

Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas

JOAN SIMON

Freely blending elements of performance, dance, drawing, music, video and installation, Joan Jonas has developed a distinctive approach to art-making. In a wide-ranging conversation she reflects upon her work from the late 1960s to the present.

Joan Jonas refers to her performances as pieces, to her video as film, and to herself as artist. She is foremost a picture-builder who elides methods from different mediums and subjects from different cultures to explore ongoing constructions of identity. Her works depend on the temporal as they incorporate dance, text, music, film, live closed-circuit video and prerecorded tapes, props, drawings and her invented personas. All of Jonas's production is informed, as critic Douglas Crimp put it, by a single paradigmatic strategy: "de-synchronization, usually in conjunction with fragmentation and repetition."

Since 1968 Jonas's cumulative gestures, repeated and changed over time, have been presented in locales pastoral and urban. Her works have been performed in grassy fields, on windy beaches, in city lots, gymnasiums and lofts. She has performed for an audience of one or an assembly of many. Her works have also been presented in more traditional forums. The artist's first retrospective was mounted in 1980 at the University Art Museum, Berkeley, the second in 1994 at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Jonas was born in 1936 in New York City. She studied art history and sculpture at Mount Holyoke College (BFA, 1958), sculpture and drawing at the Boston Museum School, and sculpture, modern poetry and early Chinese and Greek art at Columbia University (MFA, 1964). In 1965 she worked as a secretary at Richard Bellamy's Green Gallery, New York, and subsequently traveled to

Greece, Morocco, the Near East and the American Southwest before returning to New York, where she began to participate in experimental dance workshops with, among others, Trisha Brown, Deborah Hay, Judy Padow, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer.

Jonas presented her first public performances and made her first film in 1968 and her first videotapes in 1971, following her visit to Japan in 1970, where she saw Noh, Kabuki and Bunraku theater. While maintaining her base in New York City, at different times over the past 25 years she has lived, worked and collaborated with communities of artists in Nova Scotia, India, Germany, Holland, Iceland, Poland, Hungary and Ireland. In 1975 Jonas appeared in *Keep Busy*, a film by Robert Frank and Rudy Wurlitzer, since 1979, she has also performed in productions by New York's Wooster Group.

In performance, Jonas is an intensely focused, nervy presence, whether naked, elaborately costumed and masked, dressed down in neutral white work clothes, or taking her place casually on a set in a dressing gown. The last is perhaps the costume that best represents Jonas's "state" when she performs – the transfigured moment between the theatrical and the ordinary. She has an American Yankee voice, somewhat reminiscent of Katharine Hepburn's, that is determined but which accommodates the hesitations and repetitions that are much a part of her syntax. For all this, in performance Jonas almost magically erases her "self".

"The performer" she once wrote, "sees herself as a medium: information passes through."

Jonas's information and materials derive from a wide range of literary and musical sources. A brief listing

includes medieval Irish poetry, Icelandic sagas, fairy tales and contemporary news reports. She has used the sounds of spoons against mirrors; dogs barking; Italian, American, Mayan and Irish folk songs; reggae; Chicago blues, bird calls, deer calls, sleigh bells; and Peggy Lee singing "Sans Souci" with full orchestra. Her props and costumes are similarly eclectic. They have been variously saved from childhood, rummaged from second-hand stores and flea markets, and given to her by friends. If in her collecting of information Jonas seems part naturalist and part anthropologist, in her use of these humble, memory-laden bits she has also called on the personas of alchemist, illusionist and sorceress.

The transmutability, often the literal doubling, of Jonas's images, has been aided and abetted by her signature prop, a mirror, which was early on joined by a video camera. The mirror as myth and metaphor provides a key to Jonas's output and to her intent, and has been widely applied to interpreting her work. Her illusions in space bring to mind the testings of a hand-held prism, a simple tool that can be primitively magical as well as technically precise, that can generate a multiplicity of sharply etched images which are always on the verge of being lost. What remains and what might be lost of Jonas's body of work prompted the following discussions. It was occasioned specifically by several events: Jonas's *Variations on a Scene*, an outdoor piece presented at Vassivière, France, in spring 1993; "Joan Jonas: Six Installations" her retrospective at the Stedelijk in spring 1994; and its accompanying theater piece produced in collaboration with the Toneelgroep, Amsterdam, *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray*.

Joan Simon: How do you deal with the temporal, the changeable, the ephemeral aspects of your performance work in a museum retrospective?

Joan Jonas: In the Berkeley retrospective in 1980 I actually performed in all the pieces. In this retrospective I'm not performing any. What I did was to make new installations. I used all the old elements from performances, but I made new arrangements of them. I layered the information, loaded each room with information, so that it was like my performances where people were doing different things or similar actions at the same time. I wanted all that sensory experience to be there, even if a visitor were to be in a gallery for only five or ten minutes.

JS: In the room with the *Outdoor* and *Mirror Pieces* are to be found your signature props: hoops in which you perform, wood blocks used as percussion instruments, masks and, of course, mirrors of many kinds. What is the earliest work in the room?

