

Sung Hwan Kim

Organic Honey's Name

Sung Kim was at Harvard when he met Joan Jonas in 1998. He later transferred to M. I. T., where Joan currently teaches. Kim, whose own work in video explores identity, writes about *Organic Honey*.

Joan Jonas sits around her table wondering about a name sometime in the 1970s. She sees a jar of honey labeled Organic Honey. She thinks it's perfect. In the history of literature, we have seen Isidore Ducasse becoming Lautréamont, Gerard Labrunie changing his last name to Nerval, and Paul Auster going through several different names in writing his detective novels. In a way, it is common for literary writers to come up with pseudonyms to (mis)represent them. This gesture does not merely result in keeping one's private life from the public, but in maintaining an understandable whole, for once, of one's malleable self.

Thus when I can grasp a form, imperfect as it may be, I fix it, for fear of losing all thought.

Antonin Artaud's comment, although it might not have been specifically conceived to do so, alludes to the reason why a writer comes up with another writer character in order to write, why a performer comes up with a performing character that is not herself. And Artaud's fear is not only the fear of the author but also the fear of the recipient (reader). Just as one who writes creates a character, one who reads constantly recreates that character.

From *Organic's Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), *Glass Puzzle* (1974), to *Lines in the Sand* (2002), Jonas' performances often consist of a series of activities like checking parts of her body with a small mirror, sitting in a stylized posture, playing with a fan, dancing with a mask on, dropping coins into a jar filled with water, standing in front of a drawing of a dog, screaming into a funnel, jumping, running, and howling. What is the thread among these

gestures? It is not cause-and-effect. It is not a three-act play, but it is not nothing. The transition between these actions is often left blank; after one activity is done, she moves on to the next as if she were on an obstacle course. The linkage between these seemingly unrelated actions is the image of the performer's body, which is also Joan Jonas' body. That is the protagonist of her performances; it assumes a role equivalent to "I," "he," and "she" in written words. At times hiding behind the mask of an electronic sorcerer (*Organic Honey*), at others multiplying an extra face, of another woman, dressed the same, a double (*Glass Puzzle* and *Lines in the Sand*), she gives form to her possible identities. She gives her image a role.

This camouflaging, however, might be less intended for concealment than for the joy of camouflaging itself. In her class at M. I. T., where everyone is asked to bring a favorite scene from a film, Jonas chooses the scene from *Nights of Cabiria* where Cabiria is hypnotized. Her eyes are closed, she picks flowers that are not there, people laugh, her story is told, she is unconscious; it is a magic show.