

David Ross interviewed by Glenn Wharton, June 13, 2019

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Glenn Wharton: Today is June 13, 2019. This is Glenn Wharton. I'm here with David Ross, the Director of the Art Practice program of the School of Visual Arts, here to speak about his experience in working with Joan Jonas over the years. David, first, could you, going back, maybe just tell me when you first became aware of Joan's work or ...

David Ross: Well, in the early 1970s, starting in 1971, I was the curator of video art at the Everson Museum in Syracuse. As it turned out, I was the first of my kind. Now, the world is littered with video art curators, and video art is ubiquitous, but back then, it was strange and relatively unique. I was lucky enough to work for a man named James Harithas who just plucked me out of absolute obscurity, even out of my undergraduate education, and made me his assistant. Then I became curator of video art. I was interested in making video at that time. I had been doing that as an undergraduate with my friend, Bill Viola. Now, all of a sudden, I had this institutional job, a job I didn't understand at all. No preparation for it whatsoever. I just dove into the deep end of the pool and started showing videotapes by artists. Of course, there were not that many places to see or find them at that point.

David Ross: Castelli-Sonnabend [Castelli-Sonnabend Tapes and Films] was beginning to ... under Joyce Nereaux's direction, but with real tacit support from Leo and Ileana, who was assigned to show a group of video artists or artists who were using video. They really didn't define themselves as video artists, especially that group. Then there was a group of artists who were around the successor to the Howard Wise Gallery, which is now called Electronic Arts Intermix, who came from different perspectives. Many of them were filmmakers or dancers or choreographers. Some actually called themselves "video artists" and were diving into this new medium. That was the moment that I arrived as somebody who actually was interested in showing this stuff to the public. Joan's work, I became aware of, I guess, in that year. It was when she was just really beginning to move out of working in Super 8 film and working in video.

Glenn Wharton: Did you see *Organic Honey* or *Mirage* early on for the—

- David Ross: Yeah. I saw them presented at The Kitchen, which was the only place, really, in New York City where you could see video. There was some loft presentations for more documentary-related material, but for artists working with video, The Kitchen was one of the places. From time to time, the Modern [Museum of Modern Art] would show things, and even the Whitney would, but neither of those institutions were really institutionally committed to working—or even technologically capable of—showing that work yet. There was a great prejudice from the film departments, there was an absolute prejudice from the painting and sculpture departments against that kind of material. Sometimes it would sneak in, but generally speaking, it had to be in alternative spaces like The Kitchen.
- Glenn Wharton: That's where you began to see her in New York—
- David Ross: Yeah.
- Glenn Wharton: ... and places like The Kitchen.
- David Ross: I met her early on. I was immediately enchanted by this strange and really remarkable spirit. A kind of kindness also, sweetness, and kindness, and gentleness to her affect, to everything that she was doing. In an era of hyper confident, aggressive artists, she was the exact opposite. She was questioning. She was insecure. The work had a brilliant level of insecurity to it, in the Alan Watts sense. It was tentative, but on the other hand, she knew what she was doing. It wasn't like she was being amateurish, but there was a naïve quality to all the work.
- Glenn Wharton: Do you have any memories of ever either speaking with her or others about her work back then or even in the context of what other artists were doing?
- David Ross: Well, I think she was one of the first artist who was trying to understand, almost from a formal perspective—she does come out of a formalist background ... When we looked at *Left Side Right Side*, and we looked at, why am I blanking, the video tape almost like in the top—
- Glenn Wharton: Yes. *Upsidedown and Backwards*.
- David Ross: No, not *Upsidedown and Backwards*. The early structural one with the—
- Glenn Wharton: *Vertical Roll*

David Ross: *Vertical Roll*. *Vertical Roll* was amazing, and complex, and hard to see. It wasn't that it was difficult to look at, it was actually hard to see. People didn't know how to look at that kind of material yet. It was, of course, annoying because of this knocking sound. When I would present that work in the museum, people weren't entranced by it. It was, in a way, repellent because it was hard to look at what was going on. There were these changes taking place, there was this annoying, knocking sound, and it was like a television that wasn't working.

Glenn Wharton: I was going to say, back then, people related it to a television that wasn't working.

David Ross: Wasn't working. Yeah. Like the *Vertical Roll*.

