

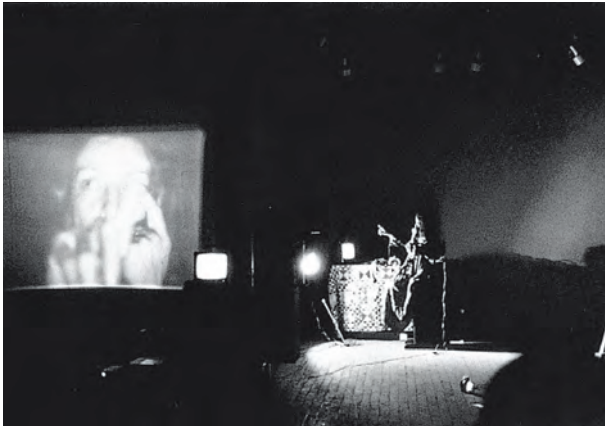
Joan Jonas: Country Things

Gregory Volk

1

Joan Jonas has often been described as a pioneer of video and performance art, and for good reason. Her video *Vertical Roll* (1972) is a masterpiece of a medium more or less at its inception. An irritating horizontal bar incessantly rolls down the screen, as it would on a broken TV, accompanied by loud, percussive bangs, made initially by Jonas striking a mirror with a spoon, and then later by hitting blocks of wood together in response to the video. Jonas appears, as a masked figure, and in the garb of a belly-dancer, but she is a fragmented image: you see a bit of her head, her cramped body as she's lying on her back with her legs raised, a section of her legs, just her hands. She is an endlessly interrupted, yet always arriving, ostentatiously female figure (with suggestions of burlesque performers, call girls, show girls, and Carnival celebrants) who struggles to infiltrate the screen, in order to both flaunt and challenge gender stereotypes and roles. Largely using Jonas's own body to deconstruct female imagery (also included at one point are photographs of a female nude), *Vertical Roll* rivets attention on the appearance and procedures of video *per se*, while questioning who controls what makes it into the frame, and for what purpose. This work, with its jarring, staccato sounds and disjointed imagery, also responds to a convulsive time of war and cultural strife.

Jonas's *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) is likewise a masterpiece of performance art at its inception. Mixing prerecorded tape, live feeds of the performance in process, and the performance itself, Jonas (as her masked and costumed alter ego Organic Honey, whom she has called 'an erotic electronic seductress') eyed her own image on a small monitor as she engaged in actions (fanning herself, jumping up and down, dropping stones into a jar of water, rhythmically swaying) that had a beguiling air of mystery and ritual. The audience, which could not possibly take in everything at once, perceived this work as multiple fragments, fissures, repetition and mirroring, and not at all from a unified perspective. Recent works like *Lines in the Sand* (2002) and *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (2004-2007) which mix performance, video, live and recorded voices, literary quotations, drawings, and sculptures, underscore that Jonas is one of the most eclectic and



*Organic Honey's
Visual Telepathy
Performance
LoGiudice Gallery,
New York 1972*

Photo: Peter Moore
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intellectually fleet artists of her generation – a visionary artist who layers myriad allusions and suggestions into works which juxtapose and combine diverse mediums.

Despite her pioneering status, Jonas remains curiously underknown when compared to quite a number of her contemporaries, as well as when compared to artists considerably younger than her whose work she anticipates, often by many years; Matthew Barney, Cindy Sherman, and John Bock spring to mind, among many others. Jonas's use of multiple screens and fragmented narratives, begun in the early 1970s, also anticipates by several decades an aesthetic that's now commonplace for younger artists, as well as modes of apprehension that are commonplace in the culture at large, like computer desktop environments and simultaneous programs seen on one television. While Jonas has exhibited and performed since the late 1960s, she has done so sporadically and in far-flung locations, making it difficult for a sizable audience to really get a grasp of her total work, or sometimes to experience her work at all. Over the last two decades she has also exhibited more in Europe than the US, meaning that a US audience has missed out on big chunks of her oeuvre. Her acclaimed 2003 exhibition at the Queens Museum was, belatedly, at the age of 67, her first one-person museum survey show in New York, although she's had several such shows in Europe. While this is an excellent museum, it is geographically on the periphery of New York City and has substantially less viewers than other more centrally located museums. In an interesting coincidence, two much younger, lionized, male artists, Matthew Barney and John Currin, both of whom pick up on themes explored by Jonas – Barney's arcane rituals, costumes, and interest in folklore and myths, and Currin's painted versions of costumed, ostentatiously female figures – also had one-person museum exhibitions in 2003, in the institutions which are at the centre,

> *Jones Beach Piece*
Performance
Jones Beach, Long Island,
New York 1970
Photos: Richard Landry

and which do generate extensive viewers, namely the Guggenheim Museum and the Whitney Museum respectively.

