

Other Times and Other Places.

The Art of Joan Jonas

Bartomeu Mari

I think my pieces have become closer to theatre because theatre itself has changed a lot in the last thirty or forty years, some theatre has been influenced by performance art... I think there is a sliding scale between, say, a purely conceptual piece and theatre. I love theatre, but I don't want to do theatre. For me, the difference between my work and theatre comes down to the way that theatre works with text, and acting. In my work, performing is not acting. It's like behaving, or simply action, and it's not working with text in the same way at all.¹

The different ramifications of modern art, above all those occurring since the 1950s, have produced artistic forms or genres that can be traced back genealogically in history. This tracing back enables us to sketch hypotheses regarding the functioning of these artistic genres based, on the one hand, on the motivations that affect their invention and, on the other, an analysis of their functioning within their system. Here I want to focus on one of these recent inventions, the video installation, in the work of an artist whose contribution to the birth and enrichment of this genre is undeniable. And I will do so with references to and a critique of a small but representative selection of her works, covering pieces from her earliest period, the early 1970s, to her most recent.

My main hypothesis proposes the identification of the origins of the video installation with the physical action of the artist herself within a specific unity of space and time, that is, performance. Performance is the action of artists who do not interpret any role other than themselves, and which, insofar as it can be repeated, is subject to constant evolution and rewriting. It is not theatre: in performance there is no text, as in the case of the theatrical language, but rather a dramatic structure and arrangement of visual elements and props. This hypothesis is not new, but it is not often taken into account at a time when the video installation and cinematographic paradigm have come to dominate the landscape of contemporary art exhibitions.

'Performance' is one of the labels used to define certain artistic behaviours that emerged out of the recovery of the Dadaist programmes that inspired, in the late 1950s, the group of artists from or associated with Fluxus. The range of expressive possibilities found in the

Mari, Bartomeu. "Other Times and Other Places. The Art of Joan Jonas." In *Timelines: Transparencies in a Dark Room*, edited by Bartomeu Mari with Clara Plasencia and Claudia's Faus, 6–17. Barcelona: MACBA, 2007.

use of one's own body and the consideration of time as material intrinsic in works of art is evidenced in the denominations which they have received in accordance with their forms of expression: 'happening', 'action', 'event'... Joan Jonas acknowledges the influence in her work of the actions of Claes Oldenburg, Robert Morris and Lucinda Childs in New York in the early 1970s. Not so Fluxus, a current with which she did not coincide at that time. Jonas moved within a sphere marked by minimalism and, to a certain extent, also by Pop Art and its return to the object and the conditions of everyday life. Jonas, who had studied art, took part in seminars with Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton. And it would be significant to stress here her background in sculpture, which enabled her to break into a new stage form created and developed by sculptors, by artists, without any pretension of becoming a new form of theatre. Perhaps it was this ambivalence that interested a young Joan Jonas when she went to see the show *Process* curated by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969.²

Performance as a genre made its debut on the art scene in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but almost entirely disappeared in the 1980s and 1990s, only to reappear in the early twenty-first century. The reasons for that 'disappearance' are as circumstantial as those for its 'reappearance'. The interest of artists such as Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, for example, in revising emblematic works by Vito Acconci from the 1970s, or the way in which younger artists cited the Viennese Actionists, demonstrate the oscillating focus on different artistic dialects over time. The reasons that inspire artists of different generations to explore the same genres can be complementary. Undoubtedly, the anti-commercial nature of performance or action means a rejection, or ironic view, of the growing commodification seen in several stages of the recent history of art. It is a simplification to say that the 1980s were dominated by painting: it is true that the pictorial object dominated the market, the media and the major institutions, but that did not prevent numerous artists from continuing, discretely, to work in traditions of innovation, political commitment or involvement in the issues of each period.

The consistency and continuity of Jonas's work account for her absence from the major artistic manifestations of recent decades. Performance abounds in her production from the 1980s, but it was not until 1994,³ and then till 2000, that she had her first shows in museums. Her participation at Documenta 11 accredited the recognition she had earned for the relevance of her work.

