

Crossroads Dancing

Barbara Clausen

*Possible inspiration as the imagination invents reality and searches at the source
- the crossroads of information - stand there and all will pass by
what was two dimensional will be infinitely stacked in all directions
and dancing at the crossroads will know no boundaries
how do we own our ideas? We don't we can't as they are intertwined
with our past, future and present we dance together not alone
in our minds that is, and as represented in the new electronic space
individual identity is another story
alone in our rooms we search and fabricate, invent forms always in
a dialogue speaking a visual language, finding our own languages
in order to give form to our thoughts, our imaginations -
the signature if you like can still function, the copyright/name
but to have to think about claiming one's thoughts or ideas is to pile
on too much stone, to interfere with free play- alchemy of
exchange I interchange- INSPIRATION!*

Joan Jonas¹

More than any other artistic discipline, performance art's influence on and sensitivity towards cultural politics has been emblematic of the development of visual culture in the latter half of the twentieth century. It has reflected the paradoxical desire for both immediacy and hyper-mediatization. When Erving Goffman, inspired by the social and political changes immanent in the early 1960s, remarked that 'all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify',² his words became crucial for the development of postmodern performance theory and practice. Probing the borders of the private and the public allowed the staging of a break with cultural and social traditions and economies. Within its fields of production as well as representation, art was breaking out of its isolation, its claims of autonomy, and its self-referentiality. Ideas such as these were the foundation of cultural studies; they opened up a space of contemplation

and exploration in both theory and cultural practice. According to the sculptor and dancer Robert Morris, the aim was to increase 'this distance between object and subject that creates a more extended situation, for physical participation becomes necessary'.³

Joan Jonas was one of a generation of young artists in the 1960s who embarked on a life long journey to visualise process and time as artistic materials, in search of new ways to approach the audience. In the late 1960s, shortly after completing her studies in sculpture and art history in New York, she explored her archaeological and anthropological interests by traveling to the southwestern US, the Mediterranean, and Japan. It was there that she became familiar with performative traditions outside of Western culture, such as the Hopi Snake dance, *Noh* and *Kabuki* theatre, as well as other dances, which would become a continual source of inspiration for her work. New developments in dance, literature, and experimental film, as well as minimalism in the sculpture, painting, and music of the 1960s, propelled her outside the studio. She expanded her field of experience by participating in dance workshops by Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, and Steve Paxton, listening to the music of composers such as La Monte Young, and visiting poetry readings in downtown Manhattan. She witnessed changes in theatre and dance which, according to Rainer, reflected 'changes in ideas about man and his environment that have affected all arts.' For Jonas, the choreography of the Judson Dance company was particularly influential: It involved meticulously composed sequences of movement which addressed the relation between object and subject in performance and sculpture. Jonas's effort to use performance to question the contingent strategies of cultural expression were also affected by Claes Oldenburg's performances at the 'Storefront', as well as the work of Jack Smith: 'It was a combination of seeing Noh in Japan and Jack Smith in New York at that specific time, that freed me of my involvement with minimalism, to develop my own language.'⁵ The layered chaos of Smith's installations and performances in the early 1970s amazed audiences: the work forced the viewer into a recognition of minute conceptual elements within a meticulously planned pandemonium. Not one scrap was out of place, no matter how long it took; every shift and change had been pre-conceived, an element which emphasised both the impossibility, and conditionality, of repetition.