JJ: *Wind*, from 1968, is the first film I made. It's from a performance piece called *Oad Lau*, which was the very first piece performed in public. The title refers to a Moroccan village that I visited once; it means "watering place" I like the name – and I can see now that the idea of a "watering place" became a very basic element in my work, as generative source, as mirror, as reflection. The performance *Oad Lau* was based on a Greek wedding that I saw in the mountains in Crete around 1966. The Greek men sang unaccompanied welcomes to the guests coming up the paths on their donkeys carrying gifts for the bride and groom.

JS: Seeing performers approach from great distances is a key element in many of your outdoor pieces, as in *Wind*. In both *Jones Beach Piece* (1970) and *Delay Delay* (1972) you play on the dislocation between sounds and signs sent from afar – the differences, for example, between an audience seeing performers clapping wooden blocks together and hearing the resulting sounds after a slight delay.

JJ: The idea of using wood blocks came from my trip to Japan in 1970. The sound of wood on wood is so much heard in the Noh and Kabuki theater. My working with the wood blocks came from noticing the actual sound delay at Jones Beach. And from thinking about the problem of how to make a sound be very clear and simple and how to show the action taking place far away. That was the essential idea of the piece. The first work all came out of my experiences in the mid-'60s of seeing work from other cultures – from Greece, from Morocco, from the American Southwest.

JS: Why were you in all of these places?

JJ: Because I had studied art history, it was research. I wanted to go to Greece; it was one of the places where it all began. And I was very attracted to Minoan imagery; I was always interested in the beginnings of things. I went to the Southwest for a summer because I wanted to see the Hopi Snake Dance, and I also was lucky to see other dances and ceremonies as well.

JS: At this point were you calling yourself an art history student, a sculptor or...?

JJ: I was a sculptor, but I hadn't quite found my language. I knew that I was going to do performances, but I hadn't

started doing them. I saw some dance pieces at the Judson Church. The minute I saw those things, I knew that was what I wanted to do. One by Lucinda Childs – I don't remember the title – was just so odd. I can't exactly explain what it was. I found it very intriguing though, and I immediately identified with it, and with her. It was in-between dance and sculpture.

JS: In *Oad Lau* and *Wind*, the performers, you among them, function somewhere between dancers and sculptures.

JJ: For me there were no boundaries. I brought to performance my experience of looking at the illusionistic space of painting and of walking around sculptures and architectural spaces. I was barely in my early performance pieces; I was in them like a piece of material, or an object that moved very stiffly, like a puppet or a figure in a medieval painting. I didn't exist as Joan Jonas, as an individual "I" only as a presence, part of the picture. I moved rather mechanically. In the mirror costumes in *Wind* and *Oad Lau*, we walked very stiffly with our arms at our sides as in a ritual. We moved across the space, in the background, from side to side. When I was in the other "Mirror Pieces" a little later, I just lay on the floor and I was carried around like a piece of glass.

JS: You used yourself as if you were a sculptural material?

JJ: Yes. I gave up making sculpture, and I walked into the space. My sculptures, the ones I had been doing before, just weren't interesting.

JS: What were they like?

JJ: Giacometti, plaster figures. I loved Giacometti's work. One of the things that attracted me to performance was the possibility of mixing sound, movement, image, all the different elements to make a complex statement. What I wasn't good at was making a single, simple statement – like a sculpture.

I found another way of making something that involves many different levels of perception, many layers of illusion and a story. Even if I didn't use an actual story at the beginning, the performances were all based on poetic structures. I was influenced by the American Imagists – William Carlos Williams, Pound, H. D. – as well as Borges.

JS: Where did you perform the first *Mirror Pieces*?

JJ: *Oad Lau* was at St. Peter's Church, New York, and then Peter Campus filmed it outdoors. I then performed the *Mirror Pieces* in a New York gymnasium and at NYU. I was taking a workshop at the time with Trisha Brown. There was a group of us, and we put together an evening

of performances. I worked with string and mirrors to define a space, to hold leaning bodies.

JS: What other performances or other works by your contemporaries were important to you?

JJ: Well, everything by Yvonne Rainer. I remember she did *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966), one of the best dances I ever saw. I didn't see any of Bruce Nauman's live performances until later. I loved his holograms, where he was making faces. I liked Nauman's work because it was so strange. It was just on the edge of being nothing.

One of the turning points for me was working for Richard Bellamy. I worked there for six months in 1965, just before he closed his gallery, and that was when I saw everything. Finding all that work changed my whole life. I saw Oldenburg's Happenings, and I met that world – Larry Poons, Lucas Samaras, Robert Morris, Oldenburg, Bob Whitman. Later on, I went to *Nine Evenings* (1966) and that was amazing. I met Simone Forti, and I loved her work. I saw *Waterman Switch* (1965), the piece where Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainer walked across the plank, both nude. The theater of those performances, the theatrical combined with visual art, I just knew that I wanted to do it. Then with the "Process" show ("Anti-Illusion: Process/Materials") that Marcia Tucker did at the Whitney in 1969, I found my own generation, a world of artists that I wanted to be close to – La Monte Young, Glass, Riley, Reich.