Moreover, in a time which increasingly favors saleable art objects (witness the current raging art market, and especially its fixation on young artists) Jonas has been and remains a total maverick. She makes weird, challenging videos. She makes drawings, but hundreds and probably thousands of them, often rapidly, as part of a performance, and frequently with chalk, which she then erases. In a Hollywoodized time which favors big budget spectacle and high definition sumptuousness (like Barney's *Cremaster* series, among many other works) Jonas's videos, while brilliant and technically adept, often have a low budget, experimental, almost home movie look, including makeshift costumes and homemade props. Furthermore there is the baffling way that Jonas's entire oeuvre seems in flux and in process, with a single work encompassing different incarnations (for instance as both an installation and a performance, or as an installation that includes videos of a performance), and with motifs, imagery, texts, and objects recycled from work to work. When you throw in just a bit of Jonas's subject matter – Modernist poetry, *Noh* Theatre, ancient Icelandic sagas, wide-ranging folklore, contemporary dance, the behavior of mirrors and lenses, the look and behavior of white dogs, the mediated (especially female) self in a mediated world – you get the sense that Jonas is just *out there*, on the frontiers of her consciousness, improvising and honing a body of work that is hypnotically compelling, and also utterly eccentric.

2

However, rather than arguing for Jonas's rightful place in recent art history – and I am convinced that she is one of the most visionary, innovative, influential, and meaningful artists of a spectacular generation who emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s – I'd like to look at things from a different angle. For all her pioneering explorations in 'new' media, Joan Jonas's work is also marked by a complex, thoughtful, meditative, occasionally sublime, and perhaps deeply spiritual orientation to nature: an orientation



once common in the US in the nineteenth century (think of Transcendentalist texts, Hudson River School Romanticism, the shimmering and ethereal landscapes and seascapes of Luminist painters like Fitz Hugh Lane and Martin Johnson Heade, poet Walt Whitman's expansive vistas and 'open roads,' and poet Emily Dickinson in her intermittent reveries) but one quite rare in the latter twentieth century as well as right now. This is also an orientation that has deep, pre-modern roots and is fundamental to the belief systems of many indigenous cultures; Jonas cites her trip in the 1960s to a Hopi reservation in Arizona, where she witnessed a sacred snake dance and other ceremonies, as a formative influence. Another formative influence was her 1970 trip to Japan, where she encountered *Noh* Theatre, which has origins in rural Japanese Shinto rituals, while still another has been her profound relationship with the rugged coastal landscape in Nova Scotia, where she has spent summers since the early 1970s.

Several of Jonas's early performances were enacted outdoors, including on beaches in Long Island and Nova Scotia, and in vacant lots in New York City, at a time when some of her friends and colleagues, including Robert Smithson, Vito Acconci, and Gordon Matta-Clark, among others, were also venturing outdoors: away from the gallery, museum, and traditional theatre, and in fact away from institutions altogether. For *Jones Beach Piece* (1970) the audience was positioned a full quarter mile away across tidal mud flats. The performers emerged from and disappeared into sand dunes as they went about their enigmatic activities, including a man running while wearing sheets of tin; Jonas wearing a white hockey mask and a blue silk suit with a huge train which blew in the wind as she climbed a ladder, from where she held a large mirror to reflect the sun back at the spectators; and the performers *en masse* as they attempted to set the ladder on fire. In Jonas's film *Wind* (1968) a ragtag troupe of performers on a windswept Long Island beach engages in a goofy, yet strangely mysterious and captivating, performance. They shuffle

Jones Beach Piece
Performance
Jones Beach, Long Island,
New York 1970
Photos: Richard Landry

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



this way and that, exchange places, form various constellations, and struggle in and out of jackets, while the wind pushes them about and tears at their clothing; in fact the invisible wind, with all its power and vagaries, is the ‘star’ of this show, and rather comical human activity is situated in relation to vast natural forces. In these works (and others) landscape becomes an exceptionally powerful force, visually, psychologically, and emotionally. It becomes a zone of transformation where the known abuts the unknown, and where rational thought merges with magical poetics.

As Jonas’s work has developed to include full-scale installations and performances inspired, in part, by literary texts, excursions into nature and a dialogue with nature continue to figure prominently. For an artist that one normally wouldn’t think of as nature-based, it’s fascinating to note how often whole works or parts of works are situated in the woods, at the ocean, in the desert, at volcanoes, and in one instance in outer space. These excursions and dialogues wind up as highly mediated affairs – nature recorded, edited, mirrored, glimpsed from multiple angles and perspectives, and juxtaposed with all sorts of diverse material – but they are always imbued with an aura of wonderment and discovery.



