

*I feel sorry for those who have not, at least once in their lives, dreamt of turning into one or other of the nondescript objects that surround them: a table, a chair, an animal, a tree-trunk, a sheet of paper... they have no desire to get out of their skins, and this peaceable contentment, untroubled by any curiosity, is a tangible sign of the insupportable bumptiousness that is the most obvious prerogative of the majority of mankind.*¹

Various formal, feminist, and historical perspectives have been applied to Joan Jonas' work. Although this brief essay is not exactly a challenge to these ideas, it tentatively points in another direction, towards the zoomorphic and where it concerns metamorphosis, about which not enough has been written. While this sketch does not begin to do justice to the vast complexity of its thesis, it will have to stand as a suggestion for a more considered investigation. Most of this discussion will concentrate on a few early works and a couple of very recent productions, but I would like to propose metamorphosis as a comprehensive view for thinking about the entire body of her work.

My way into this curiosity came while reading Richard Serra's eloquent description of an evening where Joan tried out on him some ideas she had been working through. As the story of her process unfolds he turns to reflect, "She is somewhere between kneeling and groveling on the floor, down on all fours. This is not an exercised ritual, no salvation is being sought; a form of unrehearsed prostration, self-humiliation is being carried out ... The figure is initiating herself to her-self, a person I do not recognize." Quickly thereafter, the description continues, "... she begins to mechanically tap the spoon on the

floor beside the mirror. This goes on seemingly forever while her eyes are transfixed on her reflection... with the first blow — no crisis, the figure remains composed but then the beating of the spoon upon the mirror takes on an ugly aspect, as it is repeated over and over again until every vestige is broken down into crystals, into fractured geometries of pain."²

These arresting actions were the beginning of a segment Joan was to develop in the performance *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972). Of this later incarnation she has written, "This began as anger. I was interested in translating emotions."³ The urgency and violence of the private rehearsal in Joan's studio takes me into a living room in Arroyo Hondo, New Mexico, where, splattered across the log beams that hold up an adobe ceiling, are traces of dried blood. This house was once a church for the Catholic sect of the Penitentes. Although this Spanish medieval ritual, which regularly took place for centuries throughout the Southwest (and continues in similar forms and in other parts of the world), may seem a far-fetched analogy for Joan's actions, the violence she embodied and inflicted on her self-reflection, and the voracity and repetition with which she carried it through, are, at their root, the same. The movements leading to and during *Organic Honey's* hammering of the mirror to bits with a spoon appears to be an equivocal moment of adoration and repulsion. In this way, Joan is an anti-narcissist. If Narcissus' love of his own image was so total that he transformed himself into his own reflection by falling into it, Joan also loses herself, literally and spiritually, in the process of destroying her image in order to find meaning. In a conversation regarding obsession Joan said,

"I'm interested in this question because I don't fully understand why I do it myself. It has to do with the pleasure of repetition, which is not the same as obsession." Through the steady increase of concentrated and repeated movements, Joan practices metaphysics with a mirror. Her affinity with the Penitentes, as with innumerable other individual practices and spiritual collectives throughout history, resides in the desire to attain an altered state of existence. This is not some type of religious ecstasy or Surrealist "convulsive beauty," but a radical expression of protest. Extreme ceremonies, like those practiced by the Penitentes, make revolutionaries and outsiders of secret sects within orthodoxy. Similarly, there was something revolutionary that began in Joan's studio in the late '60s, and it continues now.

Joan's attack on her image is an attack on the predominant culture. It is performed with the full knowledge of her associations — the silver spoon and everything it signifies, against her virtual image. She transgresses into a state where history and identity are checked at the gate between the world we inhabit and some other place. Georges Bataille was a great believer in transgressive acts or states that lead to the disruption of a civilization predicated on the status quo. He was able to identify and define situations and sites in the world that function as fissures in a complacent society. Metamorphosis was one of them: "The obsession with *metamorphosis* can be defined as a violent need — *identical, furthermore, with all our animal needs* — that suddenly impels us to cast off the gestures and attitudes requisite to human nature."⁴ If one has seen the head, and especially the eyes, of the Hopi in a butterfly dance, they are not exactly

human; they are those of the insect. If Joan, on the floor, is 'a person I do not recognize,' it is because she has left the socially acceptable world to explore an area where most people do not care to venture, and more often avoid. This is not an intellectual position or a "talent" to be developed. It is inherent. It seems to have always been part of Joan, and she of it.

In *Glass Puzzle* (1973) a woman (Joan) moves around another young, plump one (Lois Lane), her double, in slow, measured movements as they pace through an atmosphere originally inspired by H. Belocq's 19th century photograph of New Orleans' prostitutes. The actions of the two women walking, prancing, shaking, and switching places are perplexing, replete as they are with pyramidal references, negative and positive exposures, stereoscopic images and so on. What can be understood is the adherence to a formal structure and its corresponding effects, which eventually break down and become less and less reasoned. At one point Joan begins to 'crawl on the floor,' her legs dragging behind her like a cripple. This is repeated several times, and in one taped version of this work, Joan bites the knee of Lane, who poses in a transparent leotard with her legs splayed. In another instance Lane paws the air like a dog on its back. In yet another take, Joan, in a flower-patterned silk kimono, twists and turns her pelvis in front of the camera, so that the flower contracts. The atmosphere has turned suggestive, yet strange, as the focus descends into a "game" that appears remarkably like one practiced "among the Wollo [of Ethiopia, which] consists of imitating its [hyena] howls and slowly inserting oneself into doorways, body bent forwards in such a way as to mimic the creature's curious gait

— forelegs very long, hindquarters almost scraping the ground. . . ."⁵

As Joan has shown us the need to transform — to push one's self further, away from recognition towards the extra-ordinary — is not only the privilege of children who, in their desire to *be* animals, absorb the role with a mixture of innocence and sexual submission that always ends in violence or scatology. It is a phenomenon basic to the natural world we live within.

In Joan's most recent performance installation, *Lines in the Sand* (2002), she wears the diaphanous robes of the desert and becomes Helen of Egypt, the poet H. D., and her own grandmother, who visited the pyramids at the beginning of the twentieth century. We find her perched on a parapet inside a Las Vegas junkyard, propelled into a frenzied dance of veils; we are transported to some unspecified Eastern ceremony, or into the midst of a wasteland, base and lowly, where a bird is in the hyper-state of a mating ritual.

In 2002 Joan and filmmaker Jeff Preiss joined together to present their work. Jeff constructed a film installation where Joan performed. On a white wall hung a large sheet of paper on which Joan gradually began to draw with an extended stick tipped with charcoal. The image she drew was an ellipse. The lines filled the white space until the sign disappeared into the repetition of the process. It made her body undulate like ocean waves, with increasing fluidity as she pulled the room with her. The sense of being overwhelmed in accelerated swells of movement, of giving in, of being invincible, seemed then to prefigure immortality.

NOTES

- 1 Michel Leiris, *Critical Dictionary*, in *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, (London, 1995), p. 59.
- 2 Richard Serra, *Impromptu*, in *Joan Jonas: Works 1968–1994*, exhibition catalogue, Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 1994), p. 33.
- 3 Joan Jonas, *Joan Jonas Performance Installations 1968–2000*, exhibition catalogue, Galerie der Stadt Stuttgart, (Stuttgart, 2000), p. 108.
- 4 Georges Bataille, in *Critical Dictionary*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- 5 Marcel Griaule, *Critical Dictionary op. cit.*, p. 59.