I was lucky to have been permitted to see these amazing events carried forward from another time in which people directly related with and communicated to the land, the environment, and the elements.

In a second ceremony at Ancoma, costumed figures were far away, in the desert, and then suddenly they were close up, in the plaza,

dancing. What was striking to me was how these images from afar could be brought back home. What became apparent and of interest was how to think about one place and be in another. Was it possible to cross-reference rather than categorize? Was it possible to translate such concepts into one's own intuitive language, using technology as a tool of transformation and transmission?

Other references for me were the circus and magic shows that I saw as a child and the idea of alchemy or transformation of material and psyche. I especially liked sleight of hand—visual tricks that could be special effects. Perhaps I always like to have a reason in relation to structure and content—to know that something made it happen even if we don't know and can't see what it was. On the other hand, I'm interested in the obvious. In works of mine such as *Vertical Roll* (1972),⁴ I reveal the mechanics of the illusion. I like to juxtapose high tech with the original gesture. In that way the touch, the body, and the machine are put into play.

4 *Vertical Roll*, 1972, black and white video, 20 minutes, sound, camera by Robert Neiman.

Performance as a medium exists somewhere between “conceptual art” and “theater.” For performance, a genre of multiple media, the critical material is time. This is said in the context of the visual arts—in my context. The artist builds a performance by designing and composing all aspects of the work—conceives, constructs, draws, and choreographs; makes the music or chooses it or selects a composer to work with; performs, produces, and directs film and video; often does camera or directs the camera work; and edits. The work is based on visual and aural concerns rather than text, although text can be used as material, and it can be written or chosen by the artist. Beyond this, there is also close collaboration with other performers and artists, filmmakers, editors, and producers.

The history of performance can be said to begin with prehistoric cave rituals and to extend through dada, multimedia events at Black Mountain in the late 1940s and 1950s (as well as Europe, Japan, and Central and South America in the same period), happenings in the New York art world of the 1960s, including the Judson Church group of dancers and artists working together, and the multimedia performance and installation work in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. I wanted to look at sources from outside the art world. I wanted something that was not dance, not sculpture, not theater.

My work is often considered personal or private, perhaps because of the presence of the author as performer. Friends have told me that they feel they are looking into a private world. I do try to bring the audience into my space. There is an intimacy.

Finally, the attraction for me in performance is the immediate pleasure of working for a live audience. I am totally in a concentrated present. There is an unspoken communication and feedback

that constantly changes. In 1968, when I first presented my work publicly in New York, most artists lived near one another downtown—that is, sculptors, composers, dancers, painters, musicians, performers, video artists, filmmakers, theater people. The geography of New York condensed things—we were friends, we attended each other's shows, we critiqued, supported, watched—and in this way, forms and boundaries were erased. There was also the desire to work outside the conventional spaces of museums, galleries, and theaters. The point of view of the audience was questioned. I step in and out of my work to direct the perception.

1968 Transmission: The Mirror

Inspired by the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges, I chose as my first technological tool the mirror, a device that transmits light. First, I made a long black costume for myself with mirrors pasted on it. I moved stiffly, parallel to the audience, quoting all references to mirrors in the short stories of Borges's *Labyrinths*. The piece was called *Oad Lau* (1968)⁵ ("watering place," after a trip to Morocco; this work also related to the Greek wedding). Later, similar moving figures—a man and a woman appeared in *Wind* (1968)⁶—my first film.

5 *Oad Lau*, 1968, performance.

6 *Wind*, 1968, 16 mm, black and white, 7 minutes, silent, camera and coediting by Peter Campus.

From the beginning, the mirror provided me with a metaphor for my reflective investigation. It also provided a device to alter space and to fragment it. By reflecting it, I could break it up. I could mix reflections of performers and audience, thereby bringing all of them into the same time and space of the performance. In addition to creating space, a mirror also disturbs space, suggesting another reality through the looking glass—to see the reflection of Narcissus, to be a voyeur, to see one's self as the other. In this piece, *Oad Lau*, the reality was also to see oneself among and as one with others.

