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# Joan Jonas's Performance: The Mythology of Remaking

Catherine Wood

In her 1990 essay "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," Rosalind Krauss cited museum director Tom Krens's observation that intensity of experience is more important for the contemporary museum than mediating historical knowledge.[1] She described a resulting shift from the diachronic presentation of artworks, or art's language presented as a chronological evolution, towards a synchronic approach: we encounter art immersively, as it exists at one point in time. "The synchronic museum [...] would forego history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial," she wrote.

In this essay, Krauss emphasized the roles of space and scale in relation to how we encounter Minimalist artworks. She was critical of the "industrialized museum" in need of a "technologized subject [...] who experiences its fragmentation as euphoria." Yet her analysis touched upon a shift in contemporary attitudes to history and time, within the spatial logic of the museum, but also driven by artists, conceptually, and by technology. The notion of the synchronic is newly pertinent to a post-internet generation for whom the past and present are simultaneously available at once, within an order of space that is boundaryless. And it is a notion that is prophetically prefigured in the mixed mediums of Joan Jonas: in her live performances, which create a simultaneity of the immediacy of live action and spoken word with video transmission or ancient myth, and her attitude to the retrieval or "remaking" of her own past performance and installation work as a process which keeps it open to the present tense.

It is significant that Jonas was an early adopter of image-capture technology, from the Portapak she bought in Japan in 1970 and onwards to the smartphone camera. We see her embrace of the camera's capacity to record, replay, and intervene—or to create a kind of electrical interference—within the unfolding experience of life in an emerging post-modern reality as a fundamental recognition of new dimensions. The camera's attitude ("the video camera is in our head," as Jean Baudrillard put it[2]) inflects both the installation and performance that link her work to a younger generation's practice. Even now, Jonas uses the camera as a fundamental part of her daily practice—her Nova Scotia video diaries evidence the fact that "sometimes I [video myself] every day as just a discipline to collect images."[3]

Jonas was never afraid of the "simulacral experience" that Krauss complained was replacing aesthetic immediacy. She was never afraid that the geometric objects she used in performances could be seen as props. If performance art proper, rooted in real-time encounters with the body, claimed status as "the art of the present tense" according to theorist Peggy Phelan, and if an out-of-time "presentness" was "grace," according to champion of modernism Michael Fried, Jonas

was prescient in casting doubt on the stability of any notion of a pure present, even from her earliest experiments. She pressed ahead in inventing a kind of work that is perpetuated as a present-tense reality, but with fractured multi-dimensions. A state of "desynchronization," as Douglas Crimp put it.[4] Time and space are, from the start, looped, warped, and dislocated as audiences encounter their refracted reflections in the imperfect image-relay of the *Mirror Pieces* (1969/1970), make out the sound of clapping delayed by the various choreographies of distance in *Delay Delay* (1972), and see video transmission of the artist as an onstage parallel to her real live presence in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972). But it is not a passing present-tense aesthetic that Jonas conjures and that we mourn as it disappears. It is a robust potential for perpetual reiteration.

The question of how performance appears inside the art museum, built since the Enlightenment on diachronic principles, has been a contested one in the past decade. In line with the status of art objects, classified according to medium and date, performance has, during this time, been re-invented as both a historical object for presentation and a potential commodity by artists, curators, and dealers. In the course of this necessary re-evaluation of what was previously labelled an ephemeral, ungraspable, and anti-institutional form of live art making, one word has come up repeatedly: "re-enactment." It is not a word Joan Jonas likes.

The notion of re-enactment was popularized via the approach of Marina Abramović, the most high-profile artist at the center of a broad shift towards the summoning of a more-or-less invisible performance [illegible] by a subsequent generation who were using [illegible] again in the early 2000s. At the Guggenheim [illegible] Abramović "re-enacted" (with a great deal of [illegible] license) works by Josef Beuys, Valie Export, and [illegible] important performance artists of the 1960s, as [illegible] her own danger and endurance-based work [illegible] the 1970s. In her conception, performance art is [illegible] theater, and is founded upon catalyzing authentic [illegible] and risk. Details of the mise-en-scène are [illegible] less important than a core "essence" of real experi[illegible] played out through a ritual of quasi-sacrifice.

Jonas, whose complex world incorporating sculp[illegible] drawing, found objects, and live video changed [illegible] game for performance during that formative [illegible] of New York in the late 1960s, prefers to call her [illegible] approach to revisiting earlier works "remaking" [illegible] refashioning." Without the suspicion of "theater" [illegible] rehearsal that body art such as that made by Abramović was founded upon, or its attendant emphasis on one-off uniqueness, Jonas—embracing repetition and re-arrangement—never presumed that her work would have to be autopsied and artificially resuscitated, or simulated in effect, to be experienced again. Grounded in ideas drawn from multiply retold Greek mythologies in which factual history is less important than the power of the telling, combined with conceptual art and elements of choreography, in practices of ritual and Japanese Noh theater, and—perhaps most importantly—in the reproducibility of then-new video technology, Jonas's practice was not bound to any belief in unrepeatability that would make "re-enactment" the answer to retrieving the work. "Re-enactment" is not possible, or even desirable,

