

Lynne Cooke interviewed by Barbara Clausen and Kristin Poor, March 20, 2020

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Kristin Poor: Today is March 20, 2020. I am Kristin Poor and I'm here with Lynne Cooke and Barbara Clausen for The Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. Lynne, thank you so much for doing this.

Lynne Cooke: Oh, it's my pleasure.

Kristin Poor: So Lynne, perhaps we could start with you talking a bit about your relationship to Joan. How did you meet her?

Lynne Cooke: I can't precisely date it. The first time I saw a performance or even a work of Joan's, I guess, was at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in the late 1970s. She installed *The Juniper Tree*. I think I met her then, but it was fleeting, certainly. Then I met her years later when we were both living in New York, I guess, from the end of the 1980s probably.

Kristin Poor: How did you become aware of her work? Was it at that Whitechapel performance or were you aware of her before that?

Lynne Cooke: I think I was possibly sketchily aware but with no real knowledge. The Whitechapel installation and performance made a really strong impression. I have a vivid sense of how it looked there and where in the building it was. Of course that gets reinforced with photographs and other documentation, but it made an impression at the time.

Barbara Clausen: Then how did you start working with Joan? When was the moment where you began thinking of working with her?

Lynne Cooke: I'd seen a number of shows of Joan's work, particularly the Queens Museum retrospective that Valerie [Smith] organized. I also saw the Stuttgart show, which I can't put a date to it, but I think must've been in the early 2000s [2000]. Joan was in my mind. When Dia was in Chelsea, there was not a huge installation and performance program, but as Dia:Beacon came into being, that seemed to offer opportunities to do performance and installation, in a way that hadn't been really possible before or on the scale that hadn't been possible before.

- Lynne Cooke: So that led me to think very specifically about inviting Joan, who I'd seen a lot more and whose relationship to the artists who were present then in the Dia collection and whose contribution to that era was so manifest, so evident. So she seemed an ideal person to include in the program.
- Barbara Clausen: I wondered, Lynne, did you write about Joan's work before or during this period when you thought of working with her at Dia? Did you write any essays or—
- Lynne Cooke: No, I don't think so, Barbara. I think the first real essay ... I think that I've done short reviews since, both for book and another piece, but the most substantive writing came out of the commission, *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*. And here's a question I should have asked you before: Do you want me to answer specifically and directly or to elaborate as we go along?
- Kristin Poor: Elaboration is great. If the question prompts you to think of something else, we'd love to hear your thoughts.
- Lynne Cooke: Okay, good. Thanks.
- Kristin Poor: So what—
- Lynne Cooke: So I'll take that as we move forward.
- Kristin Poor: Go ahead.
- Lynne Cooke: No, I won't add to what I've already said for the previous questions, but I'll put that in mind as we move on.
- Kristin Poor: As you began working with Joan and thinking about working with her, did you look at any of the prior retrospectives? You mentioned that you saw the Stuttgart exhibition. Did you see the exhibition at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam or when she participated in Documenta?
- Lynne Cooke: Well she's participated in—
- Kristin Poor: Multiple times?
- Lynne Cooke: Yeah. So are you thinking of one specifically, Kristin?
- Kristin Poor: I was thinking of Documenta 11.
- Lynne Cooke: Is that Okwui's [Enwezor]?

- Barbara Clausen: Yes, that was *Lines in the Sand*.
- Lynne Cooke: Yes, that I saw. Then it was also presented at The Kitchen. I saw it at The Kitchen too. I think she did another performance at The Kitchen around that time well, or a little before, which I also saw.
- Barbara Clausen: I think there was a performance in relation to the Queens [Museum] show. Maybe that also took place at The Kitchen. There was like a special event around that time.
- Lynne Cooke: So those would have been the live works I'd seen. I guess by Documenta 11, which was what? 2003?
- Barbara Clausen: 2002.
- Lynne Cooke: Dia:Beacon hadn't opened. So the commission for Dia came in pretty ... I was thinking about it once we really could see what the spaces there were like, that's when it really crystallized, I guess you could say. But *Lines in the Sand* obviously was a different kind of work to some extent from what she'd done before in that it was more elaborate, I think. The relationship to H.D. [Hilda Doolittle] and her long interest in that gave it a particular pivot or fulcrum that manifested differently I think with [Aby] Warburg.
- Lynne Cooke: Not that she came to that material the first time after we started talking, but it's a different kind from H.D. poetry and writings, I think. It offered another umbrella for thinking about larger questions that run through her work. Existential questions and increasingly questions that have to do as the environment and the way in which not just the land and physical world is increasingly encroached upon and destroyed by humans, but humans' relations to animals and other species, which is also a thread, I think, one can see amidst her work.
- Barbara Clausen: In regard to the commission and production, at what time did the commission start ? How long was the production period?
- Lynne Cooke: Joan could tell you more specifically, but once we started talking about it, it was possible for her to be in the space for the whole summer with Ragani [Haas] and Jason [Moran], but she'd come earlier [to preview the space]. So I guess when we first started talking about it, it was before the building was ... The renovation had begun. So that must have been 2002, and she came up to see it because she photographed, as you know, in the basement

space and incorporated some of that material into the final piece.