Then I did a series of works in which performers—about fifteen of them—carrying 5-foot-by-18-inch glass mirrors and glass moved slowly in choreographed sequences and patterns, reflecting the audience, themselves, and the space, fragmenting it, and yet always flattening it. The mirrors face front. The glass is heavy. The performers move slowly—in lines (*Mirror Piece, I & II*, 1969 and 1970).⁷

7 *Mirror Piece I*, 1969, *Mirror Piece II*, 1970, performances, partial list of performers: Francis Barth, Eve Corey, Susan Feldman, Pam Goden, Carol Gooden, Deborah Hollingworth, Keith Hollingworth, Barbara Jarvis, Joan Jonas, Julie Judd, Jane Lahr, Lucille Lareau, Jean Lawless, Susan Marshall, Rosemary Martin, Tom Meyers, Judy Padow, Linda Patton, Corky Poling, Peter Poole, Susan Rothenberg, Andy Salazar, Lincoln Scott, Michael Singer, George Trakas, Pam Vihel.

In another part of the piece, bodies were treated as material. They were carried stiffly—horizontally by feet and neck—like boards or glass. In another sequence, transparent glass panels are used. Two women roll across the floor with a 5-foot-by-18-inch sheet of glass between them, avoiding breakage. The panel is the same size as the mirrors used previously; here, though, at the same time, two men work with a larger piece of glass (four feet by five feet), turning it, shifting it. The audience, included by reflection, is part of a moving picture.

The mirrors and clear sheets of glass could break or shatter at a wrong move. We were barefoot. I was interested in this tension and that the onlookers might feel uneasy.

Narcissism provoked by mirrors is also disturbing. For *Mirror Check* (1970)⁸ I stood naked, inspecting all parts of my body with a small round hand mirror. Using a slow circular movement, I began with my face and finished with the bottoms of my feet. The audience watches me checking myself. Vicariously, however, as they can't see what I see, despite the fact that they see more of me. The duration of the performance was about ten minutes.

8 *Mirror Check*, 1970–1974, solo performance.

Transmission: Deep Landscape, The Distant Image

In 1970, I went to Japan and saw the Noh and Kabuki theater for the first time. This theater's highly developed visual vocabulary gave me new inspirations. I was aware of the attraction that Yeats and Fenellosa had for Eastern poetic forms. I later learned that Artaud had been inspired by Mexican rituals and Eastern theater, for similar reasons. I attended Noh as often as possible. This experience informed the work. I translated into my own language the familiar slow pace, the sound and use of wood, the masks, the costumes, and the idea of dance or formalized movement. After this trip to Japan, I began working in the medium of deep landscape space—again interested in altering what is perceived as reality in image and sound.

Beginning at Jones Beach, I worked with the transmission of the signal—distance flattens circles into lines, erases detail, delays sound. The mirror reflects light over distance. Working with the flat expanse of distant space, I was trying to work with the absence of depth over distance—in a sense, to displace the idea of the space or what happened in the space, to bring that forward to the audience. This is explored in two beach pieces—one in New York (*Jones Beach Piece*, 1970),⁹ one in Nova Scotia (*Beach Dance*, 1971),¹⁰ and one at New York's Hudson River (*Delay Delay*, 1972).¹¹

9 *Jones Beach Piece*, 1970, performance, Jones Beach, New York.

10 *Nova Scotia Beach Dance*, 1971, performance, Inverness, Nova Scotia.

11 *Delay Delay*, 1972, performance, Manhattan Festival of Music and Dance, Tiber River, Rome, Documenta 5, Kassel, Germany.