she says. It is a term that has been used for the restaging of real political events: of the Russian Revolution in 1917, of historical battles among enthusiasts, or of the Miners' Strike in Jeremy Deller and Mike Figgis's film *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001). For Jonas, inventing a post-modern language of performance that could picture her subjectivity entangled with the fictional capacities of invented stories, screens, mirrors, symbols, and forms of masquerade—with a fundamental relationship to the simulacral—this is clearly the wrong term. Re-enactment implies copying an authentic but dead original; whereas for Jonas, the origins were always charged with theatrical, fictional magic whose liveness persists as a possibility. At the end of *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, Jonas "puts on all four masks of other performers" while in the parallel video onstage, "Masks unfold: peeled off one by one. Each identity revealed, finally Jonas herself."[5] The real Jonas, prescient also of the contemporary avatar, and inheritor of legend, is but one of many layers.

When Jonas approaches a past work she sees something simpler, but equivalent in spirit: an invitation to remake the whole for the here and now, paying attention to what was concretely done (as evidenced in photographs, props, drawings, and notes that remain, and according to recollection) and grafted to the specific details of the present situation. Unlike the notion that an essential and authentic "principle" underwrites a performance, as in the case of Abramović, Jonas's practice in performance derived from making sculpture: sculpture in a post-authentic age of the serial copy, after Minimalism. From her earliest performances, such as the *Mirror Pieces*, *Jones Beach Piece* (1970), *Delay Delay*, and *Mirage* (1976), we witness a concern for how actions and materials might be combined in live rituals with readymade primary shapes and things: rectangular mirrors, wooden blocks, white-painted circles and chimes, or paper cones. Jonas has always situated the shapes and forms of objects she has selected or made within a theatrical mise-en-scène, and within the extemporized arc of textual or musical progression. In her body of work, the possibility of re-arranging those elements persists because arranging was a fundamental principle in the first place. Jonas never observed classical temporal unfolding or chronology within the span of a single work. "[T]here is no structural center to any particular performance," Crimp observed, and so, "[t]here is no centered self from which the work can be said to be generated or by which it can be received."[6] On the question of whether the revisitings of her work are more or less "authentic," Jonas observes: "it has the reality for the people who saw it, and then it has another reality"[7]—a parallel authenticity that has little to do with origination in a classical sense.

Unlike some of her peers perhaps, the logic of remaking was, then, already inherent to Jonas's practice. With the renewed interest among a new generation of artists and curators since the 1990s, she has inevitably been asked to re-present her historical work. Each is, she clarifies, "situation"-specific: that is, specific to the space and time in which it is shown. That is true for the installation of a work such as *The Juniper Tree*, originally performed in her New York loft in 1978, then reconstructed at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1979 and at the Stedelijk in a different configuration in 1994, as it is for the various live performances of the same work,

which has had many slightly differing iterations, including as a "children's version."

How to retrieve the key performance work in parallel with the gallery installations, intimately connected in form and spirit as they are? Is it possible to reconstruct them, remake them? And, most importantly, how could a contemporary audience *experience* them in a meaningful way?

Paradoxically for the museum, to see Jonas's *Mirror Piece II* or *Delay Delay* in 2018 is to have as valid an experience of the work as in 1971, because Jonas's work, akin to an oral tradition, lives in the experiential present. The asymmetric counterpoint to this attitude is the fact that, at the same time, Jonas enjoys the presentation of performance as photography in the museum, not as "what the work was" but as a hieroglyphic equivalent and a prompt to the imagination. In both cases, the reception of the work and its imaginative stimulus is actually what is "live." In her hands, the "experiential" means more than spectacular immersion in a work.

If there is an art of the present tense that haunts performance with the demand for authenticity, Jonas summons and inhabits the worm-holed, multi-dimensional state of post-digital presentness, but close in spirit to the power of mythology. History is not behind us, but running through us. Like the contemporary subject, the artwork is no longer a stable entity that persists in the same state through time. Willing to disturb the audience with a mobile and fractured reflection of themselves in the *Mirror Pieces*, Jonas was never cautious about letting go of stability, about understanding the subject as fragmented and fluid, about taking pleasure in it. It was a radical position



then. It is an inescapable perspective now, and her work retro projects a passage towards coming to terms with it. In an interview in a book called *Art into Theatre*, Jonas asks, "Is there a female imagery?"[8] Her work calls up many images that might fit this criteria: dolls, masks, goddesses, witches. And, live and on video, she herself appears. But her answer lies not in the feminine images themselves, but in her active stance towards the world she has made: she enacts, so she need not be re-enacted. The world of the digital avatar needs the artist who made the myth of the Electronic Erotic Seductress.

1. Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," in *October*, Vol. 54, Autumn 1990, pp. 3–17.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London, 1996, p. 67.
3. Joan Jonas in conversation with the author, April 18, 2016.
4. Douglas Crimp, *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p. 8.
5. Crimp, *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982*, p. 49.
6. Crimp, op. cit.
7. Joan Jonas in conversation with the author, April 18, 2016.
8. Interview with Joan Jonas, Nick Kaye, *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 93.