JS: That group became your audience as well, and through your use of mirrors they became part of your imagery. In photos of the early performances we can recognize Smithson and Serra, for example, in the mirror's reflections. We can see ourselves, as the audiences of the '70s did, in the series of full-length mirrors from "Mirror Piece" propped against a gallery wall. We can also see our reflections in the large, partially mirrored wall that is suspended from the ceiling by chains. One mirrored prop is somewhat different from the many others.

JJ: It came out of the earlier *Mirror Pieces* Richard Serra designed this wall for me. Because of his own work, he was interested in the idea of perception around the edges of the wall. And because it's hanging from the ceiling it moves in a number of directions. It is moved by the performers, and in turn moves the performers. All of the choreography of *Choreomania* came from working on the wall, appearing and disappearing over the top, around the sides. I added the element of light behind it, and in front. And I projected slides onto it: slides of Egyptian

frescoes, Renaissance portraits, Oriental rugs. I performed very small gestures with the slides to make it into a kind of magic show.

JS: What does the idea of the magic show mean for you?

JJ: Important memories from my childhood include all the magic shows that I saw (my stepfather was an amateur magician), the circus and Broadway musicals like *Oklahoma* and *Carousel*. But magic and theater are about the creation of illusions, surprises. I like to reveal the way the illusions are made.

Organic Honey

JS: As we enter the *Organic Honey* room, drawn forward towards the mannequin wearing Organic Honey's chiffon dress and her pink feather headdress, we pass a literal "illusion": a paper wall that is suspended parallel to and a few feet from the front wall of the gallery. Within the passage created by this paper we can see video equipment trained on props which are mounted on the actual wall – photographs, a fan. In the performances of *Organic Honey*, what the audience could see were the video camera operators going behind a scrim; the audience did not necessarily make the connection that some of the video images seen on monitors in the performing space were conveyed live from behind the scrim. That's a roundabout way to get to the basic question: Who is Organic Honey?

JJ: Organic Honey was the name I gave to my alter ego. I found video very magical, and I imagined myself an electronic sorceress conjuring the images.

JS: *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) is your first videotape. What is its relationship to the performance *Organic Honey*?

JJ: It came out of the process of making the performance. I wanted to make a piece using video. I called it film. I was working in my loft, and in my research I was comparing video to film. I began by making the kind of set that I'm now showing in the museum. There was a table with objects: a mirror, a doll, a water-filled glass jar into which I'd drop pennies. There was a chair, cameras and monitors, large mirrors, blackboards. Sol LeWitt asked me to do something for his students, and I did a performance. I moved this set to the 112 Greene Street Gallery, and I got a cameraperson to come in. We performed the making of the images. It was all there, it was just a question of putting the viewer in a certain position to watch it. From the

beginning I was interested in the discrepancy between the camera's view of the subject – seen in the monitor, a detail of the whole – and the spectator's. I wanted to put those two views together simultaneously.

JS: The props you use in performance are often resonant of your past; sometimes they're actual souvenirs. Among the items on Organic Honey's table are a doll that you made when you were a child and your grandmother's silver spoon. But the work is not about autobiography in any specific way. There's very little of "you" revealed.

JJ: People have always asked if the work is autobiographical. It is, but only in the sense that all work comes from inner experience. I also use many references to literature and mythology, references that are not always visible. I was finding a language of forms, a way of telling my friends a story in pictures.

JS: In *Organic Honey* we see two distinct personas, two different storytellers. The woman dressed in genderless work clothes – the style of '70s downtown New York – and the bejeweled, begowned, masked Organic Honey. Was this a deliberate split?

JJ: Maybe a split, because the glamorous part would be the part I wouldn't show in my everyday life. The other part is the one I'd be more apt to show: the stripped down, neutral performer. Maybe I exist somewhere between the two. During the early '70's we were all asking about feminism and what it means to be a woman. The women's movement profoundly affected me; it led me, and all the people around me, to see things more clearly. I don't think before that I was aware of the roles women played. I didn't really understand how difficult it was for women, what it meant to really like other women. We had been brought up to be so competitive with each other. It led me to explore the position of women, even when I was playing an androgynous role. There is always a woman in my work, and her role is questioned.

JS: During the same period you made a change from working with groups to focusing on yourself.

JJ: I worked with groups first of all, always people I knew. Among them were Frances Barth, Simone Forti, Jene Highstein, Gordon Matta-Clark, Judy Padow, Janelle Reiring, Susan Rothenberg, George Trakas, Jackie Winsor. At the same time, I liked to give performances for my closest friends. When I was living with Richard Serra, I used to do performances for him.