Kristin Poor:

There was that contrast between the raw space and then the space as it was during the performance?

Lynne Cooke:

Yes. And one's overlaid on the other as the door rolls up and José Luis Blondet walks out. You see the screen with the projection of the building in its earliest [incarnation]. He walks towards that and beyond that out into the space that's outdoors but otherwise unidentified, highly lit.

Barbara Clausen:

Can you describe a bit more before Joan entered the space or was able to work at Beacon, from your curatorial perspective, how you started working with her and what conversations or what prepared for the phase on site and for choosing the site, for example, at Beacon?

Lynne Cooke:

I think it was pretty obvious where she would work. The lower level at that stage wasn't built out at all, as I remember. So how she focused on one part of it or isolated part of it was really up to her. I think we had some discussions, but as you both know, working with us, it's a case by case situation. While some [artists] come with fully developed ideas or proposals, others evolve them sometimes in dialogue, sometimes as a consequence of ongoing discussion.

Lynne Cooke:

With Joan certainly, it evolved as it went along. It was just, she didn't come ... Oddly she didn't share a fully realized proposal, and I think that isn't the way she worked. I think it changed. That was my sense it was changing as she worked on it, as she interacted with others in the piece.

Lynne Cooke:

For example, with José Luis, I think he initially—if I recall correctly—had in a sense a quite limited role. I don't know when he and Joan met, but he worked at Dia:Beacon as the principal curator of education at the time. So Joan, I think, got to know him or got to know him more, and his role in the work evolved considerably, I think.

Lynne Cooke:

He had a background that has included an involvement with theater for a long time. He's also a poet and writer. So some of these experiences, I think, and the way he immersed himself in the project must have contributed to that amplifying of how the embodiment of Warburg came to play.

Barbara Clausen:

Because he ended up as—

- Lynne Cooke: And I think with—
- Barbara Clausen: ... Warburg, no?
- Lynne Cooke: Yes. Yes. And he speaks ... Essentially, as I see it, it's a soliloquy that, well, it isn't the lecture in ... Joan's text includes a great deal of, or incorporates much from the lecture as well as Warburg's other writings. I don't know when exactly in the whole process that text was finalized, and I don't think from the beginning she'd anticipated him necessarily ... I don't think it was anticipated that he would give such an extended ... That he would speak such an extended text.
- Kristin Poor: How did you go about siting it within the basement? Because it was a big open space at that point. Was that something that Joan determined where the audience would be, where the performance would be, how it would work with the screens and the open door, etc.?
- Lynne Cooke: In large part, yes. At some point Jim Bauerlein was brought in as the producer because he had the kind of experience that no one on the Dia staff could provide. He took a role in facilitating that. But the primary definition of how it turned out visually and the general layout and where you came in, where the bleachers were, the use of the final door, those essentially came from Joan, in my memory.
- Barbara Clausen: Was there any exhibition part joined to the performance? Was there at any moment, before you entered the space, was there anything that stayed or was seen before or after the performance?
- Lynne Cooke: No, I think in the bookshop upstairs there were catalogues and other material but principally books. No, it wasn't an exhibition and a performance. It was the performance. It was repeated on weekends a number of times, but it was an event.
- Barbara Clausen: Could you speak a bit about—I mean Joan also of course, can speak about that—her relationship with Jason Moran? Like the use of sound, was that something that was also of interest to you and of composers within that space or within Beacon at that moment?
- Lynne Cooke: Well, Dia had histories with La Monte Young, for example, and I suppose differently with Max Neuhaus, and of course with Robert Whitman. So there was a sense in which Dia's history and the artists getting engaged with had provided something of a

precedent and a frame. But that said, they were very different artists. I think that, again, this is something that Joan can speak to, but Jason's role and his availability and his ...

Lynne Cooke:

Jason's role and what he contributed grew in part out of his being able to be there constantly. There's this strong sense in the piece that at moments he may be providing supplemental music, and at other times there's an absolutely strong ... There's a dialogue that's not subordinate. It's a direct engagement. Sometimes the music leads in a sense from one scene to another or is structuring the affect or the tone or the rhythms of the performance. It's very much a collaboration in a very expansive sense, I think.

Barbara Clausen:

Did you have any other programming around the performance itself or was it really focused on the performance?