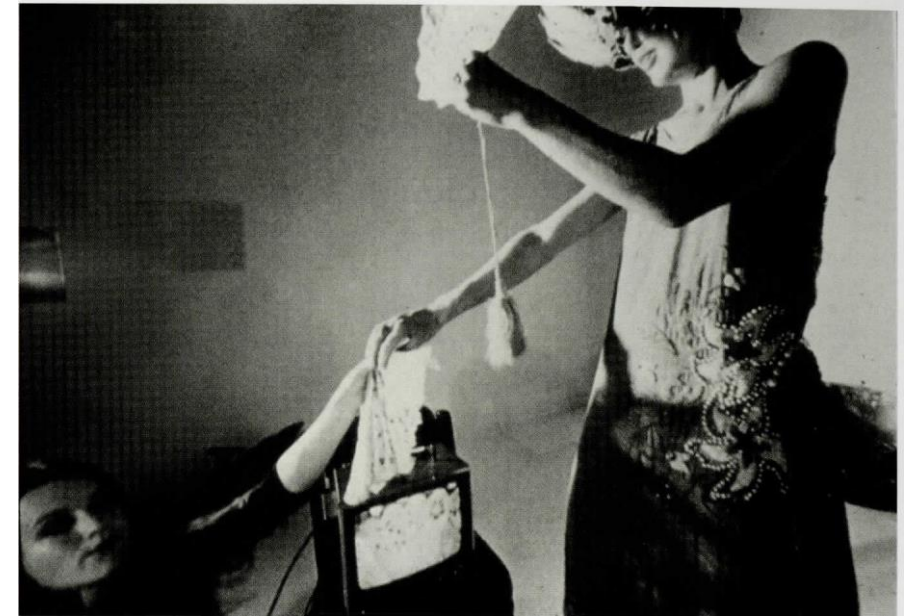


Wind 1968
Film

> *Organic Honey's
Vertical Roll*
Performance
Ace Gallery,
Los Angeles 1972
Photo: Larry Bell

Jonas, absorbing all of these different influences and notions of her time, 'gave up making sculpture and walked into space.¹⁶ She developed a practice marked by genre-transcending, non-hierarchical physical and spatial explorations, which integrated the use of the ritual and the symbolic as visual phenomena. She found her own language within the field of performance, where she 'could do something that's different in my own way, drawing from literature, film, and myth. [I was] making a kind of visual language that other people were not dealing with at that time.'¹⁷ Performance art enabled Jonas to explore a definition of sculpture in which the gesture can be understood as an object of reflection, and to combine her interest in different cultural traditions, by using mirrors, bodies, and everyday objects with a conceptual rigidity derived from minimalism. By dissolving the barrier between sculpture and performance, Jonas forged a hybrid but singular vocabulary from two disparate disciplines at a moment when vigilance regarding medium specificity should have kept them separate.⁸ By manipulating the cognitive perception of space and movement- largely through the use of mirrors - she led her audience to new insights on the dialectical relation between object and subject.

Jonas's early mirror pieces, such as *Mirror Piece I* (1969), *Mirror Piece II* (1970) and her outdoor performance *Wind* (1968), focused on the experience, penetration, and fragmentation of real and illusionary space. The rhythmic beating of wooden blocks and the alteration of human movement with stilts, flags, and gestures in *Delay Delay* (1972) challenged the audience's temporal and physical perceptions.⁹ In these and her other



works of the time, the body was no longer merely a metaphor, but a medium of expression. The significance of these early works lies in their interrogation of performance's claim for authenticity, in front of an audience as well as a camera, and the fact that they introduced a new kind of visibility to the relationship between performance and mediation. This transcriptive layering of the senses led to a synthesis of indexicality and iterability, informing Jonas's alternations between the visible and the invisible as well as the forgotten and the re-discovered.

Jonas's gift for entrancing her audiences and critics first peaked in 1972, with her performance *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*. Later that year, she developed a further version of the performance, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, as well as the twenty minute video piece *Vertical Roll* (1972). By using both large and hand-held mirrors, video recording devices and simultaneous video projections, as well as her infamous closed-circuit video effect, she created, multiplied, and fragmented her electric sorceress, the dazzling persona known as Organic Honey. Jonas seamlessly transformed before the eyes of the audience and the cameras. While dancing, singing, and drawing to the rhythm of the music, she is initially wrapped in a kimono; later, we see her putting on an elaborate headdress made of peacock feathers; at another point, she hides behind a semi-transparent mask of a doll's face. 'The audience,' Jonas explains, 'sees, in fact, the process of image-making