JS: In the Stedelijk catalogue, Serra describes an impromptu performance and captures in quite an extraor-

dinary way the essence, intensity and timing of your performing presence. He describes your striding into the room in a hooded blue robe covered with alchemical and other signs, holding a candle. He writes, "the personality of Joan was long gone, a fiction. In her place was a magical invocation." Especially striking is the way he remembers your ending the performance when the tapping of a spoon against the floor turned to smashing it, against a mirror: "There must have been forty or fifty blows administered to this narcissistic fetish; and as suddenly as it started, it stopped, the figure exhausted. Joan got up, turned on the lights, smiled and asked 'what did you think of the performance'?"

JJ: At the time I was working in the studio in the day on the video piece *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. Then at night, when Richard came back from his studio, I would put on a little show for him, testing the material as it developed. It would almost always turn into something, because with an audience present something else happens that you don't expect.

So Richard was often the first audience for what were actually little fragments. There was somebody there to say it was interesting. I couldn't tell; sometimes I knew, and sometimes I didn't. It was a very important encouragement.

JS: Did anyone else serve as an individual audience the way Serra did?

JJ: I think all my friends who came to see my performances – but nobody in exactly the way he did. The people I performed for in the '70's were all friends. My performance would change from night to night or from one month to the next as the result of making it for the audience. The art world then was almost like a workshop. We worked for each other, and we appreciated each other's work. We talked to each other about our work. Many people served as the same kind of audience as Richard but never in such a constant way. We were together about four years. He was incredibly encouraging to the women he knew, deliberately and consciously so. I wasn't the only one. When I started to do solo work, I did it because I thought I would be traveling with Richard, and thought I could take it along easily. That's one of the reasons I stopped working with groups. The other reason was getting the Portapak and beginning to work by myself with video.

Early Video Work

JS: Where did you get your first video camera?

JJ: In Japan. I went with Richard in 1970, and it was there I bought a Portapak.

JS: This new tool took you indoors, into the studio. You were alone with the camera. What were you looking for?

JJ: I had wanted to make films, and here was a medium in which I could make instant sequences of images. I was making videos, but I was referring to film all the time. I was entranced by the early Russian films: Vertov, Eisenstein. And early French films: Vigo, *Children of Paradise*. Early black-and-white films where the narrative was dreamlike, poetic. *Children of Paradise*, for instance, portrays the essence of the theatrical magic in the way the performer on stage relates to the audience in the highest balconies through movement and gesture rather than words. Vigo's *L'Atalante* has an underwater sequence, supposedly in the Seine, in which the young barge owner dreams he is reunited with his lost wife. Vertov made one of the earliest sound films in which sound is not used realistically but in an experimental way, in and out of synch with the image. That's what I brought to the video works. It wasn't theater, it wasn't dance, it was more film – plus the circus and the magic show. I tried to go outside of the art world to find my inspiration.

It was also fascinating to see yourself. It was like looking into the pool and not being able to look away. It was a natural thing to do: to sit and turn on the video monitor. That's why visual artists like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Peter Campus and everybody worked that way with video – alone by themselves.

JS: How much did you know about video technology when you started?

JJ: Nothing. But it wasn't a very difficult technology. I believe in simplicity. I think you can do a lot with very little technology.

JS: Was *Vertical Roll* (1972) initially an accident, a mistake? I always associate it with watching TV in the '50s. When the picture started jumping and rolling, it meant something was wrong.

JJ: I was interested in experimental films. I approached video in the same way, working with the actual medium and its peculiar qualities. The vertical roll in video looks like a series of film-strip frames going through the monitor – that's the reference. I also played with the video light, the light emitted from the monitor, as a source of illumina-

tion for other actions. I was referring to the continuous time of the piece in a different way. In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, I drew my dog Sappho because she was a special little white creature with one blue eye and one brown eye. Her image was a kind of leitmotif for *Organic Honey*, the animal spirit that represents a force or instinct. Then I did drawings for the video monitor. I drew "around" the vertical roll and used the vertical roll to bring the parts of the image together. I drew the top half of the dog's head on the bottom of the paper, the bottom on the top; then with the roll the two halves came together. I also put my masked face in place of the top half of the dog's, turning me into half woman, half dog.

JS: In many of your works you are drawing and erasing often on a blackboard.

JJ: I was inspired by Maya Deren's footage that she shot in Haiti of someone making a drawing in the sand again and again; it was unedited and so appeared as drawing and erasing. The chalkboard is a good medium in performance because it's very immediate – you can erase. And it has to do with childhood memories.

JS: In *Mirage* (1976), we see the chalkboard drawing and erasing on 16mm film combined with your signature dance step – a kind of frenzied stomping.

JJ: The stomping dance first appeared in *Mirage*. It came from a particular meditation I had practiced in India. It was called "dynamic": the point was to shake all over as hard as possible to get rid of the knots. So I began with the shaking. Then in front of projected film footage of a series of volcanic eruptions and lava flows, on a black wooden table on which I had just drawn a chalk hopscotch diagram with the numbers 1 through 9, I ran in place stomping as fast and as hard as possible. The sequence was drawing, hopping, pounding the table with a stick, shaking, running and stamping – with the volcano sequence's slow buildup to energy explosions. The context of the sequence is always important.