3

Consider Joan Jonas's remarkable performance/video installation *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, presented last October in the cavernous, grotto-like basement at Dia: Beacon (and now included in this exhibition as an installation). At the core of this work is the artist's profound affinity for the idiosyncratic German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929). Warburg's interest in myths, magic, rituals, archaic memory, and his openness to art from other cultures beyond the Western canon (for instance his 1895-1896 trip to the American Southwest to observe and photograph various Hopi rites) dovetails with many of Jonas's concerns, including her own experience with the Hopis as a young woman. Much of the work involves Jonas's rendition of Warburg (wonderfully played by José Luis Blondet, who is not a professional actor) in the sanatorium where he was confined because of chronic depression. Using quotations from Warburg's own notes, as well as his doctor's observations, and a subtle interplay between live performances, videos, and music, Jonas's work developed as a complex voyage – into the recesses of the actual performance space; into Warburg's, her own, and probably our collective psyche; and out to a conflicted world.

Entrancing images enacted onstage or in big video projections seemed fraught with mysterious meanings. A stuffed coyote on a cart pulled by Jonas, a serpentine line of six bare canvases strung together on wheels, and a video of a white dog jumping through a hoop hinted at animal worship, powerful totems, and a reverence for nature.

Other video images of Las Vegas marquee lights, electrical wires, and freight trains suggested a commercialized and industrialized landscape from which spiritual power has been exiled, perhaps irretrievably. While singer Kate Fenner delivered a haunting rendition of Woody Guthrie's *Pastures of Plenty*, a video showed an abandoned playground, motel, and casino at the Salton Sea in California, which seemed like the crumbling remnants of a wasted civilization. At another point, a birch tree recorded through a concave mirror seemed somewhere between realism, abstraction, and delirious psychedelia – one of many times when Jonas uses odd angles or reflections to make otherwise prosaic natural settings seem dreamlike and wondrous.

Near the end of the performance the huge garage door in the darkened basement suddenly went up, flooding the space with sunlight, and revealing the sky, clouds, grass, and nearby hills outdoors. This was an enthralling, stop you in your tracks moment. Videos of the outdoors gave way to the outdoors, and the garden-variety nature outside a museum instantly seemed beatific, spiritually charged, and near supernatural: the normal sky and the manicured lawns, the nearby hills and the actual grass. A rigid border between inside and outside, architecture and nature, art and world vanished in an instant. Blondet, as Warburg, dressed in hospital clothing, ambled outside, and returned. As he did so, the audience was mentally and visually transported, shaken, and quietly amazed.

4

There's a famous moment in the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1844 essay *Nature* – one of the few times, actually, when this theorist of large ecstasies attempted to describe what a mystical experience actually felt like – that begins, 'Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky...' and goes on to memorably conclude, 'I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all...' In Jonas's performance the garage door going up, and a subterranean indoor space opening up to the outdoors, was precisely such a 'transparent eye-ball' moment.

Here, it's worth considering Emerson a bit further. While Transcendentalism began in Concord, Massachusetts as a schismatic theological movement (a radical offshoot of Unitarianism, and Emerson was a Unitarian minister) it quickly became a literary movement, with a special interest in immersive, mind-bending, psyche-rearranging encounters with nature – a nature understood to be suffused with God, Unity, or the Over-Soul (Emerson used many different terms). And what Emerson was really after (although rarely reached) was this 'transparent eye-ball' condition: a fluid, even ego-less exchange between self and world, which could then be channelled into art.

As he gravitated from organized religion to art (poetry was the term he most frequently used, but he could just as well have been referring to any other art form) Emerson tended to make enormous claims for art, seeing it as inseparable from questions of individual character, psychological growth, revelation, and redemption. Emerson was typically dismissive of art that didn't arise from the galvanic inspiration that he wanted, and he counselled instead a kind of untrammelled wildness, an organic fusion of art and the total person, and a thorough willingness to take risks, all of which fit with his idea that formalism itself would solve nothing, but what could offer a great many possibilities is 'the instant dependence of form upon soul', as he wrote in his 1844 essay *The Poet* (incidentally the first great statement in the US about radical and experimental art-making strategies) – artistic forms that would elastically take the shape of the artist's own psyche, and that would also respond to the constantly changing character of the country itself.