Glenn Wharton: Whereas, today, it's very different.

David Ross: The *Vertical Roll* was misadjusted. People may have thought that was funny. They didn't recognize that in that piece, there were the seeds of all the character fluidity, gender fluidity, character fluidity that was at the bottom of a lot of the work there. The transformational stuff, the human into dog, the human into whatever, into some kind of spirit. I must say, I remember, I probably had watched it fifty times before I really understood what I was seeing because we didn't really know how to see those things yet. That piece, even more successful than *Left Side Right Side*, but *Vertical Roll* ... Still today, I show it to my undergraduate students as a really important work to see. The first time they look at it, and I ask them to write about what they saw, they don't see it. It's a piece that you really have to watch carefully.

David Ross: People were not trained to look at television monitors carefully. Television was not meant to be viewed carefully. It was whatever. It was television, but this was poetry, and it was delicate, and complicated, and fleeting images that you had to be paying attention to see and to pull it all together, the structure of it, the sound of it, the choreography of it. It was a challenge.

Glenn Wharton: You curated this work for years and now, you're an educator, teaching a new generation about this work and other work, of course. I'm curious what your thoughts were back then, and even now, about communicating the work to the public from a curatorial point of view in terms of showing more labels, instructions, public education ... Or do you think for her, the work should just speak for itself?

David Ross: Well, I went through different phases in my life as a curator and then museum director in relationship to how one educates the public in relationship to contemporary art. At first, I did none because again, I wasn't prepared. I didn't even think of producing educational material. I just showed it. Then I got to a point where I thought, "Oh, I'm supposed to be preparing people for it." Then I came to a point where I realized—and it took me quite a while—that, in fact, my initial approach to it was actually more correct. That you really needed to let people struggle with their comprehension of the work, that the struggle with it and the eventual understanding of it was integral to its value and to its success as art. That if you gave away all the clues, if you had the Rosetta Stone for this piece saying, "Here's what this means, here's what this means. Now go and look at it." It's like "Really? Spoiler alert." You've taken all the pleasure out of dealing with complexity.

David Ross: Joan's works, although sometimes ... And of course the latter years, they're enormously complex but they've always been complex.

Glenn Wharton: You showed her work early on before you got to Berkeley [Berkeley University Art Museum, University of California, Berkeley] and did this retrospective.

David Ross: Well, I showed her in every museum job I had, I guess. First, I was at the Everson, then I was at the Long Beach Museum where we started a collection and an exhibition program in Southern California. Then I was brought up to Berkeley as chief curator and associate director for collections and programs. It was there that I got a chance to do something rather radical with an artist who I just admired and wanted to work more closely with. That was the chance to, for the first time—I don't think Joan had done this, I don't think any museum had done it yet—to try to figure out how do we present in some kind of retrospective fashion or even in a survey fashion— because it was too early for a retrospective, but still a survey was due—, how do you present work that defies that representation, a representation? How do you do that?

David Ross: There's a certain quality to these installations that were performed within and energized and brought to life and then often turned into videos ... But they had an organic—to use an overused word in relation to Joan—, there's an organic process. The works evolved as Joan performed them. They weren't scripted and set out in advance that, "You'll do this, this." Her later work has a lot more scripted structure, but the early works, it wasn't that they were completely made up on the spot, but

they evolved in her relationship to the act of drawing or to the motions or to a piece of music that turned into dance. Of course, Joan's taste in music has always been exquisite and extraordinary. I've learned about so many musicians from Joan. I don't know how she's always on that edge, but she's always, always out there.

David Ross:

So how do you represent that in a way that still has the energy and quality of its original? Because if you put up a painting, it's the painting or drawing or photograph or even a video. But an installation where she interacted for the first time and created a set of objects and a set of actions, to reproduce that ... Are you really presenting the work again or is this just a simulacrum? We were wrestling with that. Joan was wrestling with that too. I'm not sure if she ever felt completely comfortable with it, quite frankly. The new work, *Double Lunar Dogs*, that we did there, that was a new work. So that had all those qualities of discovery, and I think it was fantastic to see something like that happen. From my perspective, I could see the difference that one was ... that her representing a work and probably changing it slightly every time it was done ... But still, it didn't have the same energy as a new work being presented, with all the problems that had to be overcome, all the questions that had to be answered, all the difficulties that generated beauty at the end of the day.