In any event, many of us have been able to witness performances in video recordings. The link between performance and video has existed since the technology became available to artists. The video document seemed to offer the answer to the problem of the one-off nature of live action, providing a peerless medium for preserving over time the original event. Nonetheless, it was clear that video would not be a substitute for the action, but rather it would give it, with new a discourse and rules of its own, a longer lease on life. And the initial hypothesis can find further support in the idea that artists such as Nam June Paik, for example, come in the wake of the work of John Cage, George Maciunas or George Brecht in the 1950s, and of the trends that championed the reinsertion of the abstract gesture, stripped of meaning, into everyday life. In this context, another of the main sources of inspiration for Joan Jonas was experimental cinema, which she would draw on intensely, exploiting the advantages of video over film in terms of recording, editing and presentation. With video, the moving image gained speed: speed in recording, speed in manipulation by the artist and speed in reaching the viewer. In union with performance, video is no longer a mere document but becomes scenography⁴ and, although not proposing a recreation of the live experience, it certainly takes the latter beyond its original time and place. Jonas's earliest works are performances and moving images, first film then video, which speak of the influence of contemporary dance, action and avant-garde cinematographic language. These works are essentially theatrical, and highly influenced by the language of dance group choreography: separation – though at times only apparent – between stage and public, costume and gestures, the interaction between the different individuals on stage, between the male and female characters, and especially the recurrent use of a certain device: the mirror. These are works choreographed in a unity of space

and of time only disturbed by the character of the narrated object, by the self-referential, schematic, sometimes mechanical stories developed in the movement of the participants in the action.

Since the early 1970s Joan Jonas has stuck by a system of expression and thematic repertoire of extraordinary inter-coherence, to the point that the different installations and videos she has produced since seem to belong to a single programme. Remarkably intuitive, Jonas's *modus operandi* is frequently embodied in a text, a poem, a story. In her early works, the subject of her works was herself, the artist's body, her incarnations, transformations, deformations and reconstructions through her alter ego, abstractions of femininity, the juxtaposition of sexual roles. Later the dramaturgy of the text would relate to historic events drawn from a fable or an epic. Although these events are culturally specific, Jonas extracts from them universal motifs through *mises-en-scène* with characters whose dress and acts do not appear to bear any necessary relation to the historical context of the action.

Fundamentally, Joan Jonas has done performances and installations in which video is placed at the service of experimental narrative projects. Concurrent with – and, it should be said, from a logical viewpoint, prior to – these installations the artist does performances that expose her to the public in varied situations, situations that range from those arranged for perception, that herald the act (in a gallery, in a theatre...), to contexts in which the action is more unpredictable (the artist's studio or open spaces, urban or rural, etc). Her installations 'translate' the action into its more theatrical form. *Mirage* (1976) is an installation that still preserves an element of theatrical language: the stage onto which the images of the performance are projected, as if over them the action were, in fact, happening. *Lines in the Sand* (2002) is arranged according to a similar principle, and in it can be seen clearly the frontal arrangement, with a stage on which the action takes place. Her remaining installations no longer contain any recollection of the stage – with the ground constituting the perfect setting for the action – and the alternating of images of natural, outdoor environments with images of actions carried out in the artist's

studio or enclosed spaces also speaks to us of this dichotomy of settings. The wild and rural coexists with the urban and domestic: two spaces in a single constellation that Jonas has cultivated alternatively.

Jonas acts in her works either as a solitary performer or in the company of other actors, and she tells stories which seem to come from another time and another place. Nature, animals (often dogs) and characters from ancestral tales populate these stories in which dreams mingle with epics, in which we bear witness to acts by characters that are born of another imagination. We see in these actions no sign of the technologies with which we have grown used to living. On the contrary, there appear any number of the simplest, 'analogue' props – sticks, masks, caps, outfits made especially for the occasion – that contribute to the making of dreamlike atmospheres similar to recitals of white magic and dramatised poetry, and of voices that, once again, come from other times and other places. The artist herself informs us that among the main sources of inspiration in her work is traditional Japanese theatre – *Noh* and *Kabuki*, which she knows well from a stay in Japan in the early seventies – and Native American dances, especially of the Hopi of the US Southwest. Likewise, travels in Greece and Morocco brought her in contact with other cultures that still have a strong oral component, that is, that emphasise the direct relation between the emitter and the receiver of a message in a perfect unity of time and space. The video installation in a way proposes an assisted substitution of live experience. Her video does not provide a documented synthesis of the action, but rather a dramatised, theatrically arranged version. The most relevant information is that which is impressed upon the spectator's mood.