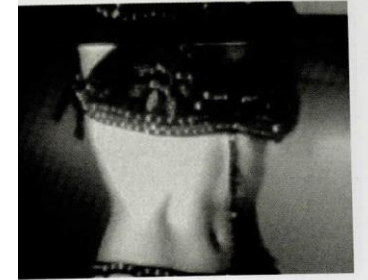
Organic Honey's
Visual Telepathy
Performance
LoGiudice Gallery,
New York 1972
Photo: Peter Moore
© Estate of Peter Moore/VAGA, 2007

> Vertical Roll 1972
Video

in a performance simultaneously with a live detail. I was interested in the discrepancies between the performed activity and the constant duplicating, changing and altering of information in the video.¹⁰ Kneeling on the floor, having pushed the doll's mask to the top of her head, Jonas used a spoon to rhythmically smash a mirror lying in front of her. The video images of her face and body are transferred and simultaneously fragmented on the screen of a monitor, where they are reproduced as rolling images interrupted by black bars.

Jonas's enactment of the way in which the iteration of the gaze constitutes the presence of the feminine evokes what Teresa de Lauretis, more than a decade later, would describe as a never-ending process of self-representation.¹¹ In an unprecedented way, Jonas used her physical presence and the technical capacity of video to become a projective surface for what is thought to be feminine. By doing so, she ruptured the physical and media-based tradition of female representation, identity, and gender in culture, history, and society. Exposing the masquerade, Jonas investigated the perspectival power of the 'female gaze'; while keeping femininity at a distance, enacting Mary Ann Deane's suggestion that 'womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed.'¹²

The audience was confronted with a scenario of metaphorical fragmentation, and a practice which produces neither a centre, a climax, nor a hierarchy. Bodies, objects, gestures, sculptures, signs, texts, moving and still images are all equal in Jonas's work,



creating what Douglas Crimp described as an effect of de-synchronisation.¹³ The close-circuit video effect - wherein the camera records itself recording - creates an infinite sequence of images, exposing the production of the image itself. This act of transcription within the medium, in which the indexicality of Jonas's gestures is directly addressed, is specific to performances at the time, such as the *Organic Honey* series or *Glass Puzzle* (1974). Rosalind Krauss denned this process as a psychological relationship, in which a field of action is marked by a narcissistic drive. The body is at the centre, caught between the different apparatuses and acts of recording, reproduction, and perception.¹⁴

It is within this particular state that the present collapses, allowing the claim of immediacy to inscribe itself into performance art's ontological reasoning. The closed-circuit video effect is an echo, transforming the performer's body into a medium which information 'passes through'.¹⁵ The parallel presence of the body and the medium of video, as a device of recording and rendering, becomes more than a mere conveyor of information: it is a union of the key participants in the act of creating meaning and the production of cultural memory.¹⁶ Jonas stages a double indexicality of the absent, visualising a process - whether as a physical gesture on stage, or a reproduced media image - which is emblematic for performance art's historicisation and claim for authenticity.¹⁷



Mirage
Performance
Anthology Film Archives,
New York 1976
Photo: Babette Man goltte

> *Revolted by the Thought
of Known Places...*
Sweeney Astray
Performance
Westergasfabriek,
Amsterdam 1994
Photo: Joan Jonas

Jonas's reflections on the world and her presence as a performer are closely linked to the mesh of stories, art, history, science, music and prose which serve as her sources. She draws on legends and myths, as well as writers like Eduardo Galliano, James Joyce, H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), Ezra Pound, Jorge Luis Borges, and William Carlos Williams. Her growing interest in the enactment of textual structures in the late 1970s led Jonas to include the semiotic in her practice of multi-media layerings of time and space. Her silent and reduced choreography, with funnel sculptures, masks, and sticks, such as that in *Mirage* (1976), was enhanced with quotes and text collages, creating a full vocabulary of gestures. As Jonas explains, her projects were the result of an ongoing concern with the subject of ritual and performance... and my involvement with the beginnings of expression in other cultures in relation to my own.¹⁸ Her personal experience, nurtured in context, is part of a temporal and physical set of cultural continuities which are mirrored in the instability and ambivalence of her female protagonists.¹⁹