Glenn Wharton:

What was her involvement? Was she deeply involved in—

David Ross:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Glenn Wharton:

... every aspect of the exhibition? You were working closely with her. What was her input like? What were her concerns?

David Ross:

She was in charge of it. To say that I was the curator of it is to use the word "curator" inappropriately. That's always the case when you're working with an artist who's doing anything involving installation. Your job is, really, to support them and get as much of what they need for them as you can, and maybe to help set up the initial structure.

Glenn Wharton:

She had an evolving vision, it sounds like, but as it came into being, she was there making decisions on the spot? Was she asking other people or was her style more to—

David Ross:

Oh, no. She was always very collaborative, and there were a number of people that she was very close to. Actually, one just walked out of here just as you walked in, Robin Winters, a very old friend of Joan's, but also Bill [William] Farley, a filmmaker in

the Bay area was a good friend of Joan. Joan has always attracted really interesting people to work with her. Of course, the museum's preparatory staff worked very closely with her also because, you know, she was Joan Jonas. In inside baseball, in the art world, Joan has always been a star. Now, Joan is a star outside of the art world. She's a huge star, and it's wonderful to see that the world at large has recognized her. But even then, within the framework of Berkeley and of the art world, and of people who were just doing performance and video and new art, she was already Joan Jonas.

Glenn Wharton:

Do you remember any specific concerns she had about the exhibition in terms of the proximity of the works to each other or even the light levels or audio?

David Ross:

I think she had concerns about all of those things, but I think her primary concern was what I was trying to communicate just before, which is that, would the work have the same level of intensity? Those same qualities that they had when they were seen in isolation, both temporally and spatially, one at a time, a year apart or whatever. When you put them two or three together or four together, what does it do to them? Do the meanings shift into one another? Can people really bring that level of focus and understanding to that one piece even though they see the sets for the other two right there? There are issues. I can't say this is a perfect solution, but finally, maybe with more space you could put these pieces in different rooms, and you can create a different ... but the Berkeley Museum, the old University Art Museum at Berkeley which is a horrible, horrible piece of architecture. It has its fans, but as somebody—

Glenn Wharton:

I grew up in the Bay area, I remember.

David Ross:

... as somebody who worked there, I can tell you, it was just a total pain in the ass. It never worked from day one. It had a certain charm and the openness and everything. People, for the first time, who walked into it said, "Oh, isn't this interesting? It's kind of a little Guggenheimy," or something or whatever, but it wasn't. Anyway, Joan responded well to the space. I think she got a lot out of doing it. That's the most you can ever ask for. We weren't in show business, and we didn't count how many people came. We didn't have box office. It was in a simpler time for museums.

David Ross:

We judged ourselves based on, did the artist learn something from it? Did the artist get something out of it? Then, it was a good experience for the contemporary artist because they were the primary person you were working for, it was to help *them*

create new work and help *them* refine what their vision was. The audience would get the very best if that happened. It wasn't like you were neglecting your audience but you were serving them best by serving the artist first.

Glenn Wharton:

Well, you used the term variability or variable art now, which is at least, for me, it's been very helpful in thinking about a type of art that's not fixed, so that every time it's reinstalled or reperformed, it's different. As a conservator, I didn't, for the museum, want to know what kinds of curatorial authority the artist is transferring to the institution or what creativity can a curator bring to a work.

David Ross:

Well, it's not so different than the world of music. When sculptors started performing like composers or acting like composers, then they had to take on those same responsibilities that a composer or a choreographer would take on, which is to say to create a work that could be interpreted by others who would be functioning like conductors conceivably when they are gone and could interpret the score, interpret the look and feel that have been properly passed along in documents.

Glenn Wharton:

Back then, a lot of the theory that we have now connected to this practice wasn't well developed back in 1980. I'm just curious how, if you can remember how she or you were thinking about the fact that you are reinstalling these works, and they weren't exactly the same as they were the prior time they were installed.

David Ross:

Well, we were aware of it. Since Joan was not only alive and well but very there, we just could rely on her memory, and her touch, and her sense of what was right. We weren't relying on documents. I assume that at this point in her life and career, she has fully documented everything because she is a meticulous person, but back then, I think she had her props. She had props that she could rebuild. There wasn't a sense of, "Oh, this is a vintage prop." There were some vintage props, and there were some props that were remade, and there were props that were made to be used and tossed, that were ephemeral objects.