Lynne Cooke:

I think it was focused really on the performance.

Barbara Clausen:

Were there any lectures, for example?

Lynne Cooke:

Barbara, I don't remember exactly, but I don't think so.

Barbara Clausen:

Do you feel that this piece is ... I mean, I've heard this sometimes, and I felt— having seen it, at least in the latest version of it at rehearsals—I felt that this piece was very particular in how it brought together Joan's work with installations and Joan's work with performances. It really had a very strong fusion at that moment. How do you read this work in Joan's oeuvre?

Lynne Cooke:

Yes. I think this space was of a kind she'd never had before. The length of time to actually evolve the piece in the space was also unprecedented. Maybe also the fact the space had no imprint in that it hadn't been used as a venue at all. So it was singular in many ways.

Lynne Cooke:

I think the text and the parallels between Warburg and Joan in their thinking and their prioritizing of image, of a text as a conveyor of meaning or the basis out of which argument and exposition can evolve, poetically and through juxtaposition and through sequencing and that these visual motifs along with different projections and the play between the illusory and the actual ... So much of that links the two of them. And of course, the Hopi Dance and Warburg's experience of going [to the Southwest] in the late 1890s, and the use of that experience he makes when he's writing the lecture to demonstrate that he's

cured, or as a proof of the cure after being in a mental institution for five years.

Lynne Cooke:

Joan, in a different way, experienced the Hopi Snake Dance in the 1960s but didn't use it in a direct sense. Then once we started talking, and this commission was in play, she went back to the Southwest and stayed again on the reservation. But her conviction that she shouldn't or wouldn't directly involve imagery and material from that later informed her work. It's something that I think is adjacent to Warburg and in dialogue with him.

Lynne Cooke:

So I think that his life, his thought, but above all the way he transformed art history through his work on the *Mnemosyne Atlas* has a lot to offer in thinking about the way this performance was worked out between a realm of materiality and spatiality in the foreground where the couch and the figure of Warburg—José Luis—and the medical team are present.

Lynne Cooke:

Joan is there part of the time, and from there she's moving back and forth to the [distant] areas defined by the screens and the projections there. That's used, in a sense at different ... Well, it's used differently to explore issues to do with myth and history and motifs from within the art's old parallels, those within the *Mnemosyne Atlas* and the environment of the Southwest, particularly through the footage of Salton Sea, and so on.

Kristin Poor:

Would you just talk a bit about the documentation of the performance?

Lynne Cooke:

In the sense? What do you mean Kristin?

Kristin Poor:

Well, in multiple senses, of course video and photographic, if there's anything that you recall about that, but also in relation to the book that Dia produced in relation to the performance.

Lynne Cooke:

You would know better than I do, but I think it's probably the first time a DVD was made of her piece at the time. The ... let's say the catalogue took the form of a book, and the DVD I think was very important. It's of course extremely difficult to document any work. But given that there were bleachers and that the number of people [in the audience]—so the size of the bleachers—was relatively small, in shooting from there, one could get a closer representation of the experience of seeing it than in some situations where the performances happen more in the round or are seen from less of [a strictly] frontal position, let's say. Also that would have to do with the distance from the

bleachers to the depth, which was very long. It's a much larger area than most of Joan's or any of Joan's performances I think at that time, other than, say, the outdoor pieces.

Lynne Cooke: So it lent itself perhaps better than one might anticipate to that kind of recording. I think, in a way the book offers more information. It has texts [and more detailed images than] the DVD ... One can read what's in the book or take in that information in relation to what you're seeing on the DVD. I think that's very important because it's clearly complimentary.

Lynne Cooke: What happens inevitably, or has happened in the past with performance, once it's done and what remains is a series of stills. Critical reception, whether at the time or in subsequent writing, is much more reliant on documentation that shapes critical reception. And with hindsight, in some ways there's more access for multiple readings perhaps than is often the case.

Lynne Cooke: I suppose the other thing that we should mention is that it was re-staged a number of times: in Brazil, in Berlin, and elsewhere. It was fascinating to see what could be done, what could be retrieved, perhaps what could be added. But inevitably the spaces were very different. Consequently the experience, of course, was vastly different.

Kristin Poor: It was re-staged at Beacon in 2006, no?

Lynne Cooke: Yes, it was.

Kristin Poor: Had it changed in the process of being at those other venues? Was that in between in the year ... I think it was exactly a year later or so that it was done at Beacon.

Lynne Cooke: I think it was done in Brazil pretty soon after. I'm sorry, I don't have the dates.

Kristin Poor: So then she would have been performing it in between the two performances—

Lynne Cooke: I think she did, at least one of them she did. No, I don't think it changed in any substantive way through those experiences. The performers had grown with it, knew their parts, their roles, had hindsight on it. But in terms of its visual and sensory and even textual base, I don't believe that it changed in any significant way.