As an author as well as a performer, Jonas slips into the narratives of other works of art and literature, investigating the power of individual and collective desire. Often resurfacing literally into the light of her multi-media scenarios, the tales of her protagonists are excavations of long forgotten moments in memory, resurrected in the present on the basis of a mutual past. Through her poetic reflections and actions, she continuously investigates her own position as an artist and social subject, as well as the history of representation inherent to her stories and characters. The voices of past narrators are preserved in their existence, and inevitably change in their meaning for the future. The ever-growing complexity of Jonas's narratives in the last two decades, the duplication of characters, and the arrangement of scenes within the work, continue to oscillate between the semiotic, the pictorial, and the theatrical.



Looking back, Jonas's work is a signifier as well as a metaphor for the turbulence of her time. Based as they are on a juxtaposition of images, gestures and texts, her non-linear narratives question and contradict the dynamics of official history and collective memory. The social isolation of the individual, the imperialist history of the Western World, and the traumatic consequences of war, displacement, and human miscommunication are all central issues in Jonas's work from the 1990s onwards, including *Variations on a Scene* (1992), *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* (1992-2003), *Lines in the Sand* (2002) and *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (2004-2007).

Jonas's specific understanding of culturally formative images, signs, and narratives in these works is not pre-determined, nor caught in time. Like any gesture inherent to authorship, these stories are subject to socio-political forms of representation and the process-based nature of memory. This applies especially to ascriptions of gender roles, as well as renunciations of certain moral codes and hierarchies. Their seemingly impenetrable inscription in the world defines our relation to history and the relation between the sexes. Memory presupposes the interdependence of presence and absence, which written language, with its fixed codes, permanent legibility, and availability cannot keep up with. The only way of solving this problem, as the historian Aleida Assmann has written, 'would be inventing an image of writing that, once it is written down, cannot be deciphered randomly, but only under certain circumstances.'²⁰ The portrayal of the



Lines in the Sand
Performance
The Kitchen,
New York 2004
Photo: Paulo Court

> *The Shape, the Seen t,
the Feel of Things*
Performance
Dia: Beacon,
New York 2005
Photo: Paula Court

deviation between the past and the future as a detachment of the space and limitations of experience is not intended as a rejection of the past, but rather as an attempt to recover it,²¹ It is necessary to deal with memory in a mediated manner, which would - like magic - allow short glimpses of signs, images, and gestures, only to let them disappear in the next moment.²²

By shifting between her own presence and that of her anti-heroes and ambivalent heroines, Jonas creates a field of sensory association that triggers 'involuntary memories'. Visually, these transcriptions of the Self have always appeared in Jonas's works which incorporate mirrors, the closed-circuit video effect, and masks. In 1976, with *Mirage*, they were translated into the shadowy appearance of a second performer.²³ Just like the images of Jonas's closed-circuit videos, the reoccurring presence of her characters represents the iterative and tangible representational process of memory formation, and bring about a recollection of the protagonists' past experiences. Jonas's work suggests that cultural memory cannot exist without the tension between textuality and performativity, media-representation and social process.

In this spirit, her 2002 performance and installation *lines in the Sand* portrays a myriad of historical, geographical, and psychological displacements of the myth of the malevolent goddess Helena. Jonas bases her performance on *Helen in Egypt*,²⁴ written by the Imagist poet H.D. (who was a patient of Sigmund Freud), to create a collage of scenes about Helena's psychological and political power. For Jonas, 'the poem [*Helen in Egypt*] is personal... The male figures represent [H.D.'s] different lovers and her analyst I tried to avoid that I just wanted to deal, in a very simple way with the skeleton of it, of Helen being



in Egypt with these two men [Achilles and Paris], being inside and outside in relation to the Trojan War and the present time, The conflict and illusion of it all.²⁵ That is to say, the artist positions Helena as an age-old metaphor for the collective ownership of the female body and therefore the ownership of land, and a justification for each 'Trojan War' to come.