In the mud flats at Jones Beach, the audience is situated a quarter of a mile away from the performance, and in Nova Scotia the audience is on a cliff overlooking a beach. In *Delay Delay*, in lower Manhattan, the view was from the roof of a loft building overlooking the empty lots and distant docks of the Lower West Side. In Rome in 1972, the audience viewed a version of *Delay Delay* from across the Tiber River.¹²

12 See above.

The new element for the outdoor works was the sound delay. Performers clapped blocks of wood together at different distances from the audience. One saw the gesture of clapping in wide overhead arcs before hearing the sound, the lag depending on the distances and the atmosphere. This separation of action and sound,

of sight and hearing, isolated for the audience the relativity of perception. The clapping gesture marked the perimeters of the space, but the sound transmission, the desynchronized delay, was its measure.

Being far away from the audience gave me freedom to move in strange or comic ways. Out on the mud flats at Jones Beach, I felt comfortable dressed in a long black skirt, head scarf, and heavy welding shoes, running with a shovel and a red bag of shells or sitting precariously on the top of the ladder in the distance and wearing a plastic hockey mask. I wore a blue dress with a long train, which was wet and blowing in the wind. The weight of the cloth caused the ladder to tip. I was holding a 5-foot-by-18-inch mirror and using it partly to balance myself while flashing reflections of the sun into the eyes of an audience away in the distance. Between my position and the audience, seven women dressed in black capes, blindfolded, with blocks of wood tied to their feet, ran back and forth along a rope stretched between two men that was diagonal to the audience's view. It appeared to be parallel to the audience. Details of costume were not visible but affected the performers' movements. All movements were made to be seen in the distance. All was flat without color.

The structure of these pieces was simple—one thing after another like beads on a string.

In speaking of the movement of dance, I have to say that in the 1960s in New York the Judson Church project opened a way for visual artists like me to go into performance. In the works of dancers Yvonne Rainer, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, and Simone Forti, in particular, was an exploration of natural, everyday movement. Actions like walking across the stage to sit in a chair or performing a routine, simple task expanded the definition of dance. I began my work, first simply in relation to the job of moving or being moved by props. Slowly over the years I developed more complicated moves with music, sound, mask, object. And then I learned how to move in relation to the video camera—both as operator and as subject.

Transmission: Moving Images In Film, Electronic Signals In Video

13 *Songdelay*, 1973, 16 mm, black and white, 18 minutes, sound, camera and coediting by Robert Fiore; sound by sound technician Kurt Munkacsi, with Ariel Bach, Marion Cajori, James Cobb, Carol Gooden, Randy Hardy, Michael Harvey, Glenda Hydler, Joan Jonas, Epp Kotkas, Gordon Matta Clark, Michael Oliva, Steve Paxton, Penelope, James Reineking, Robin Winters.

Wind (1968) and *Songdelay* (1973)¹³ translated my live performances into the medium of film. In *Wind*, an indoor work—*Oad Lau*—was taken outdoors to a beach on Long Island's north shore. It was winter. The element of wind became the central force as mirrored figures slowly moved in a snowy landscape. We played with the wind, taking our coats on and off, again and again, with some effort, while moving along the water's edge in the strong wind.

In *Songdelay*, by using different lenses, a wide angle and telephoto, I translated the outdoor performance *Delay Delay* into film. This was

the final development of the series of outdoor works that began at Jones Beach. I wanted to save my performances in a form that interested me, and since I consciously used film as a reference at times during the performances, film was appropriate to the task. I was particularly drawn to early filmmakers such as Vertov, Vigo, Franju, Eisenstein, and Ozu. And the fragmentation of sequences in my performances comes partly from ideas that are based on film techniques such as the cut and the idea of montage. I felt the freedom to move from one element to another, cutting from one scene to the next like cut and paste.

In 1970, in Japan, I bought my first Portapak and began to work in video. The Portapak (a big heavy camera and reel-to-reel deck) was not often used for art making at the time. Some artists had begun to use it in the last few years of the 1960s, and artists such as Nam June Paik had worked with broadcast television in the early 1960s. It was definitely outside the mainstream commercial art world and television industry. The Sony Portapak was an appropriate tool for artists, who usually worked alone in their studios. It could be handheld. The technology was simple, and it did not require a crew. It was black and white.

