

She walks into space. All eyes are on her. The lights go dim. She stands naked in the center of the space. The action is live, there is no edit, no delay, no projection to hide behind. The audience watches her staring into a small handheld mirror as she meticulously traces her entire body. None can see what the other perceives. While the artist has total control over her body through her gaze in the mirror, only the audience can see her body as a whole.

Today, more than four decades later, when we look at Joan Jonas's seminal performance *Mirror Check* (1970), both as a live performance as well as a video installation, we are witnesses of a historical recording. What we see is not only a woman looking at every detail of her bare body in front of a live audience, but in fact the staging of a performance of a film in the making. The mirror, like a camera, records and frames the body as an object of desire caught in the space between its gaze and projection.

Throughout her five-decade-spanning career, Jonas has deconstructed the politics of the gaze by giving vision to two cognitive facts, both of which are essential to the never-ending process of self-representation and understanding of gender.¹ First, the impossibility of meeting one's own gaze in an apparatus of reproduction during the process of recording, and second, that one can never see one's own body as a whole without the help of media. By acting out these signifying instances of what we can see and what remains invisible, Jonas turned herself into a "medium: information passes through."² *Mirror Check* not only embodied the artist's desire from early on to give up making sculpture by literally walking into space,³ but is the foundation of her ongoing interest in the visual strategies and spatio-temporal complexities inherent to the history of female identity.⁴

In her well-known works of the time, such as *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1971–73), as well as

Glass Puzzle (1973), Jonas simultaneously merged the visual staging of the live with its recording, a move that allowed her to orchestrate an endless labyrinth of bodies and spaces, confronting the viewer with multiple layers of time and space.⁵ Both were new mediums of expression that allowed Jonas, who had always been inspired by the literature, films, music, and arts of various times and cultures, to find her own language and to "do something that's different in my own way...making a kind of visual language that other people were not dealing with at that time."⁶

While shooting *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, for which *Mirror Check* became the opening act, Jonas's blurring of the two- and three-dimensional drew the audience into her non-linear narratives and scenarios of metaphorical fragmentation. The live and pre-recorded interplay of the body in relation to multiple cameras and projections on stage challenged the cognitive capacities of her viewers in an intellectual, affective,

and spontaneous way—an effect that deconstructed the idea of a center as well as hierarchy and that the art historian Douglas Crimp described as a de-synchronization and de-centralization of the live.⁷

Discovering the potential of an infinite visual space through its de-synchronization allowed Jonas to develop a series of performance-based scenarios in which the double indexicality of the absent became manifested within the correlative tension field of the live and the mediated.⁸ Jonas's principle idea was to enable her audience to see “the process of image-making in a performance simultaneously with a live detail.”⁹ This idea was not only central for her performances but even more so for her performance-based installations. The spatial and temporal discrepancies “between the performed activity and the constant duplicating, changing, and altering of information in the video,”¹⁰ illuminate what the philosopher Judith Butler came to formulate two decades later in

her theory that reality can never be produced by virtue of will or intention, but precisely because it derives from conventions that it repeats and actualizes.¹¹ For Jonas, space and time were never abstract imaginary categories, but rather reality producing relations, constituted in their relationships to and with the objects and subjects within them.

Jonas's comprehension of the reality of loss and its impact on human presence allows her to not only channel one space within another, regardless if real or not, but to articulate a continuously growing artistic vocabulary, a methodology driven by her outspoken desire to unravel illusion, without the loss of its seduction.¹² Jonas's knowledge of material alchemy allows her to juxtapose complex technical innovations with a gesture as simple as drawing a circle on chalkboard. Each line drawn and mirrored echoes philosopher Michel Foucault's idea that a “thing's place was no longer anything but a point in

its movement, just as the stability of a thing is only its movement indefinitely slowed down.”¹³ Her poses and gestures with objects and props, on screens both opaque and translucent, allow her to construct both imaginary and real sites of encounter. Space becomes a malleable self-referential entity, a medium of its own, to be reproduced, repeated, and acted upon.¹⁴

In *Glass Puzzle*, Jonas pushes the internal temporality of the aesthetic experience; by interweaving of various spatial entities and realities, she makes the room legible through itself.¹⁵ The installation version of *Glass Puzzle* consists of a monitor and a video projection, each respectively showing a color and a black-and-white version of the video. On both the monitor and the screen, we see two women involved in various exercises and poses—their presence shifts between the reality of the studio spaces and the reflections of their recording in the monitor. They are accompanied by an antique children's school desk; from within, an orange

light flows out into the gray space, animated in time. Each of the three elements in the installation of *Glass Puzzle* oscillates in its function and transgresses the dialectical hierarchy between object and subject. She engages the space within and outside the monitor by echoing the spaces within the video in the set up of the exhibition space.¹⁶

Jonas's decision to double the past in the medium of its staging as a public act of appearance makes the experience of both her live performances as well her installations tangible as a semantic event within the Now of the art institution. This constellation is not driven by a longing for nostalgia, but, as philosopher Martin Seel states, by the staging of "the striking production and emphasis of a presence, of a right here, right now of something taking place. And because it is happening in the present, it evades every attempt of grasping it completely."¹⁷ She confronts the viewer with the anticipatory images of technical progress and its failed utopias.

Jonas constantly changes and adapts the installations of her performances not only to the spaces she is given, but also to the actuality and context in which the work is shown. In *Parallel Practices*, for example, she decided to paint the walls that frame her part of the exhibition in gray, mirroring the duality of the given curatorial framework and translating its dialectics into her own structure and content.

