



# JOAN JONAS

"revolted by the thought of known places..."

- work in progress -

EDITION  
KUNST-WERKE BERLIN  
1992



It began when I returned to Berlin in January, 1990, to see the changes — what was once strange and exotic would soon be erased. Later in '91 when I went back for a longer time, I thought of setting “Sweeney Astray” in the various locations my work takes me to — beginning with Berlin as a center. Working on the road in real places that relate to the poem through our activities would give this narrative about a journey a certain logic.

I began to collect images on video and in still photographs. We bought a big piece of glass. Sans Souci in beautiful, crumbling Potsdam would be a fitting context for this king who goes mad during battle and is condemned to live like a bird flying from place to place, sitting in trees, existing on water and watercress. Only after he is on the move does he speak or sing, complaining, lamenting his fate, praising nature, yearning for home — all this relates to a contemporary situation.

The indoor sections were shot in an old abandoned liquor factory in Berlin Mitte, once the Jewish quarter — Sweeney perched on his glass nest — we painted a quote by Moses Mendelssohn who once lived nearby, to remind us of the past.

Sections like “I often go to the flagstone . . .” written by the Irish poet Lianain, in the 8th century, the time of Sweeney’s origins, will be included to offset his mysogeny and to give the woman a voice. (I am curious about this period when the church came to Ireland and smothered the female presence.) Working with Marie Goyette from Berlin, Sven Lehmann from the Ernst-Busch-Theater-School in East Berlin and students from a workshop at the HdK we improvised with text, sound and movement using material at hand in the echoing space to translate this Irish epic into a video narrative using a mixture of ancient and contemporary story telling devices.

I used simple effects — in-camera (Hi-8) and glass-transparent and reflective —, the structure of the double monitors was a device used in a video piece I made in '82 about Berlin. Next time I will change this.

After that I went to Lodz, Poland to work in the Artist’s Museum where I began work on the section of Sweeney that describes his transformation.

There I visited the Russian market every morning (remembering the Polish market in Berlin in 1990), and bought many objects — a spinning tank, a gas mask, a first aid kit, a doctor doll that lit up, a compass, a ruler, old car windows etc. — at the same time we visited a textile factory where we found a room in which a young woman was all alone winding thread from a rickety spinning machine. We recorded this 19th century scene, and then with three young performers worked out sets of movements with the props while they repeated the poem in Polish in a sort of round. The actor playing Sweeney moved among them in an expressionistic manner also speaking the poem repeatedly. His particular style became part of the picture. At the same time a monitor played the footage shot in the factory of the young woman spinning endlessly. A dance.

These plays avoid any one source and continue the ancient process of cooking — transforming. I will continue this work on the road in different places as I develop this video/performance.

Joan Jonas



the fleeces of my white couch

I often go to the flagstone  
where he once stood —  
I go there often, each day.  
He shall neither have cows nor yearlings  
no heifers.  
Never a mate shall be at his right hand.

Beloved is the dear voice that I hear.  
I dare not welcome it.  
But this only do I say —  
beloved is this dear voice.

The voice that comes to me  
through the wattled wall —  
it is right for it to blame me:  
What the voice does to me is,  
— it will not let me sleep.

That friday  
it was no camping on pastures  
of honey  
upon the fleeces of my white couch.  
Between his arms.

Joyless the bargain I have made —  
the heart of his I loved I wrung.  
Twas madness not to do his pleasure —  
conceal it not.

He was the love of my heart.  
If I loved every other  
a roaring flame dissolved this heart of mine.  
However, for certain it will cease to beat.

Lianain, Irish, 8th century





When Sweeney heard my bell ringing  
he came all of sudden hurtling  
in a terrible rage against me  
to drive me off and banish me.

My curse fall on Sweeney  
for his great offense.

Cracked bell hoarding grace  
since the first saint rang it —  
it will curse you to the trees,  
bird brain among branches.

May the mad spasms strike  
you Sweeney, forever.\*



The mother of this herd  
is old and grey,  
the stags that follow her  
are branchy, many tined.

I would be cloaked in the grey  
sanctuary of her head,  
I would roost among  
her mazy antlers

and would be lofted into  
this thicket of horns  
on the stag that lows at me  
over the glen.

I am Sweeney the whinger,  
the scuttler in the valley.  
But call me, instead,  
Peak-Pate, Stag-head.

The spring I always liked  
the spring well  
that tasted pure and cool...

Forever mendicant,  
my rags all frayed and scanty,  
high in the mountains  
like a crazed, frost bitten sentry

I find not bed nor quarter,  
no easy place in the sun —  
not even in this reddening  
covert of tall fern.\*





I prefer the elusive  
rhapsody of blackbirds  
to the foolish talk  
of men and women.