What I call "dance" is movement framed by the context of the work – natural movement that is choreographed, altered, made strange or rhythmic. This freedom was established as far as I know by dancers in the '60's like Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Simone Forti and others and by the task-oriented performance of Happenings.

The Juniper Tree

JS: After *Mirage* you stopped using the real-time, closed-circuit video setup. With a single exception, you also stopped making videotaped works until 1980. Why?

JJ: Because with *The Juniper Tree* in 1976, my first fairy-tale piece, I became interested in a different approach: the story and how to represent and play it.

I was commissioned to do a piece for children at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. I was walking around an Egyptian show in Paris and thought I'd do a fairy tale, the favorite of a young friend – the son of poet Susan Howe. In *The Juniper Tree* I traced themes related to the legendary Gaelic bard Ossian and to the ancient nomadic tribes of Europe and Asia.

JS: How did using this particular story compare to other narratives or poetic structures you had used before?

JJ: *The Juniper Tree* tells the story of a family with a wicked stepmother who cuts up the little boy and gives the pieces to the father, who eats them. Later the sister gathers the bones and takes them under the juniper tree. A beautiful bird rises up and kills the stepmother and then turns back into the boy.

I found that kind of story was like my early work, which always used mythological references. Of course the history of art is packed with depictions of mythical heroes and heroines whose stories correspond to the everyday adventures, temptations, daydreams of viewers – like mirrors in which we see ourselves. And the fairy tales were ancient teaching stories.

JS: The sets for *The Juniper Tree* are different in materials and color, and the drawings are painted this time.

JJ: The fairy-tale sets became richer and more colorful as reactions to the stories. The color became for me another layer. The structure I built represented the house, the ladder a tree; for the shaman, the tree is a ladder to the sky. The paintings were each made during performances. They represented the boy and the girl in the story. The girl began as a painted valentine heart, red on white silk, with a face added later; the boy was an almost anatomical heart, white on red. Each night of the performance I would add the paintings I liked to the backdrop of the set and subtract the weaker ones. As Douglas Crimp said, this drawing production replaced the videotape production for a few years.

JS: In your works prior to *The Juniper Tree*, you used fragments of language and other ordinary sounds in an

abstract way, almost as pure sound. Now you began to use more elaborate sound accompaniment.

JJ: When I started to work on *The Juniper Tree*, I decided that I would make a kind of film sound track that would illustrate the story. Film music and sound give atmosphere to a scene, help to change the mood, to inspire movement or dance. In *The Juniper Tree* I began to use the sound track as one of the underlying structures. Before, silence was the continuum, with sounds sharply marking spaces. I went from silence to sound – a dog barking, birds singing, a rainstorm.

JS: There is an almost 10-year gap between *The Juniper Tree* and *Volcano Saga* (1985). What happened in between?

JJ: In 1979 I made *Upside Down and Backwards*, a solo which is another piece about fairy tales. I rewrote two Grimm Brothers tales – “The Frog Prince” and “The Boy Who Went Out to Learn Fear” – telling “The Frog Prince” backwards and the other forwards and interweaving them to make a new narrative. The set consisted of three big painted backdrops with props placed in front of each. The first backdrop – green and yellow – represented the prince; the second – red and yellow – was the boy; and the third – blue and yellow – the two together. I moved horizontally from one to the next and used colored lights to alter the space of the painted backdrops.

Double Lunar Dogs, from 1980, was based on a Robert Heinlein science-fiction story about a group of people trapped on a spaceship that had been traveling for so long that everyone forgot where they came from and where they were going. I designed it for the big central space of the University Art Museum at Berkeley, and used a live rock band, about 10 performers and film projections that I got from NASA. It was a big spectacle, and the audience sat in the middle.

There was also the performance *He Saw Her Burning* in '82, which I made when I had a DAAD grant to live in Berlin. It was based on two news stories I found: one about an American soldier who stole a tank for no apparent reason and drove it into the center of Mannheim; the other about a woman who burst into flames in spontaneous combustion. Again, I intercut the material. I was working with two actors who told the stories on TV monitors, like news documentaries, during the performance.

JS: Where does working with the Wooster Group fit with all of this?

JJ: I was in one piece with the Wooster Group in 1978 –

Nyatt School, based partly on Eliot's *Cocktail Party* – as an actress/performer, when Spalding Green was still in it. Then in 1989 I began to work with them for three years as an actress in *Brace Up!*, their version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. I played Masha, one of the three sisters. I wanted to learn to practice speech. I wanted to learn about voice, my voice. I had reached a certain point in my performing that if I was to go on I wanted to use my voice and my body in a different way, a way more related to acting.

JS: What was it like for you to switch from performing in your own works to defining yourself as an actress in someone else's?