Still, for all his focus on spirituality, catharsis, an openness to nature, and on inner life writ large, Emerson was not all that ecstatic or otherworldly, but preferred instead an approach that is at once spiritually questing and cerebral, simultaneously metaphysical and utterly bound to the here and now, and in this sense his questing thought also involved a big dose of to the point practicality. This mixture of the visionary and the empirical (which Emerson succinctly encapsulated when he wrote in his journal, 'We want the Exact and the Vast; we want our Dreams, and our Mathematics') seems especially apt for Jonas. Throughout her work she measures, considers, and arranges things exactly; she likes to use

methodical repetition and to go about things with an air of quasi-scientific research; she's got a no-nonsense demeanor, a matter of fact voice, and an interest in precision. In the meantime, she makes fanciful, crazily imaginative works that have the fluidity and mystery of dreams, and the logic-warping properties of hallucinations or ecstatic visions.

Emerson immediately affected other writers, notably Henry David Thoreau (author of *Walden*) and Walt Whitman, who once declared, 'I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.' His influence also quickly extended to visual artists, including the Hudson River School painters and the Luminists, as I mentioned. Long after Transcendentalism's brief heyday in the 1830s to 1850s ended, many artists coming much later have incorporated Emersonian inclinations, including Edward Hopper (who read Emerson assiduously), Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Agnes Martin, and these are just a few obvious examples. California Light and Space artists like James Turrell and Robert Irwin are certainly indebted, and I would also include examples of late 1960s and early 1970s Earth Art. Among other things, when Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Walter De Maria and others ventured from the city, and from the gallery or museum, to make works directly in and with nature, they were also making a contemporary variation on a very Emersonian call to venture outside in the largest sense, to break the bounds, surmount restrictions, and seek an original engagement with nature ('In the wilderness,' Emerson wrote in *Nature*, 'I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages') despite their often specifically non-spiritual claims. And once outside, the way that Smithson's works, in particular, don't comment on natural forces from a distance, but rather channel them and embrace them – in fact, become them, and *Spiral Jetty* is the best example of this – is very much in line with the Transcendentalists' desire to cross the borders (whether psychological or cultural) separating themselves from the world.

5

Joan Jonas, as well, constantly tests such borders, and throughout her work there is a cyclical exchange between human actions and natural environs: the spirit of the woods,



Volcano Saga 1989
Video

so to speak, flows into her work, and her work responds to the woods, even to the point of evincing, as Emerson wrote in *Nature*, 'an occult relation between man and the vegetable'. I'm not suggesting that Joan Jonas is some sort of latter day Transcendentalist or that she has been directly influenced by Emerson – maybe so and maybe not. Nevertheless core level Emersonian concerns – for instance a deeply felt absorption with nature, an ever-cycling exchange between the artwork and its surroundings, an orientation toward vastness, a way of reaching out toward the ungraspable or ineffable, a magical aspect emerging from what would otherwise be mundane circumstances or materials, and an understanding that an artwork can result in a comprehensively transformative experience for both artist and viewer – enter her work, although entirely on her own terms, and for her own reasons.

Volcano Saga (1985-1989) is inspired by Iceland, which has one of the most volatile and powerful landscapes on earth. Based on excerpts from the thirteenth century *Laxdaela Saga* (which many scholars attribute to a female author, although this has not been proven) this work re-enacts a fraught encounter between Gudrun, a legendary Icelandic heroine, and her cousin Gest, a chieftain and seer. As Gudrun and Gest (played wonderfully by Tilda Swinton and Ron Vawter) lounge in a geothermal pool, she describes four of her dreams and he interprets them; each of his interpretations has to do with the four husbands she will have, her complex relationships with those future husbands, and their dire fates. This encounter between cousins is mesmerizing, and erotically charged, and it occurs against a backdrop of video images and photographs of contemporary Iceland: lava flows, craggy mountains, jagged lava fields, turf houses, and steaming waters. Present and deep past, ancient journeys in Iceland and Jonas's own journey to the country, all intertwine.



Meanwhile, the Icelandic landscape with all its power becomes a visual counterpoint to Gudrun's dreams, to the roiling (yet contained) emotions of both Gudrun and Gest, and no doubt to Jonas's psyche as well.

Lines in the Sand (2002) involves another legendary heroine, Helen of Troy, as interpreted in the Imagist poet H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) book-length poem *Helen in Egypt*. In H.D.'s poem, as well as in Jonas's work, the epic Trojan War, allegedly fought over an unfaithful Helen, was actually fought for very different, far more prosaic reasons, like trade routes. Helen, if there was an actual Helen, was in Egypt, not in Troy, meaning the Achaeans and Trojans fought it out and slaughtered one another over a phantom, an illusion, an age-old archetype.