The artist puts us in touch with a conceived time, which is not necessarily a past, but rather invented time. There is no nostalgia or lament in the work of Joan Jonas. There is indeed, on the other hand, an expansion of the physical places from which to contemplate the effect of the fiction and the metaphor that the repetition of the present seems to perpetuate.

The oral modes of communication, the relations between spoken language and gesture and, in sum, the symbolic systems of communication are not sciences of the past, despite the fact that it has been only recently that linguists have begun to turn their attention to their current forms, their function and their functioning in the contemporary world. In effect, until now they seemed to have been relegated to the fields of the ethnography or anthropology of archaic societies. And, still, there is nothing archaic about the atmosphere in which the works of Joan Jonas immerse us. If anything, it seems anachronistic, purposefully anachronistic. Jonas combines an interest in other cultures and other places with an analytical-poetic programme of deconstruction of roles, canons and cultural and social models, markedly intuitive but nonetheless meticulous. However, we should recall that it was not until the late 1980s, as an evolution of the different feminist discourses that launched fierce attacks on the old methodological dogmas of modernity, that the first discourses on cultural diversities appeared, and that we had to wait until the mid-1990s to see the coinage of the notion of globalisation and the definition of the inequalities between dominant cultures and minority cultures, as well as between modernity and its different local expressions, in what we might call the survival of pre-modern expressions in the post-modern world.

Timelines, the exhibition which concerns us here in this publication, presents four installations representative of the oeuvre of Joan Jonas and a series of films and single-channel videos, representing the typologies in which her work has evolved and been organised. The selection is not meant to provide an exhaustive account of her work, but rather it is an attempt to sketch a thematic circle in her oeuvre: from her earliest works, among them the magnificent *Mirage*, to her most recent installation *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (2004-2007), and including two very different but nevertheless emblematic works: *Lines in the Sand* and *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* (1992-2003). The installation *Volcano Saga* (1985-1989) is presented in the form of single-channel video projection accompanied by photographs and drawings.

Nearly all of Jonas's works include in their genealogy a reiterated oscillation between performance and its translation into video installations. And in many of these installations we find fragments taken from early footage, which are integrated here and there according to the needs or intuitions embodied in each presentation. This is another mark of Jonas's way of working: the back-fed concatenation of live actions and their adaptation in the form of installation. Actions are not exhibited: they occur; they are not for viewing, they are for experiencing.

Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy (1972) evidences Jonas's debt to Oriental theatre: the use of the mask and the noise of the wooden pieces, the artist's alter ego costumes and her on-stage postures would seem to emulate a non-Western dramatic construct. *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* betrays more clearly the impact of Jonas's experience with Hopi dances in the 1960s, the imprint of which remains strong today. These are two old forms of theatrical communication – the elaborate bourgeois theatre in Japan and the ancestral Native American ceremonial form – are quite disparate geographically and culturally but akin in their quest for a specific relation between actor, message and spectator through ritual. The notion of ritual refers to a pre-theatrical form of interaction among individuals, that is, in which the content of the action is already known by both those who officiate and those who attend the ceremony, and whose *raison d'être* evokes the components of a particular relation of the individuals organised in group with time. Rituals are irrational: they constitute a form of magical understanding or representation, in the same way that the composition and survival of a myth is irrational, as are too religious beliefs. Jonas's task lies in creating a *mise-en-scène*, exteriorising physically and tangibly micro-readings of otherness (the otherness of the landscape, of the animal, of the sign, of the story, of the memory, of the present...) in a pre-modern language with the universal components of the desire for representation and the need for imagination.