JJ: It was interesting and magical to inhabit for such a long time a Chekhov play, and working with Liz LeCompte and the other performers was quite compelling and a challenge. I learned much from Chekhov's structures and use of language. And I loved performing so regularly without the responsibility of making the piece. However, it was very difficult to neglect the making of my own work – to sit for hours waiting for my part of the rehearsal.

Volcano Saga

JS: In the performance *Volcano Saga*, the videotape component is the most complicated of any of your video works. It's quite surreal, with landscapes layered into bodies and other special effects.

JJ: I worked in a commercial studio in New York with a friend, Jill Kroesen. She worked on certain sections with a computer developed in England; with it you can alter each frame, each image on a videotape. One can literally do anything with the image on this machine. We layered and animated my still photographs of Iceland. At one point a car floats through. Also, of course, the matting device is extensively used, to place the actors in Icelandic landscapes.

JS: In the videotape *Volcano Saga* you directed Tilda Swinton and Ron Vawter and also directed yourself as an actress.

JJ: I had worked with professional actors before, Lindzee Smith, for example, and in *Double Lunar Dogs* Spalding Gray and David Warilow.

When I made *Volcano Saga*, I was trying to push my work. I went through rather a slump in the '80's. It was a combination of my career dipping and the art world changing; it

stopped being interested in performance and video. *Volcano Saga* was my attempt to come out of that slump. I was very lucky. A filmmaker friend of mine in Berlin, Cynthia Beatt was a friend of Tilda Swinton. I thought this piece demanded really good actors, and it was because of Cynthia that I cast Swinton. I knew Ron Vawter from the Wooster Group, I'm very lucky that I live in a place and time where I know these people.

JS: The text of *Volcano Saga* is from the 13th century Icelandic Laxdaela Saga. How did you pick it?

JJ: Somebody told me about these Icelandic sagas, and I started reading them in Nova Scotia, where I've spent the summers since the early '70s. The landscapes in these sagas seemed very related to the Nova Scotia landscape. The Icelandic myths and superstitions were also similar to those of the Scots and Fench inhabitants of Nova Scotia. I wanted to find something beyond the fairy tales and their one-dimensional depiction of women. In *Volcano Saga* there is a woman who dreams, and who then finds an interpreter of the dreams – the sage played by Ron.

There isn't a huge amount of dialogue, and the language is very simple. The book that contains the sagas is an epic piece. It starts with the settlements, traces the lineage of all the people in the story. Ghost stories add to the magic, along with descriptions of disasters and so on – all these little anecdotes that give so much atmosphere, that make it so beautiful. I had to edit out most of the beginning, the history, but I put in several of the little stories to give the feeling of Iceland and what it's like there.

I structured the whole tape in fours. The woman washes her hands four times, she tells four dreams, and there are four interpretations. She says to the sage, "I had this strange dream. What does it mean? Can you tell me?" And then he interprets the dreams, saying that each represents a disastrous marriage. The landscape plays a major role, too; it's like a character, a living presence. I was trying to show how the landscape can represent psychic space. The backgrounds were filmed in Iceland. We did the rest of it with the actors in a studio in New York.

JS: The man and woman look angelic, floating in what seems to be clouds or mist.

JJ: I had them sitting in water, because everyone in Iceland sits in hot springs and talks. It was just a natural thing for them to do.

JS: The naturalism is countered with a distinct formality. The two main characters may be sitting in the baths, but

they look like classical busts. Their voices are trained and the texts economical.

You also have an elderly couple who tell similarly mythical stories in ordinary conversational speech, dressed in ordinary clothes. There is a gentle humor and acceptance between them that's in contrast to the disasters discussed by the dreamer and her interpreter. I'm thinking in particular about the scene at the end of the video where the old woman tells her version of the origin of the fishing net.

JJ: She says, "I bet it was a woman who invented the fishing net." And he says, "Why should you say that?" And she answers, "She was probably sitting at home when the children were taking their nap, and she started with her cord and she knotted and knotted and made a net. And then when her husband came home and looked at it, he said, 'That would be marvelous to catch fish.'"

JS: And then he agrees with her, and the video ends. We hear the haunting music again, music we've heard intermittently before.

JJ: It's a recording of Cape Breton fiddle music played backwards.

JS: You also created a different kind of role for yourself in the *Volcano Saga*, one that's different from both the mythical woman telling her dreams and from the grandmother plainly telling her story. You are the narrator, and you are sited directly in the landscape.

JJ: It was a way of starting the tape, of framing the old story in present time. At the beginning of the tape I tell a true story of what happened while I was driving by myself in Iceland down a little dirt road in a rainstorm. I was blown off the road by the wind. In a place like that, you can't separate yourself from nature, from the elements, from the timeless. What I found fascinating about Iceland was the closeness between the present and the past – as if all the mythic stories happened just yesterday.

Sweeney Astray

JS: The last installation is a work-in-progress based on your plans for and rehearsals of the new production.