Glenn Wharton:

This really was quite radical back then.

David Ross:

Well, and it's radical right now, but the world of curators and conservators, in particular, a whole generation of conservators, who understood and loved the challenge of the variable, have developed standards for documentation that now make it possible for an artist who was thoughtful, and careful, and meticulous, and cares about his or her history or their works' ability to be present in the future or to be "re-present" in the

future. Those works will benefit from that. I can't say that all artists work in that form because there are some who now— especially some of the younger artists that I've worked with— who think of that as just too fussy. “Let it go. Let it go. Whatever. Oh, it's gone. Okay, it's gone.” Its quality was that it was ephemeral. Its quality was that it can never be redone.

David Ross:

I remember working with James Lee Byars and how he would feel about certain things that he could do perfectly. But could you ever see anyone doing a James Lee Byars piece now that he's gone? It could not be done. You would have to have James. No matter how brilliant a dancer or a choreographer or a visual artist was to be able to imitate James Lee Byars, they couldn't be inside that particular head. Joan has those same qualities, but I think she is taking great pains to produce works that someday could be presented by someone else playing Joan's role.

Glenn Wharton:

We will be interviewing her about that. I wanted to—

David Ross:

I hope that's the case. On the other hand, I would be ... Oh, boy, would I be critical. If this was a time, twenty years after Joan's passing and I came to see someone redoing it, and it was like ... Would I even want to go? I don't know.

Glenn Wharton:

Is it still Joan Jonas or—

David Ross:

It might just be too sentimental for someone who's known her ... I've known her all my professional life and admired her, but what about that generation of curators and art lovers in the year 2070?

Glenn Wharton:

These are the potential users of our knowledge base that we're creating.

David Ross:

Yeah, and how are they going ... they deserve to see this. It's not just to see the great videos, which are getting better and better. I think the one she did of *Double Lunar Dogs*, which she actually wound up doing in Rochester, I believe. I think it was Rochester public television [Artists in Residence Grant TV Workshop, WXXI-TV, Rochester, New York, 1980] but Bill Farley helped her on that one a lot. That was the first one where she really started to use more sophisticated editing tools, but now, they're brilliant.

Glenn Wharton:

Well, let's talk about the performances related to the 1980 exhibition. We've just looked together at the floor plan and on the bottom right, there's a list of performances: *Mirage, Organic Honey, Vertical Roll, Funnel, Upsidedown and Backwards, Double*



*Lunar Dogs*, which you said was commissioned for the exhibition. For the other ones, how did she arrive at deciding which ones to perform? Could you describe—

David Ross: Well, they were her decisions. Not mine. I take no responsibility or credit for them. She felt that this was an overview that would give a Bay Area public a reasonable understanding of her work. She did the curatorial selection. Was I going to disagree with her? Did anybody know that work better than her? No. Some of her friends probably gave her advice, some of her closer friends, but that wasn't me. I wasn't one of her intimate circle. She came with this idea. We found a way of placing it in there. James Elliott who was my director at the time adored the work and thought that she was brilliant, so I had a carte blanche. We didn't apply for grants. We just paid for it out of our operating. I don't think we could've gotten a grant for it. I don't think that would have been possible at that point.

Glenn Wharton: Were they performed in the gallery?

David Ross: Yeah, right there.

Glenn Wharton: Okay.

David Ross: The audience would be brought in, chairs would be setup near whichever installation was going to be there, and she would perform that piece.

Glenn Wharton: Were they repeat performances—

David Ross: No.

Glenn Wharton: ... or just one performance?

David Ross: I saw them—this may have, again, been a function of my naïveté or just my incomplete understanding of the work at the time— but I saw them as, from a sculptural perspective, that she was energizing the sculpture.

Glenn Wharton: That was my next question. What was the relationship of the performances to the work simply installed?

David Ross: Because then the props would stay but they had been used.

Glenn Wharton: So the props would stay as part of the exhibition after they were used in the performance?