The entire oeuvre of Jonas is markedly iconographic, almost baroque. In her reaction, early in her career, against the serialisation and repetition of minimalism – to which she felt indebted in her first films and some installations – Jonas introduced in her work an effect

of 'desynchronisation', as characterised by Douglas Crimp⁵ in his publication constituting the first anthology of works by the artist. This term 'desynchronisation' also enables us to allude to one of the most important characteristics of Jonas's work method, which relates accumulatively to the real physical action in a unique space and time, first with her cinematographic mediation and then with video. It is above all in her video performances that Jonas begins to unite and exploit, with all the consequences that entails, the logical constructs of the complementary but antagonistic languages: the theatrical action, on the one hand, and cinematographic/video material, on the other. Her earliest works in this sphere, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Vertical Roll*, both from 1972, along with *Mirage*, are, in the first instance, performances.

*I worked on Organic Honey for two years: I began to produce video tapes out of the process of performing. In other words, while I was performing I worked out ideas for single-channel video tapes. They were a translation of the performance, and they were works in themselves. They weren't just a document. Then I would take that material and put it back into the performance. Organic Honey generated a number of single-channel works, and also particular ideas in relation to the technology of video.*⁶

The works we see in this show are not mere documentary recordings, rooted in an attempt at objectivity, striving to transmit what happened 'there and then', but rather they constitute genuine visual essays with which the artist has progressively constructed her vocabulary, and which she continues to exploit today. *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* is the expression of the transformation of the artist into a fictitious character, a theatrical persona that will develop and build up an accumulative succession of images and gestures: a collage stretched out over time. The performance proposes an anachronistic landscape of technology and craftsmanship; from her earliest moving images to her latest installations, Jonas's work looks 'handmade', in other words, made with the measure and economy of her own body, which, while admitting actors in certain works (*Revolted by the Thought*

of *Known Places...* *Sweeney Astray* is, in fact, a theatre piece), constantly relates to her own body and her physical appearance.

The invention and diffusion of the means of recording and reproduction with video mark a turning point in the development of the visual arts. Someday we will be able to show that post-modernism – or whatever it was that came to explode the categories of modernism – began with the spread of the use of video among the artists of a generation that did not hesitate to set its creative sights on the then emerging technology. The break with modernism can be read precisely in the realisation of the fracture of space and time as fundamental categories of perception. Heirs to the inventions of early twentieth century experimental cinema, evidently steeped in the logic of collage – and its photographic correlative, photomontage – in the 1960s and 1970s numerous artists not only attacked, consciously or unconsciously, the formal moulds of artistic representation, but invented new material bases for doing art. Thus, Jonas gradually pulls away from purely choreographic programmes to explore the roots of theatre, and she looks to ancient ritual forms, from the tradition of the buffoon to Oriental characters or Native American dance, as noted above. Her aim seems to be the creation of fables with beginning and end, with objectives undeciphered but imaginable, in order to exorcise conventions and transport the spectator's consciousness by means of enchantment, gesture, manipulation of objects and words with evident poetic intention.

When I started doing performance I had studied poetry – especially twentieth-century poetry – and I was interested in the formal structure of poetry. My models were also film and music, time-based forms. And so I worked with the language of film as well – the edit, the cut. But the poem in particular is something you see on the page, like a haiku. How do you make an image? Well, I think about poetry when I think about images. How do you construct? It's like a haiku, you put one think next to another and it makes something else, a third thing. That's what I mean when I say 'poetry'. All of my work is concerned with that. That's how I work.⁷

The structure of the presentation of live performance has often led to a frontal visuality, in other words, to a relation between spectator and action comparable architecturally to that between the spectator and the space of a painting: the penetration into the space of the painting is virtual, or rather it is possible thanks to the power and strength of the imagination. On the other hand, with the exception of *Lines in the Sand*, which follows a principle of frontal perception, most of Jonas's installations are enveloping and arranged around, not in front of the spectator. Jonas uses numerous screens and projection surfaces along with monitors, diverse sources of sound and props. Combining all of them in the space creates a sort of visual cacophony. Her works become, then, simulated stage scenarios in which we seem to meld with the projected images. Object and projected image coexist in these situations, fabulous in their modesty, disconcerting in their composition and enchanting in the unveiling of their content. Voices, noises and music succeed one and other rapidly, from the narratively most coherent to the most disjointed or devoid of any clear beginning or end. In this sense, Jonas would be closer to the Beckettian drive of Bruce Naumann than to the Elizabethan refinement of James Coleman: dispersion and multiplicity in the first, unity and frontality in the latter.