The video camera did not have a history for me to refer to. In fact, history for me was film, a reference against which the new video possibilities became clear. I was aware of the work of independent filmmakers like Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, and Stan Brackage (and in 1976 came to know the work of Maya Deren). What video offered was the opportunity to work live, to make a continuous series of images explicitly for the camera during live performance, which allowed me an added nonnarrative layer in a kind of condensed poetic structure that I had earlier found in the writings of the American imagists (including H.D., William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Emily Dickinson) and in Japanese haiku. I was also interested in how myth was used in the work of James Joyce, for instance. These forms were also models for work in time.

Video allowed for the immediacy and the continuity of television's live broadcast, while also allowing real-time, ongoing viewing via a monitor. It was simultaneously a recording medium. Video offered a continuous present—showing real-time actions, and incorporated a potential future, re-viewing and reusing actions thus recorded.

The monitor, at that time a critical factor of video, is an ongoing mirror. I explored image making with myself as subject: I said "this is my right side, this is my left side," and the monitor shows a reversal. I made a tape about the difference between the mirror and the monitor.¹⁴ I worked with the qualities peculiar to video—the flat, grainy, black and white space, the moving bar of the vertical roll and the circle of circuitry formed by the Portapak, monitor/projector, and

14 *Left Side Right Side*, 1972, black and white video, 7 minutes, sound, camera and performance by Joan Jonas, produced by Carlotta Schoolman.

artist. In the first tape that turned into the first performance, I imagined myself making a film. I sat on a white wicker chair facing the camera and monitor, and using props, objects, and sound, I improvised for the camera.

15 *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972, black and white video, 23 minutes, sound, camera and performance by Joan Jonas.

Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy (1972)¹⁵ evolved as I found myself continually investigating my own image in the monitor of my video machine. Wearing the mask of a doll's face transformed me into an erotic electronic seductress. I named this TV persona "Organic Honey." (I stayed up all night wondering what to call my persona and then saw on the table a jar labeled "organic honey": it seemed perfect.) From a book on magic came the phrase "visual telepathy."

In translating this initial experiment into performance, I thought of my stage as a film set within my loft. I added a 4-foot-by-8-foot piece of plywood on sawhorses—a table for my objects. Among them were a big glass jar filled with water and a small shot glass, mirrors, silver spoon, old doll, silver purse, stone. On the wall, I tacked a drawing of my dog with one blue eye and one brown eye, doubled. I also used a tall, antique, wood accounting chair. Inside this set, I put the camera on a tripod. For some sequences, the camera would also be hand held by the camera woman. I showed the audience the video images in two ways—one on a small monitor, the other in a large projection on the wall of the set. I also placed a small monitor inside the set for me. All of my moves were for the monitor, which I monitored, keeping my eye on the screen as I worked.

16 *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972, performance, Joan Jonas with Suzanne Harris, Kate Parker, Linda Patton; *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, 1973, 1974, and 1980, performance, camera by Robert Neiman, performed by Joan Jonas with Anne Thornycroft, Margaret Wilson, and Freuda; *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, 1973, 1974, and 1980, performance, camera by Barbara Mangolte and Joan Jonas.

The camera woman, holding the camera or placing it on the tripod, operated inside the set with me. She followed my rehearsed movements in close-up. This system—the set for *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*,¹⁶ the live performance and its related tapes¹⁷—was the model for all my subsequent black and white video works.

17 Tapes that were made in relation to the Organic Honey series: *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, *Vertical Roll*, *Duet*, 1972, black and white, 4 minutes, sound and camera by Joan Jonas; *Left Side Right Side*, *Two Women*, 1973, black and white, 20 minutes, silent, camera by Joan Jonas, with Christine Kozlov, Penelope.

Video performance offered the possibility of multiple simultaneous points of view. Performer and audience were both inside and outside. Perception was relative. No one had all the information. I thought I had, but it was an illusion.

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