Three years later, in 2005, Jonas built upon *Lines in the Sand* by developing her performance and installation *The Shape, the Seen t, the Feel of Things* in which she transposes the encounter between H.D., Sigmund Freud, and Helena onto the mnemonic practice of the art historian Aby Warburg. The piece is a collage of Warburg's seemingly infinite collection of images and text gathered for a lecture he held at the Swiss sanatorium Kreuzlingen in 1923, where he was recovering from a mental breakdown under the care of a Dr. Biswanger, a former student of Freud. The lecture consists of Warburg's fascination with the ritual dances of the Hopi Natives,²⁶ which he had witnessed during his travels in 1895-1896 and the settlement of the American West. In the pages leading to his presentation he finds the space to relate his anthropological and art historical observations to Freud's psychoanalysis.

In *The Shape, the Seen t, the Feel of Things*, Warburg feverishly recalls his experiences from the past, present, and future, as he prepares for his academic performance, which he hopes will re-instantiate his authorial role as a historian. As before in Jonas's work, the people who are declared to be blind, sick or misfits, are destined to lecture their guardians. Nurses and doctors, fairies and historical figures, including that of Durer's Melancholia, populate a performance space of screens and columns. In one of the key scenes, a large screen rolls towards the audience, We see fluttering moths and butterflies projected



*The Shape , the Scent,
the Feel of Things*
Performance
Dia:Beacon,
New York 2006
Photo: Dani Bauer

onto the moving wall, penetrating the darkness of the space . Their mirrored and densely layered appearance fuses the protagonist's space of visual illusion with the actual space of the performance.²¹ At the same time , the offstage voice of Dr. Biswanger, played by Jonas, affectionately describes the fragile insects as Warburg's fellow travelers: 'He practices a cult with the moths and butterflies that fly into his room at night. He speaks to them for hours. He calls them his little soul animals and tells them about his suffering. He recounts the outbreak of his illness to a moth.'²⁸ In this particular scene, Jonas's use of the insects is a metaphor of memory's ungraspable nature, its latent visibility and its disappearance.

These types of figurative and literative transcriptions are exemplary for Jonas' s progressive *modus operandi* of appropriation. It is one in which the dialectics of appropriation are accomplished through iteration wherein the appropriated, as well as the appropriator, continuously change .²⁹ As with these continuous transformations, the Self is confronted with in its representational interrelation with the world, and the scene becomes reminiscent of Jonas's early video performances and her visual experiments of physical and representational entrapments between the projective and the projected. Her project is to tease our capacity to understand the present through its past and future. This is similar to the kind of temporal collapse Jonas produced with her closed-circuit video effects in her earlier works, which dealt with the representational mediation of the body and the female Self. The past, as a performative practice, remains an arbitrary construction in the present, constituting and withdrawing itself from any fixed state or subjective appropriation.³⁰



*The Shape , the Scent,
the Feel of Things*
Performance
Dia:Beacon,
New York 2006
Photo:Joan Jonas

It is within this interplay, between the amnesia and infinite memory of her protagonists, that Jonas appeals to performance art's potential to be an ideological indicator of its time, and not just a spectacle of essentialist motifs. Her oeuvre is a synthesis of singular and collective stories, which confront disparate, sometimes contradictory memories, yet all claim social recognition. The visual and performative realisation of historic memory is only possible when that memory is supported by media, whose diversity enables the development of new forms and new means of expression of political awareness . Jonas's work, like no other, continues to travel the landscapes of memory formed by manifold voices and their reflection in individual and collective constitutions of identity.