- Barbara Clausen: Dia has never presented the work as an installation, if I'm not wrong?
- Lynne Cooke: I don't think so.
- Barbara Clausen: They're planning to do so.
- Lynne Cooke: Yes. So I've heard.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes. In your time, did you ever curate one of the installation versions of this piece?
- Lynne Cooke: No.
- Barbara Clausen: Did you ever have any conversations in regard to the possibility, not perhaps at the time at Dia, but in the near and far future of what a transformation into an installation could or would look like with Joan in conversation?
- Lynne Cooke: No, I don't think so. I think—and I'm speaking for myself, not Joan—with some of the early pieces like *Organic Honey*, it's very interesting to see how they have been transformed and to have access to props and costumes and footage. I think what the relationship of those first early pieces when she was the only performer with the range of media and materials, they're different in ways. It's not just that the pieces like *The Shape ...* or *Lines in the Sand* are more complicated. It's the physical presence of a performance and the simultaneity of what's going on near or far or as one looks over to Jason that obviously an installation can't do.
- Lynne Cooke: Given that the DVD exists, I think that there would be a different kind of triangulation between what an installation might bring to both the actual event and to the recording that the DVD offers.
- Barbara Clausen: Well, thank you. Kristin, do you have any more questions with regard to conservation?
- Kristin Poor: I guess, Lynne, do you have any general thoughts for curators who present Joan's work in the future? Do you have any advice for them about how to approach these materials, to reconstruct—
- Lynne Cooke: On working with her or working with preexisting works?
- Kristin Poor: Well, actually both would be interesting, if you have thoughts on working with her, and then also what it would be like to

approach these works without the artist's authority and participation.

Lynne Cooke:

Well, in terms of preexisting works, I hope your work, above all, but other work too will be done so the works and performances that haven't yet found a counterpart as installation will be thought through with Joan so that they can take place without her as needed. That would seem to be an important thing to do.

Lynne Cooke:

In terms of commissioning new work, I think she knows ... She's been doing this for a very long time. She draws on her own experience greatly—all artists do—but in some ways, she's honed and refined and evolved a way of working that seems to me not to have had fundamental breaks or turns that one can see.

Lynne Cooke:

She's been working in a sense more on her own than many artists do. The language she's evolved and the techniques and materials she's relied on and explored to do that set her apart from anyone of her generation. Anyone subsequent has had to have known her work. So she's in a unique position in terms of crafting a practice. Giving her the mental, psychic, material, and other space in the room to propose something is very important, the fewest possible restrictions and constraints from the beginning.

Lynne Cooke:

Obviously there are always constraints whether it's budget or space or so forth, but bringing few expectations and requirements would be very helpful and productive. Trusting her and giving her the time she needs, and the possibility of working with whoever she needs. Or she decides who she wants to invite.

Lynne Cooke:

In other words, giving her as much freedom. I'm not a curator who says, "Oh, whatever the artist wants is great, we'll do it or we will attempt to do it." I don't think one brings that attitude to any project. It's not exactly what I'm saying in this case, but I would say that more than in many cases I think it's appropriate, and it would be very fertile to let her explore as fully as possible.

Kristin Poor:

Thank you. Well, that was great to hear.

Barbara Clausen:

Thank you.

Kristin Poor:

Do you have any recommendations for other people you think we should interview?

- Lynne Cooke: Karen [Kelly], if you haven't, because of the book, the documentation, all of that, she obviously can speak to a great deal. Have you talked to Jim Bauerlein?
- Kristin Poor: No, we haven't. Is this the only performance that he worked on with her? Do you know? I guess I should put that question to Jim.
- Lynne Cooke: I think so.
- Barbara Clausen: I think so.
- Lynne Cooke: He can tell you what he contributed when he came in, whether it was [a question of] realizing and manifesting and facilitating, and what else he brought to it. Certainly he worked on, if I recall correctly, both Brazil and Berlin. I think he was very helpful in figuring out what these other spaces offered and what could be possible.
- Barbara Clausen: Very interesting.
- Lynne Cooke: Yeah, and I think by that time she was also involved in doing other things. So I think he was very ... He had the experience of taking things from one place to another, one venue to another. I think he was invaluable. José Luis could tell you also about the evolution of his part, but obviously Joan can too.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes. Well, Kristin, do you have another question? Otherwise I think we may—
- Kristin Poor: I don't. I think this has been so great. Thank you again for taking the time.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, it's been wonderful. Thank you.
- Lynne Cooke: I wish my memory was better.
- Kristin Poor: No—
- Barbara Clausen: No, it's fantastic. Thank you so much, Lynne.