

Richard Serra

## Impromptu, February 1968

Late one evening I was sitting on the floor on a mattress in Joan's loft. Joan was undergoing a fit of inspiration; it was obvious that she wanted to get something out and she asked if I would watch, that is: I was to be the audience. This was in 1968; I really did not know what to expect. Joan turned off the lights, disappeared, then returned in a dark blue silk robe, hooded and laced at the neck, very monklike, except for the fact that the robe was covered with symbols of alchemy: a crescent moon, a spiral, clusters of stars sewn on. Joan was swaddled in a fetish of cloth, a witch's sacred bathrobe. A theatrical persona had appeared, a new creation of sorts was striding towards me with a lighted candle in a makeshift candleholder. The personality of Joan was long gone, a fiction. In her place was a magical invocation. OK—I was prepared for the supernatural. What next? Very carefully the candle is set on the floor about two feet in front of me and out of nowhere a very large, ornate, tortoiseshell hand mirror is placed face-down, aligned behind the candleholder. Both of these objects are assembled with a slow, casual indifference. I feel a bit uneasy, I am losing my distance. The next thing that happens is a little more involved. Up until then, the figure has merely bent down, but now she is somewhere between kneeling and groveling on the floor, down on all fours. This is not an exercised ritual, no salvation is being sought; a form of unrehearsed prostration, self-humiliation is being carried out. I closely watch this perversion of prayer, this bowing down. Arms, knees, head, face are not performing distinct gestures of respect, only those of self-rejection. I understand that I am witnessing a private initiation. The figure is initiating herself to her-self, a person I do not recognize. Then suddenly the figure is seated upright and composed holding a velvet cutlery pouch tied together with a ribbon. Carefully, and very slowly with ceremonial coordination, the cutlery pouch, containing a full set of silver, is unrolled and laid out on the floor, horizontally behind the mirror. There is a unity to the movement as the left hand draws a large silver serving spoon from one of the sleeves and the right hand

turns over the mirror. There is a sober, wooden countenance to the hooded figure. She remains erect, stiff and still, knees bent under her torso, sitting on her heels. She begins to mechanically tap the spoon on the floor beside the mirror. This goes on seemingly forever while her eyes are transfixed on her reflection. Her arm lifts above the shoulder, the elbow bends and in an instant the spoon is raised overhead and brought down with full force, striking the glass and smashing the mirror; with the first blow—no crisis, the figure remains composed, but then the beating of the spoon upon the mirror takes on an ugly aspect, as it is repeated over and over again until every vestige is broken down into crystals, into fractured geometries of pain. This is no surgical operation, this is punishment, pure and simple. It is as if the mirror has been beaten to death. There must have been forty or fifty blows administered to this narcissistic fetish; and as suddenly as it started, it stopped, the figure exhausted. Joan got up, turned on the lights, smiled, and asked, "What did you think of the performance?"

First published in *Joan Jonas: Works 1968–1994* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1994), 33.



Jonas performing in *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972)