JJ: I called it *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places*, which is a line from the work the piece is based on: a medieval Irish poem, translated by Seamus Heaney, called "Sweeney Astray". When Rudi Fuchs, the director of the Stedelijk, asked me if I would do this exhibition, he said that he thought it would be interesting if I also

directed a theater piece outside the museum. So I started to look for something I wanted to do. I knew about this poem – a friend, after visiting Ireland, had read it to me over the phone. I was in Helsinki and I saw it in a bookstore, and I thought, that's the piece. It was written at the same time as the Icelandic saga that I used as the basis of *Volcano Saga*. I'm interested in that time. And it's a beautiful poem.

The story is about a king who, because of a curse, has to live like a bird and sit in trees. The poem is full of passages praising nature. It relates to Irish mythology, symbolism and landscape, and it also relates to the situation of being a refugee. With this piece I don't deal just with my own inner world. It's reaching out to the world a little more.

JS: I hadn't realized until walking through the Stedelijk show how much of your work has to do with travel. And *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places* could be read as a metaphor for the way you treat each new performance site and also for the itinerant life you've led for the past several years.

JJ: Bruce Chatwin wrote some very interesting things about the way artists work when they are moving. A lot of people do their work by traveling. I would like to stay in one place for a while. But I do get a lot of inspiration from going to strange places. Your perceptions are sharper.

JS: For the *Sweeney Astray* installation, the projections on the freestanding scrims include photos you took in Nova Scotia 20 years ago as well as shots you made more recently in a Budapest flea market. Some of the props look more sculptural – the treethrone, for example, and the high, glass-topped steel table, which appears to be a stagelike place in itself.

JJ: It's a glass table, and the video camera operator shoots from underneath with the actor standing on the table. It's all about perception from below, what the camera sees from below. You see this image projected on one of the freestanding scrims on the stage. From the audience you'll also see the actor on the table and the people below the table – the camera operator and at times the other actors. This juxtaposition of live action and video details is still what I'm interested in. Three actors recite the poem. There are two others who don't speak: a dancer and a young artist who is more or less playing me. I wanted a nonactor. There is also the composer, who is playing on the stage, and the cameraman, who is also an actor, operating the live video.

Variations on a Scene

JS: The piece you did in 1993 at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Vassivière, France, *Variations on a Scene*, was staged outdoors. From the beginning, there's been a pastoral element to your work, whether you are literally working outdoors, or using animal sounds and images of dogs and birds, or treating nature thematically in the texts you choose.

JJ: I think it has to do with my whole life – spending half my time in the city, half in the country.

JS: *Variations on a Scene* was first performed in 1990 at Wave Hill, in the Bronx, New York, and performed again three years later in Vassivière. The settings were quite different, and so were the casts. The performance at Wave Hill included Kiki Smith and her mother, Jane Smith; at Vassivière their roles were played sometimes by Geno Lechner and sometimes by you.

JJ: *Variations on a Scene* is not a story. I made a collage from fragments of poetry and texts having to do with war, conquest of the landscape, the Americas. The beautiful gardens at Wave Hill suggested it. *Variations on a Scene* was also the first outdoor piece I'd done since the early '70s, so it combines ideas from that time, such as the use of a sound delay or signaling over distances, with elements I have worked with more recently – for instance, live sound against electronic sounds broadcast outdoors. At Wave Hill, I chose five locations in the park. One was under a tree; one was the reflecting pond; one a big field; another, an open area in the back of the house that I call the garden; and finally, inside the house. That made it into a circle in Wave Hill.

I chose the texts because of how I felt about either the landscape or the world. The piece is suggestive, not literal. I was thinking about America and colonization. I found images and texts in *Memory of Fire*, by Eduardo Galeano, for instance; it's a beautiful book in three parts that June Leaf suggested I read. I love Anna Akhmatova's poetry, and when I traveled in Poland and Hungary in 1989 I felt a distinct connection to her work. So I put her poetry next to Alvin Curran's music at Wave Hill, and when I did that an entire sequence came to mind.

Then I asked Kiki Smith to come into the piece because I liked her presence. Kiki represented the artist – somebody who was making something all the time, out of clay, out of earth, because we were outdoors, I missed that in the piece at Vassivière. I missed that image, but she couldn't be there.

JS: And what was her mother's part at Wave Hill?

JJ: Jane Smith used to be an opera singer, so I asked her to sing and speak throughout the whole performance. She sang a Haitian love song while sitting under the tree. I choose performers to be themselves, basically. Jane is a strong presence. She was the narrator, the storyteller, sitting by the reflecting pond, she read the fairy tale by Josef Novotny about pollution. She read it into a microphone while we called it out through megaphones. She recited Akhmatova poetry that for me strongly evokes contemporary tragedy. Finally, she represented Simón Bolívar's mistress, a woman known for strength and independent character, with her horses and her guns. Jane speaks the text by de las Casas about the Spaniards' atrocities against the Indians. At the last minute before coming to France, Jane fell and broke her wrist and I didn't try to replace her in the piece. In France, Geno Lechner spoke the de las Casas text, saying it while whirling around her head a stone tied to a long string.