- David Ross: Right. Right. Now, you saw that, and if you were there for the performance, you had more of an understanding of what those objects now meant and how the drawings evolved. If not, you saw the drawing and the cone or whatever props were there and ...
- Glenn Wharton: So the exhibition grew as the performances were conducted?
- David Ross: Yes. Not enormously, but yeah, within the space of that open area. Gallery B I think it was called.
- Glenn Wharton: I do have a question about the ... I don't know whether we would call them installations or not, but the installed works and their relationship to each other or maybe even the types of installations that she did later. Were they more just the props from her performances or was she conceiving them as installation art then or—
- David Ross: I think it was a fuzzy moment. I think it was evolving. I think she saw them a little ... On one hand, and to use Daniel Buren's term, they were souvenirs. I always liked that term.
- Glenn Wharton: Yes.
- David Ross: They also were more than that because they had specifically been activated within a space, within a specific narrative. They had a role to play.
- Glenn Wharton: Objects associated with the memory of the performances. Okay. Were there other people? Did James Elliott get involved?
- David Ross: No.
- Glenn Wharton: You mentioned preparators. Were there others?
- David Ross: Yeah. The preparators were very involved. I could say, Bill Farley was involved. As she built *Double Lunar Dogs*, there were other people involved that she brought in to help in the staging of it. I can't recall the names.
- Glenn Wharton: These were people from the Bay Area?
- David Ross: Yeah.
- Glenn Wharton: Or did they come out from New York?

David Ross: No. They were mostly people from the Bay Area. As you know, she had a lot of friends in the Bay Area and California in general. She had taught in Southern California. She spent a lot of time in Northern California. Her friendship with Richard [Serra], her relationship with Richard opened up a lot of Northern California friendships that were longstanding. Then she had her own followers. She was already developing followers. She didn't have as many student followers as she has now. Now, from all those years at MIT, she has some extraordinary students who've worked with her over the years, but back then, it's a little bit more her downtown friends.

Glenn Wharton: Then the exhibit traveled.

David Ross: Right.

Glenn Wharton: It went to Eindhoven.

David Ross: Just to one place. Yeah. To Eindhoven [Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum] and we had worked on that idea. There was a director there named Jan Debbaut. He and I became friendly, and we decided we could afford to do the book if we did it together. They actually produced it there, which was great because we actually had no resources at Berkeley to produce books.

Glenn Wharton: Before we get to the book, the exhibition itself, was it radically different? Was it—

David Ross: I never got to go to the Eindhoven. I assume that they did what we did.

Glenn Wharton: She went.

David Ross: Yeah, of course.

Glenn Wharton: She was very involved.

David Ross: Yeah, Joan was very involved. Again, this was a little under the radar. Joan was not a superstar yet, but these were two museums who cared about her, who wanted to do this. But it wasn't like there were museums all over the world fighting to do this show, right? It still pains me that it took all those years and then for New York to finally get a show, and then it happened at the Queens Museum. It was a wonderful show, but no one saw it, relatively speaking. I remember how angry I was then. I was like, "This is where she deserved a show at the Modern

[Museum of Modern Art] or at the Whitney or at the Guggenheim.” Then this was the moment where it began. New York took her for granted for a long time—

Glenn Wharton: Right. She'd been performing regularly—

David Ross: ... like a lot of artists of her generation.

Glenn Wharton: ... at places like The Kitchen.

David Ross: She was seen. She was known. It was outside of New York that she ... “Oh, well, Joan Jonas is in Europe.” Her reputation kept growing and growing. It was until she left for MIT then all of a sudden it's like ... but Joan still ... she's still in the same place. She hasn't moved. She's an anchor for SoHo still.

Glenn Wharton: She sure is. We've loved going over to her loft and scanning a lot of her notebooks and of course, working with her, interviewing her for this project. Wonderful space. Yeah. So the book, *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982* [ed. Douglas Crimp, 1983] ... I did talk to Douglas Crimp about the book.

David Ross: Yeah.

Glenn Wharton: From your point of view, could you say a bit of—

David Ross: Except for giving birth to it, I personally had very little to do with it because Joan had a great faith in Douglas, well placed faith because he's a brilliant writer. I think, especially at that point, he had a much deeper and more profound understanding of her work than I did. I don't think I could've remotely brought as much to bear in talking about her as he did. Her intuitions were right. That was the first book. It was a small book, but it was still the first ... Again, it was like, “Really? How long ...” And even doing books about artists like Joan, it was hard to think about because now, we're just reading about it.