Jonas evokes Egypt via videos of the ersatz Egypt of Las Vegas's Luxor Hotel, a 36-story hotel in the shape of a pyramid, which is fronted by a replica of the Sphinx, interspersed with travel photographs taken by her grandmother in Egypt in 1910. An American, cross-cultural, highly commercial fantasy of Egypt enfolds an ancient tale which developed over centuries from many sources, and which can't be trusted for historical veracity, as well as a twentieth-century reinterpretation of that tale, and you can't get much more hybrid than that. Still, one of the marvelous things about *Lines in the Sand* is how this hybrid of cultures and places, ancient history and contemporary Las Vegas, opens up to the outside. The video version of *Lines in the Sand* begins with an extraordinary shot of the shadows cast by Jonas and her dog as they walk together on a beach; these images evoke the fantastical figures in shadow puppetry and suggest that we, as well, with all our passions and enthusiasms, are also shadowy, apparitional, and subject to disappearance. Elsewhere, one sees the Luxor Hotel, including roulette wheels and glittering electric lights, as well as other more gritty sites in Las Vegas, but also the surrounding desert landscape, including distant mountains, horizon lines, and immense skies; the simulated nature and history that one finds in the hotel is arrayed against the huge and powerful landscape that surrounds the city. At one point a woman and a man appear far out in the landscape, on a spectacular rock formation millions of years old. It is a windy day and the woman holds a parasol with

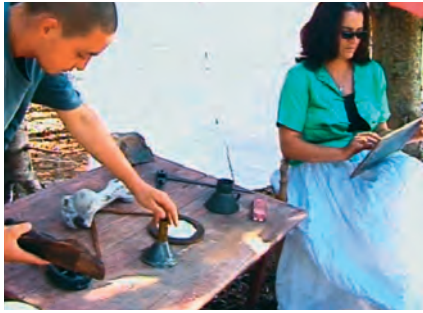


difficulty, as she and the man move about on the rocks. Later the two figures place and rearrange objects on the rocks: a television, radio, toy horse, toy baby carriage, basket, and tambourine. The effect is startling. A work concerning ancient human history suddenly extends to the even more vast reaches of geologic time, and to world processes of land formation and erosion, regeneration and decay.

6

Waltz (2003) revisits a trope from Jonas's earliest work: a small group of friends who go down to the beach and out into the woods, dress up in odd costumes, arrange and rearrange several objects, and make an improvised, strangely magical performance, like an amateur theatre troupe in the middle of nowhere. The rocky beach and the nearby woods are in Nova Scotia. Jonas recorded the improvised performance, and from this raw material she later made the edited video, which is the finished work.

It is a playful and exuberant video, but it is also haunting and deeply touching. You hear a lilting waltz played on a fiddle and this music blends with the rough sound of wind moving through the trees. Friends move purposefully through the trees, seemingly deep in thought, as they arrange special objects on a table or hang a mirror from a branch. The woods and the rocky beach are far more than settings: the fertile woods enclose the performers, the open beach exposes them, both sites are frankly beautiful, and both have an aura of the sacred. The work is made of fragments, just mere snippets of what happened, but these are exceptionally vivid and evocative fragments: an isolated red flag hanging from the end of a pole, a blindfolded woman holding a mirror and a slim piece of driftwood as she slowly turns in circles next to the sea, a plate which reflects and distorts nearby trees, mirrors which reflect beach stones. While the work does not develop as a narrative, these linked image fragments elicit a complex mood, or rather shifting psychic states: there is whimsy and gleeful ridiculousness here, but also solemnity, reverence, fear, and awe. Jonas appears in a clearing, in full, nutty regalia, which means a dress, flowing robe, mask, crooked hat, and the large white flag on a pole which she carries; she's like a ragged priestess from



some obscure religion, or perhaps a figure from a fairytale that you can't exactly place. Another woman appears next to the ocean wearing a rudimentary skeleton mask and holding a staff. You laugh, but not that much; there are shuddering intimations of mortality in this work. This eccentric human activity is ephemeral; at one point the woods and the ocean will remain, but not the people. The video concludes with a gorgeous view of the sky, with clouds moving across a shimmering moon, and this is a vision of immensities, of eternity. The only thing one hears is the sound of clicking stones.

A lot goes into Joan Jonas's work: her synthesis of image, language, and sound; investigation of costumed, masked, and mediated selves; combinations of live and recorded performance; and her investigation of gender. Jonas's meditative and often coolly fantastical approach to nature is a major part of this work, and a big reason why her films, videos, multimedia installations, and performances continue to be so pioneering, and so humanly cathartic.



Waltz 2003
Video