- Crossroads Dancing (an old Irish custom)*, unpublished poem of Joan Jonas's private Archive New York dated June 12, 1995.
- Erving Goffman : *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday / Anchor Garden City: 1959, p. 72.
- Robert Morris: 'Notes on Sculpture', in Gregory Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art, Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968, p. 231.
- 4 Yvonne Rainer : 'A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Amidst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*', in Gregory Battcock (ed.): *Minimal Art, Critical Anthology*, op. cit., p. 264.
- 5 Unpublished interview of the author with Joan Jonas, May 2003.
- 6 See Joan Simon : 'Scenes and Variations : An Interview with Joan Jonas', *Art in America*, no. 7, July 1995, pp. 72-79 and 100-101. Unpublished interview of the author with Joan Jonas, May 2003.
- 8 Hamza Walker: 'Essay on the exhibition: *Joan Jonas. Lines in the Sand and The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*.' Chicago : The Renaissance Society, May 02 - June 14, 2004.
- 9 At the time, the audience mostly consisted of colleagues and friends, who often participated in the performances.
- 10 Joan Jonas: text comment on *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972) in Warren Niesluchowski, Valerie Smith (eds.): *Joan Jonas: Five Works*. New York: Queens Museum of Art, 2003, p. 10 [exh. cat.].
- 11 See Teresa de Lauretis: *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 1-5.
- 12 Mary Ann Doane: 'Film and Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', *Screen*, v. 23 (3-4), Sept/Oct 1982, p. 81.
- 13 Douglas Crimp: 'De-Synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances', *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*. Berkeley and Eindhoven: University Art Museum and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983, p. 9.
- 14 See Rosalind Krauss: 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, no. 1, Spring 1976 pp. 51-64.
- 15 Joan Jonas: 'Artist statement: The performer sees herself as a medium: information passes through.' *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*, op. cit., p. 139.
- 16 See Sybille Kramer: 'Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat.' *Medien, Computer, Realität: Zur Veränderung unserer Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen durch die Neuen Medien*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000, p. 73.
- 17 See Christiane Kuhlmann: *Bewegter Körper - Mechanischer Apparat*. Köln: Deutsches Tanzarchiv K61n, Studien und Dokumente zur Tanzwissenschaft, Peter Lang Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2004, p. 194.
- 18 Program folder Dia Art Foundation for the performance *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, September 2006.
- 19 Douglas Crimp: 'De-Synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances.' *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*, op. cit., p. 9.
- 20 See Aleida Assmann : *Erinnerungsraume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1999, p. 154.
- 21 See Ernst Schulz : 'Ab sage an und Wiederherstellung von Vergangenheit,' in Moritz Csaky, Peter Stachel (eds.): *Speicher des Gedächtnisses*. Teil I, Vienna: Passagen, 2000, pp. 23-39.
- 22 In literature as well as cinema, the appearance of the past in the present of human consciousness has often been compared to photographic and reproductive processes, perhaps most famously and earliest by Marcel Proust who compared them to negatives, which may or may not be developed in the future, remaining perhaps never to be seen.
- 23 The second performer in *Mirage* would remain behind the screen throughout the performance at the *Anthology Film Archives* in New York
- 24 H.D. (Hilda Doolittle): *Helen in Egypt*. New York: New Directions, 1961.
- 25 Unpublished interview of the author with Joan Jonas, May 2003.
- 26 According to Jonas, Warburg despite his fascination and his writings, had never actually seen the Hopi Snake Dance. During his stay he did research and had the opportunity to see other dances and ceremonies of the Hopi Tribe.
- 27 Lynne Cooke: 'The Seismograph and the Medium,' *Joan Jonas: The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*. New York and Paris: Dia Art Foundation and Yvon Lambert, 2006, p. 61.
- 28 From the script of *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, *ibid.*, p. 18: original quote: Philippe-Alain Michaud: *Abby Warburg and the Image in Motion*. New York: Zone Books, 2004.
- 29 Rahel Jaeggi: 'Aneignung braucht Fremdheit.' *Texte zur Kunst*, vol. 46, June 2002, p. 62.
- 30 See Aleida Assmann : *Erinnerungsraume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, op. cit., p. 17.