From Performer to Director

JS: A constant in your work is the figure of a woman who speaks in many tongues, through many texts, who keeps changing within a piece over time.

JJ: Well, I started with myself, when I started doing video in *Organic Honey*. I was exploring the female psyche and the possibilities of a visual language without being too obvious about it. In the early video work I was searching for roles I could play as a woman. Later, when I began to work with fairy tales, I chose stories about women. *The Juniper Tree* is, I would say, about the devouring female, a negative image, but that's how the story was told. I'm interested in the depiction of strong women. I think it was Clara Weyergraf who said that women were depicted as evil in fairy tales because they had no power in the world, and so their energy was twisted. In Icelandic sagas, the characters are more three-dimensional, not like the cardboard figures of good or evil in fairy tales. Icelandic women, perhaps because Christianity was late in coming or not completely there in Iceland, had basic rights, were stronger, although their choices were still limited. People thought that the dreams in Volcano Saga were my dreams, but they weren't. They were written down in the 13th century, and probably date from the 8th century, but when I spoke them in the performance they seemed contemporary.

JS: Did the fact that *Variations on a Scene* was more a collage and less of a story make it easier to perform in the piece? Or was this part of your turn to a more directorial mode, regardless of the type of text?

JJ: Yes to both questions. I'm interested in going back and forth between the director and the performer. I want to direct my pieces, but I want to still be in them. I almost always jump in at the last minute. In front of any audience, I'm still a performer. And I've become interested in directing because I'd like to have others doing parts that I would not have done in the past.

JS: Does this have anything to do with age?

JJ: Yes. It has a lot to do with age because I find it less interesting to see myself performing. And I can't do everything any more; it's not attractive. I said this to somebody recently: when you're younger, you always want to be out there in the center, in the limelight, as a performer. I don't care about that so much anymore. And also I'm now more generous; I feel more open and free. I like it when other people's characters come through in my pieces.

JS: In Vassivière we saw the image of performers coming from afar, up over a rise in a field, clapping wood blocks over their heads – images from your *Jones Beach Piece* of 1970, for example. We saw the man in the mirrored jacket, who earlier had been in *Oad Lau* and *Wind*. We also saw performers working with large, full-length mirrors; those go back to your early *Mirror Pieces* in which performers danced with the mirrors, hid behind them. Pairs of performers worked with the mirrors or with pieces of glass sandwiched between them, and performed very precise movements, such as rolling over and...

JJ: I was never afraid we were going to break a mirror, but the audience was. And I liked that tension. We never broke a mirror and it was never my intention to break one. For Vassivière, Geno wanted to put that action into the piece, but it would have been dangerous on uneven ground. When we began to work on the piece, I gave Geno my book (*Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*) and asked her to find things she liked. The way I worked with her was to try to show her my early work and to ask her to invent movements and actions that had to do with her perceptions of my concerns.

JS: You found a way of inventing a double for yourself, by having a performer find what parts of your work she wanted to re-present, reinvent.

JJ: I'm interested now in stepping outside and having more control over how a piece works, or in weaving

together the different layers. It's very hard for me now to do solos, although I think I probably will do another solo. I really enjoy working with other people and passing things on. I'm interested in working with younger people to take my place in the performances, who can do the physical things that I can't or don't want to do anymore. And to direct them to places new to me.

JS: *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places...* *Sweeney Astray* in many ways revisits and revises many of your ideas. The images projected on the scrims include landscapes you shot decades ago and also some from your recent travels. And the method of incorporating live video and displaying the crew is very much like what you did in *Organic Honey*. The props go back to some of your most basic illusions, the video "mirror" and the actual mirrors.

JJ: It's strange. The whole show is like a circle. In the *Sweeney Astray* room is a well. It refers to a well in the poem. It looks like a Minimal sculpture. It's based on an Irish well made of big stones that I saw in the Aran Islands, but I made it in steel. I'm putting a mirror in it, which makes it mine again, changes it into something that relates to the whole show. Thinking about your own retrospective becomes cyclic.

JS: The mirror in the well goes back to your signature performance, *Mirror Check* (1970). In one version, filmed in Nova Scotia, you stand isolated in a studio. You are naked and you hold a small round hand mirror, which you use methodically to examine your body. What is it like for you looking at this work now?

JJ: I don't like to look at it, frankly. I'm not really into looking at these images of myself over and over again. It's very emotional in a way, very strange to look back at a work made almost 25 years ago. I can't see it. It's a task-oriented performance. It's about looking at my body with a mirror – that's what I was trying to concentrate on. I was trying to look carefully at as much of my body as possible while facing the audience and standing in one place. So it was a task, and I was moving slowly, making it very formal. I think for the audience, it was voyeuristic and strange.

I'm glad to have a film of it so I don't have to do it again. But I was thinking. You know those Rodins? The sculpture of one of his models when she was very young and then the sculpture when she was very old? I was thinking maybe I should do this again when I'm very old.