I have deserved all this:  
night virgils, terror,  
flittings across the water,  
women's cried out eyes.



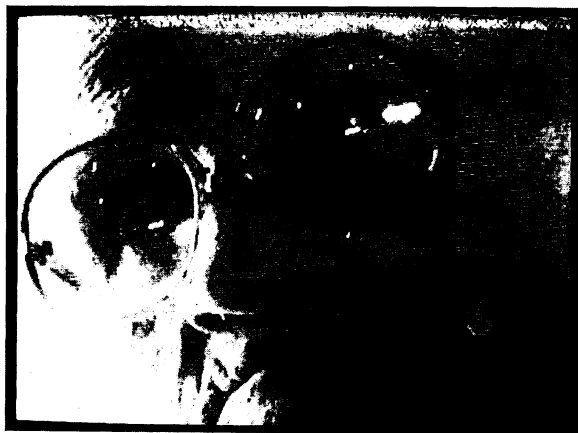
Calm yourself. Come to. Rest.  
Come home east. Forget the west.\*



I am so terrified  
so panicky, so haunted  
I dare not an eyelid.

The flight of a small wren  
scares me as much,  
as a great expedition  
out to hunt me down.

Were you in my place,  
and I in yours, think:  
Would you enjoy to be mad?  
Would you be contented?



There was a time when I preferred  
the mountain grouse crying at dawn  
to the voice and the closeness  
of a beautiful woman.\*



## Joan Astray

“Joan, where are you goin’?”

“To Amsterdam, to Iceland, to Nova Scotia, to Paris, to . . . , wherever I can earn my living . . .”

“Joan, what are you doin’?”

“Have a show, do a workshop, make a video, perform . . . , whatever I have to say for myself . . .”

“Joan, why?”

Joan Jonas is leaving Berlin, although she really would have liked to stay, but again . . . , and Joan is leaving us with memories again, of two workshops, two installations, several video “Sweeney Astray”.

Being an eclectic she would of course use only parts of this Gaelic epic, about King Sweeney, who runs off from a battle, naked and a madman, and spends his life roaming the counties of Ireland, from well to well, feeding on watercress, hiding in trees, because he’s cursed to be scared away from wherever he’d like to rest. In his rare moments of halting, meeting old and new acquaintances, he’ll always create a poem lamenting his fate, some times a poetic dialogue with his respective counterpart. When he’s killed in the end as part of his curse and because of mischievous rumour, he’s declared a saint and his memory immortal by his last host, the collector of his poems and stories.

Doomed to be on the road – no longer than three months Joan would stay in one place for long years now. Whether you call it curse or choice, it’s her way to be an artist: travelling, surviving. Highly respected but poorly rewarded in the U.S. she worked in Europe a lot. And she would never be an easy-to-deal-with participant in the discourse.

Although her artistic work itself is not political, she's always raising her voice in political issues, may it be the front line of the women's movement back in the sixties, or the debate on censorship today; like Sweeney is cursed for being in the way of the politics of a selfordained cleric, who is marking out property that doesn't belong to him.

Doomed to perform when there is an audience — if you have that urge to exhibit yourself, that's what you do: dance, acting (does anybody remember her part in Chekhov's "Three sisters" with the Wooster Group?), performance (although I thought her work was just pompous when I saw her first with "He Saw Her Burning", I couldn't forget her images, and gradually and gratefully I would change my mind . . .), teaching . . . Again what is it but escape? Joan explains, that wherever she is staying for some time, she will create an environment that's different from ordinary life, where she can think and play in her own and personal stream of consciousness, and all her work starts and is composed there, before she takes it on stage, an installation, a loft, a park.

Doomed to go on. Most of her work I've seen or heard of was called "work in progress". The stream of consciousness, the finding of images which call for more images to be created, the implications have no end. A fact well worth lamenting. All these fairytales of the ultimate the perfect work of art. Tragic they are and deadly. Yet every artist yearns for becoming the white light, being the vision rather than talking about it, and complains about the sufferings one has to take on to make the work.

Maybe that's where the video comes in. When there's a tape it's definite, even in the fragility, the spontaneity inherent in the medium, it's by-the-way-quality. Also it allows you to collect images and use them in a performance: whether it's material from the Russian market in Lodz or a close circuit video mirror, they are proof of a relation to real life.

That's the point. Doomed, cursed, mad, the artist is a mad(wo)man who maintains contact with the "real" world. ("Yes, we are crazy, but we now it, that's the difference!" Robert Filliou once said.) The witty lunatic. Trading rest for beauty and security for truth.