Jonas's treatment of the spaces that are activated in her installations is guided by the awareness that the past is never directly accessible. The past myths, stories, and characters she calls upon will only become legible through their translation and iteration into another medium, whether a moving image or a live performer. Jonas's dedication to the visual and corporal articulation of cultural memory affirms the notion that cultural memory cannot exist without the tension between media representations and social processes.¹⁸ The inter-meshing of the pre-recorded

and the live within the doubling of the exhibition as a performative space remains important for the development of her more recent, loosely connected trilogy of works entitled *Lines in the Sand* (2002); *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* (2005); and *Reading Dante III* (2010).

In all three Jonas confronts the present loss and politically-governed suppression of cultural memory by using a fictional story set in the past. Her sources are interconnected and range from the myth of Helen of Troy, to Sigmund Freud, to Aby Warburg. Her aim is to create a scenario in which the experience of knowledge is given a space to reflect a shared, yet heterogeneous multitude of cultural memories.

This is particularly apparent in *Reading Dante III*, a performative adaptation of Dante's *Inferno* as a road movie. On stage as well as within the installation, the viewer follows Jonas on a journey from the past to the present, crossing the American continent from

north to south. A host of parallel narratives staged in clips and fragments unfold in both metaphorical and real space and time. *Reading Dante* is a series of mnemonic analogies that develop as an infinite string of theatrically animated time capsules. They are miniature worlds of their own, mixing flashbacks of Jonas's own archival footage with travelogues from Mexico City and staged performances in Cape Breton. When we see Jonas manipulate her own archival footage from the 1970s¹⁹ with recently recorded video footage, live on stage, for *Reading Dante III*, we witness how she explores the forgotten in light of the re-discovered. Her research of the ritualistic, the conceptual, and the political gives vision and voice to the universal desire to perceive one's own consciousness of the present in the context of a greater world. These loosely connected scenes and acts aim at capturing the present state of the world, one that in Jonas's view is fascinating and "historically speaking a period of

mannerisms and fragmented memory."²⁰

The spaces Jonas creates in her installations both unravel and control her surroundings. As heterotopic spaces they reflect on the concrete spatial conditions of their presentation as well as the ideological complexities at the root of her research-based practice and cultural appropriations.²¹ Her installations function like a *mise en abyme*, echoing the archival nature of the museums that house them. They not only replicate but question the given order of memory regardless of their physical, ephemeral, or concrete state of being.²²

Jonas's simultaneous stagings of physical and pictorial spaces remains a central factor in her constant rethinking of works from the past. They have absorbed their own history as installations. Because of their unique synthesis of indexicality and iterability, they have become signifiers for the institutionalization of performance art that peaked both in the late

1970s as well as throughout the last decade, due to the revival of performance art. Jonas's unraveling of the hidden mechanisms of power remain visionary in the increasingly recognized relationship between the performative and its installation-based manifestations and creation of space, unraveling the museum as our time's biggest stage.

- 1 See Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- 2 See Joan Jonas, "Artist Statement," in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1983), 139.
- 3 See Joan Simon, "Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas," *Art in America* 7 (July 1995): 74.
- 4 *Mirror Check*, one of the few early performances that Jonas agrees to have re-enacted, was regularly performed during the *Parallel Practices* exhibition at CAMH.
- 5 When Jonas created *Mirror Check*, she had begun to work and experiment with one of the first Sony Portapak's circulating in New York. This new video recording device made it possible, unlike analog film, to simultaneously record and render, as well as project moving images, live on stage.
- 6 Joan Jonas, in discussion with the author, May 2003.
- 7 Douglas Crimp, "De-Synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances," in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1983), 9.
- 8 Christiane Kuhlmann, *Bewegter Körper – Mechanischer Apparat: Zur medialen Verschränkung von Tanz und Fotografie in den 1920er Jahren an den Beispielen von Charlotte Rudolph, Suse Byk und Lotte Jacobi* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2003), 194.
- 9 See Joan Jonas's text comment on *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* in *Joan Jonas: Five Works*, ed. Valerie Smith (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2003), 10.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 By doing so Joan Jonas unifies two key artistic and cultural concepts of the late 20th century ahead of their time: the process based construction of gender through the iteration of the mutually counter posing and reinforcing concepts of subject and object. See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue Ellen Case (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270–282.
- 12 See Joan Jonas, "Artist Statement", in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions, 1968–1982*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley; Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, 1983), 139.
- 13 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–49, <http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html>.
- 14 Joan Jonas in discussion with the author, May 2003
- 15 Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 251.
- 16 Wolfgang Kemp, *Die Räume der Maler: Zur Bilderzählung seit Giotto* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1996) 10.
- 17 Martin Seel, "Inszenieren als Erscheinenlassen: Thesen über die Reichweite eines Begriffs," in *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*, ed. Josef Früchtel and Jörg Zimmermann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 53.
- 18 Alaida Assmann, "Gedächtnis als Leitbegriff der Kulturwissenschaften," in *Kulturwissenschaften: Forschung – Praxis – Positionen*, ed. Lutz Musner and Gotthart Wunberg (Wien: WUV, 2002), 32.
- 19 This image, by virtue of her technician working the mixer, is seen on the screen superimposed on a projection of her own archival video footage from a 1976 performance, which she recorded during a summer night in Manhattan. We see Jonas and the artist Pat Steir, both dressed in flowing white gowns, moving around in circles, singing an eerie version of the familiar "row, row, row your boat" tune.
- 20 Alvin Curran, "Out of Space," *Frieze* 124: (June–August 2009), http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/out_of_space/.
- 21 Christian Kravagna, *The Museum as Arena: Artists on Institutional Critique* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2001), 7.
- 22 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46–49, <http://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html>.