In the majority of Jonas's works, the use of different loops expands the distance between the installation itself and the 'here' and 'now', instead to point us towards a 'there' and 'then' of which we know little, but about which we must imagine everything. Jonas's installations are self-contained and we could perceive them as finished, rounded-off forms or as complete cycles continuously repeated; as in that gesture – repeated like a litany – of the hand that draws in chalk on a blackboard a never-ending circle only to rub it out and immediately start over again. However, nothing could be further from the truth: the artist works constantly on the making and remaking of each installation, adding and subtracting, introducing new meanings and compositions into each of her works as if they were live performances.

We could argue that in Joan Jonas's work there exists a correspondence, a cause-effect relationship, between her live actions, or performances, and her installations in which

the video image plays a major role. In her installations *Mirage, Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray, Lines in the Sand* and *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, as well as in the films presented in this show, the flow between live action and installation is two-way. Indeed, if above I have mentioned the cause-effect relationship, I must warn the reader that the causes and the effects are equally the two types of creation. Both the video recording and live action are means, vehicles, more than objectives assimilable to inert work.

Finally, we might possibly consider the video installation as a form of 'expanded cinema', whose source lies, paradoxically, in the theatre. If the disappearance of art cinemas drove non-commercial and experimental film towards museums, the growing commercialisation of the art world has also pushed non-spectacular artistic practices towards the periphery of institutions. Gradually, in it have coincided two paradigms of representation whose main shared element presents us with artistic phenomena that appeals to life, to movement, to sound and to voices, in short, to the ephemeral. The museum's reluctance to involve itself in the language and grammar of the temporary, of the ephemeral, preferring instead to seek out the permanent, would seem to take up and extend the swan song of modernity. Modern but anti-modernist, the work of Joan Jonas manifests the transitory nature of action and the mobility of the modes of reception and interpretation that different generations of spectators can make of it, and of the tension between the unique and unrepeatable forms of performance and those mediated forms that approximate sculpture.

- 1 Robert Ayres: 'That's what we do - we retell stories. Listening to Joan Jonas', in *Joan Jonas*. London: John Hansard Gallery / Wilkinson Gallery, 2004, p. 12.
- 2 '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 theatre 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, Serra.' Joan Jonas cited in Joan Simon: 'Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas', in *Joan Jonas: Performance, Video, Installation 1968-2000*. Stuttgart: Galerie der Stadt / Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001, p. 27.
- 3 'The work had concentrated on performance and single-channel video works. But in 1994 I was asked to do a retrospective show of five works plus one new work, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. I had to find a way to show the original pieces, and in thinking about it and talking it over with Dorine Mignot, the curator, we decided together that it wouldn't make sense to show drawings, for example, separated from the original videos, objects or "stage sets". So, because I'm a visual artist really, and I've always made up my own stages and my own objects, I decided that the natural step would be to install each work - slightly adjusted - like a stage set, as it were.' Joan Jonas cited in R. Ayres: op. cit., p. 9.
- 4 From the 1920s, film had also acquired the role of stage element in sporadic experiments which were hardly developed further until the seventies. The architect and theatre designer Frederick Kiesler pioneered the back projection of film images for the set for *R.U.R.*, by Karel Capek, premiered in Berlin on 29 March 1923, in addition to an innovative device with mirrors which reflected on a screen what was going on back stage.
- 5 Douglas Crimp: *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*. Berkeley and Eindhoven: University Art Museum and Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1983.
- 6 Joan Jonas cited in R. Ayres: op. cit., p. 13.
- 7 Joan Jonas cited in R. Ayres: op. cit., p. 15.