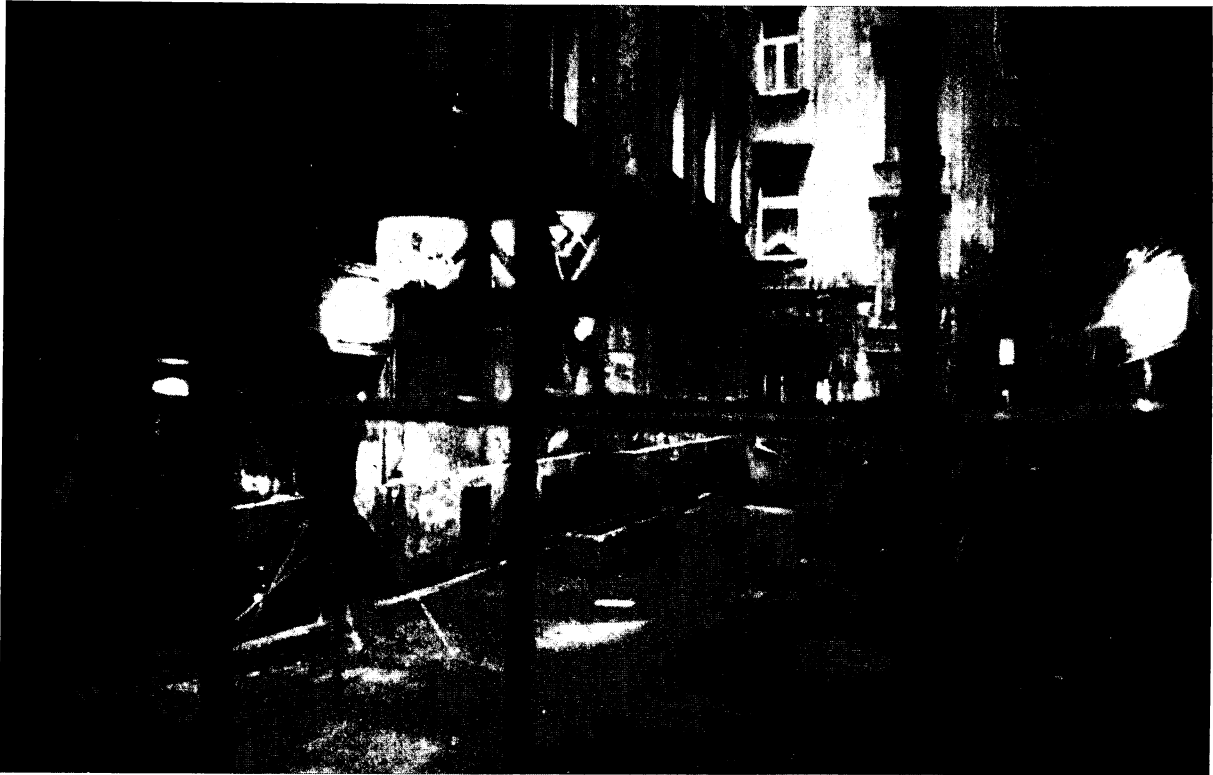
But what about the holy fool? Walter Benjamin's "Aura", destroyed by mass production, is what any performance artist tries to recreate. If eternity is out of reach, we make for the moment, for dematerializing in a material world, for the spark of the divine in a split second instead of tons of glamorous (and oppressive) marble and steel.

Have we lost Joan now? No, neither in these notes, where, like Moling records Sweeney's history, we try to preserve a memory of the pieces of artwork she presented us with, nor in reality, while she's on her way, taking her tales from place to place, collecting and conveying found images to recreate and rearrange her vision again and again.

She'll let us know how she's doing. May there be for her a place to settle soon, and a long time to keep commuting between accomodation and creation without trains, planes, and pains, while she goes on smiling at human folly.

