

DE-SYNCHRONIZATION IN JOAN JONAS'S PERFORMANCES

At that moment in the late sixties when traditional art practices had given way to a multiplicity of new activities, thereby disrupting the continuity of a century of modernism, Joan Jonas began performing her works in the lofts, gyms, galleries, and vacant lots of lower Manhattan. Her events were not, properly speaking, theater or dance, nor were they directly related to contemporary developments known as process or site-specific sculpture; Jonas had, in fact, been a sculptor, but her new work represented a rejection rather than an extension of that medium. Indeed, it was the fact that Jonas's performances could not be assimilated to any previously known category of art that was their distinguishing characteristic. Yet at that time they were seen as a logical next step, and no one was concerned to ask what, exactly, they were. It simply seemed obvious that the potential for innovation within painting and sculpture had been exhausted, and that these traditional mediums were giving way to other, hybrid forms, particularly those involving temporality.

It is now, however, important to return to that situation and to recall that "logic," because the rupture that it effected in modernist practice has subsequently been repressed, smoothed over. The past decade has seen an unquestioning return to conventional art forms and all the values attached to them, most particularly the value of "individualism." In such an atmosphere, Jonas's performances appear to be marginal, peripheral, *eccentric*. But it is precisely this eccentricity that gives Jonas's work its meaning, for it is about the lack of a center. By this I do not mean only that there is no structural center to any particular performance, but also that there is no centered self from which the work can be said to be generated or by which it can be received. Both performer and spectator are shown to be decentered, split.

A single strategy, paradigmatic in this respect, informs all of Jonas's work. That strategy is de-synchronization, usually in conjunction with fragmentation and repetition. (These latter were initially explored in the early performances with mirrors.) De-synchronization is first fully operative in the outdoor works, *Jones Beach Piece* (1970) and *Delay Delay* (1972). In those events, performers made loud noises by clapping blocks of wood together in wide overhead arcs. Because of the vast distance between performers and spectators, the gesture was seen well in advance of the sound it produced, making the gesture one of silence and the sound seem to come from nowhere. Both because of the number of performers clapping blocks and because the sounds were repeated with their own echoes, it was impossible to link sound and gesture. In this very simple

way, Jonas enforced a separation between the spectators' senses of sight and hearing, making them aware of the contingency of perceptual experience.

De-synchronization was intensified and complicated by the use of video technology in the indoor performances. The videotape entitled *Vertical Roll*, related to the *Organic Honey* performances of the early seventies, serves as an emblem for this activity. Here the de-synchronization of the monitor's receiving and transmitting frequencies causes the image constantly to scan vertically across the screen, disappearing off the top and reappearing at the bottom. The viewer is far more aware of this hypnotic vertical motion than of any movement internal to the image itself, which can only be glimpsed piecemeal. Moreover, the movements enacted by Jonas within the videotape are choreographed in relation to the action of the vertical roll. In the video performances, Jonas used the de-synchronized video image in a closed-circuit situation. At one moment in *Twilight* (1975) she and another performer drew halves of various figures on opposite sides of a blackboard on which a video camera was trained. In this instance, the images could only be discerned whole because of the de-synchronization, the two halves of the images coming together precisely at the moment when the vertical-roll bar was at center screen. These two opposite uses of the vertical roll—one to wipe away the image, the other to constitute its visibility—insist upon the same reading: that the medium through which one gains access to the image, whether it be simply one's senses or a technological apparatus, is contingent, unstable.

This lack of stability exists in the images Jonas uses as well as the mediums through which they achieve visibility. This is perhaps best illustrated by the very simple drawings she makes in many of her works. For the performance *Mirage* (1976), for example, Jonas repeatedly drew and erased lines on a blackboard (a film shown during the performance showed the same activity), making images whose ambiguous readings were reinforced by their being somewhat different with each incarnation. In one case, Jonas drew a circle, labeled it "sun," then inscribed a second arc within the circle, erased part of the larger circle, and left what was now surely a new moon with the label "sun." She is also particularly fond of drawing a heart with arteries that also looks like a head with horns. In this same performance, an analogous doubling of Jonas's own persona occurred in a beautiful videotape in which she constantly repeated "good morning" and "good night." One quickly became aware of watching, in the enforced voyeurism of seeing the moment of awakening and the mo-

ment before going to bed, the extreme compression of a duration of days and nights into the short span of a videotape. In this fractured and repeated time, what one finally came to sense was a profound split between the "good morning" and the "good night" personae, as if two separate selves were caught in an endlessly repetitive dialogue.

The splitting of the performer into separate guises parallels the rift that exists between performer and performed material. Jonas's images, while personally important to her, are often garnered from the public domain of culture. This accounts for her attraction to fairy tales as the "texts" of her recent works. For these stories are clearly not written by Jonas, or, for that matter, by anyone else. Fairy tales exist within the long traditions of their telling. In *The Juniper Tree* (1976) and *Upside Down and Backwards* (1979), Jonas severs her telling voice from her performing body, using the dislocation of an audiotape; thus within each performance the tales are twice told. And moreover, this retelling of the tale that characterizes the fairy-tale genre also characterizes the performances, almost every one of which has been redone on numbers of occasions, with different performers, even different numbers of performers, in radically different spaces, using different mechanical and technological equipment and different props. The result is that Jonas's performances can never exist in the integrity of their scripts and descriptions,* just as the notion of art that we take away from these works is that it can now exist only in the process of its enactment, not in its integrity as object.

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*Despite the fact that each of Jonas's works develops and changes, and often radically, from one performance to another, only one script or description is published here. The sole exception is *The Juniper Tree*, for which two variants are included. One of these was exceptional in being made, on commission, for children; the other, because it was a collaboration. Hopefully these variants of *The Juniper Tree*, together with the inclusion of photographic documentation from many versions of each performance, will provide some sense of the differences from version to version of all the works. It should also be noted, however, that there is one respect in which Jonas's performances rarely vary, and that is that their duration is almost always about one hour.