Thomas Marquard

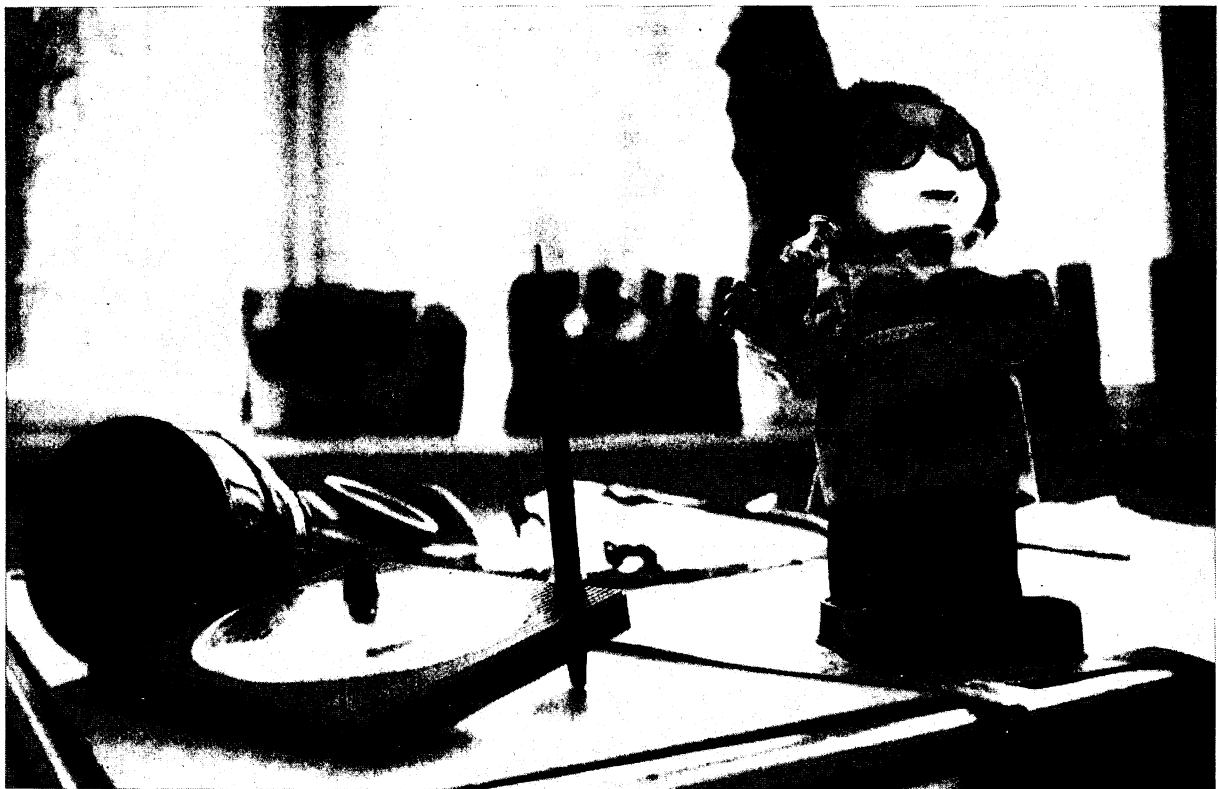




“Es thut mir weh, daß ich um das Recht der Existenz erst bitten soll, welches das Recht eines jeden Menschen ist...”

Moses Mendelssohn to Marquis d’Argens, 1763

Left and right page:  
“revolted by the thought of known places...”  
Installation, January/February 1992  
KUNST-WERKE BERLIN Galerie Likörfabrik





His brain convulsed,  
his mind split open.  
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings  
and launchings came over him,  
he staggered and flapped desperately,  
he was revolted by the thought of known places  
and dreamed strange migrations.  
His fingers stiffened,  
his feet scuffled and flurried,  
his heart was startled,  
his senses were mesmerized,  
his sight was bent,  
the weapons fell from his hands  
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion  
like a bird of the air.  
And the curse was fulfilled.\*

Left and right page:  
"revolted by the thought of known places..."  
Performance, March 1992  
International Artist's Museum, Lodz, Poland



“revolted by the thought of known places...” (work in progress), 1992

**BERLIN:**

**Actors:**

Sweeney  
Others

Sven Lehmann  
Marie Goyette  
Bob Rutman  
and students from the Hochschule der Künste, Berlin

**Costumes:**

Natascha Agafanova

**Lights and technical assistance:**

Guido Kulecki

**POLAND:**

**Actors:**

Sweeney  
Others

Mirosław Fiedler  
Agnieszka Dumas  
Karolina Lutczyn  
Marian Slupinski

**Assistant:**

Mariusz Olszewski

**Camera:**

Joan Jonas

**Editors:**

Joan Jonas  
Egon Bunne

**Production:**

KUNST-WERKE BERLIN und Llurex Video

Project-Management and catalogue: Alexandra Binswanger, Philipp v. Doering

**KUNST-WERKE BERLIN**

**verantwortlich:**

Alexandra Binswanger / Klaus Biesenbach  
Philipp v. Doering / Alfonso Rutigliano

Wir danken dem Künstlerprogramm des DAAD Berlin für die Förderung dieser Publikation und der Philip Morris GmbH für die Förderung des Gesamt-Projektes.

\* “revolted by the thought of known places...”  
is based on “Sweeney Astray” in a version by Seamus Heaney

Was  
Vedent huf  
||