David Ross: We're not getting any of the time-based ... We're not hearing any of it. It was like a dance history or choreography history. It was like taking apart something and describing it in a way that the reader could get it, but if you hadn't seen the work and you just read about it, what are you comparing it to? You haven't seen the work. You're just reading descriptions of the work. That was hard for artists who were working with video and performance. It still is.

- Glenn Wharton: Well, that's interesting for me to hear from Douglas that he wasn't involved in the exhibition in Berkeley and now, I'm learning that you weren't really involved with the book so much.
- David Ross: Right. I didn't edit the book. It happened after the Eindhoven presentation, but it really started coming together after there were photographs from the Berkeley presentation and after that, it happened once.
- Glenn Wharton: Do you know if there are any archives from the Berkeley exhibition?
- David Ross: I would imagine that the Berkeley Museum has ... Again, in my career, I never took anything with me. I know a lot of my colleagues took things with them and moved it over, but I always left every file there.
- Glenn Wharton: As far as you know—
- David Ross: As far as I know—
- Glenn Wharton: ... that would be the place.
- David Ross: ... whatever files were there, whatever correspondence in the museum was there. It should be there.
- Glenn Wharton: We're in communication with them, and they said they would send us some stuff. Unfortunately, we don't have the funds right now to fly out or hire anybody to be there to go through the archives, but there's probably someone that's—
- David Ross: There are probably people out there who would do that for you.
- Glenn Wharton: We may pursue that. Okay. I'm just wondering—
- David Ross: Farley is still out there. Bill Farley.
- Glenn Wharton: Okay. Well, maybe, I was going to ask you this later. Who else—
- David Ross: He'd be an interesting person for you to talk to.
- Glenn Wharton: Who else do you think we should interview for this project?
- David Ross: Well, you should talk to Robin Winters. He'd be a good person to talk to. You should talk to Bill Farley. It would be interesting to talk to Stanton Kaye. Do you know who Stanton Kaye is?

Glenn Wharton: No, I don't.

David Ross: They were friends for a while.

Glenn Wharton: Okay.

David Ross: He was a brilliant, brilliant filmmaker whose career crashed and burned. He became an inventor. He's an amazing figure in Southern California, in a way. He had three strong relationships with New York women artists: Joan, Pat Steir, and Lynda Benglis. Interesting, huh?

Glenn Wharton: Very.

David Ross: Everyone loves Stanton. He was going to be the next genius. He was in the class with [Francis Ford] Coppola, and [George] Lucas, and all those guys, but he was the genius. Except, he crashed and burned. He had a take on Joan.

Glenn Wharton: Imagining someone coming to this knowledge base in twenty years, fifty years perhaps, or a curator, and they want to learn as much as they can about curating her work after she's gone, we're all gone. What are some of the takeaways that you think somebody should get about curating her work to just not get it too wrong or maintain the way—

David Ross: One of the things about Joan is her relationship to literature. I think from my perspective now, a curator who wants to really understand and dig deeply needs to understand the ways in which she has looked at world literature. Almost like an ethnomusicologist looks at music. She has looked at literature from around the world, especially myths, and origin stories, and the like but other stories as well. I think that they would need to be grounded in the literature that has inspired her and kept her curiosity alive. I think one of the things that's amazing about Joan is that the work is about scratching an itch, always. There's this itch. She just wants to know more. She just wants another opportunity to dig deeply into another cultural gold mine and come out with material that then she transforms with her own vocabulary and her own mission. That would be the first thing.

David Ross: I think, more than art history, it would be to really have this literary thing. Of course, she's deeply embedded in the history of twentieth-century art, and performance, and music. There is also the music side of it all. Somebody who could go from The Residents to Jason Moran. That's a pretty broad spectrum.

Glenn Wharton:

Yes.

David Ross:

What connects them both is, they are both uniquely brilliant musicians whose music is complex and helps to crystallize Joan's vision. She has had this incredible sense of partners that she brings in or collaborators that she brings into her projects. She's a perfect example of the collaborative impetus in late twentieth and early twenty-first-century art where she never gave up her authority. On the other hand, she never had to hammer it either. She was very gentle with it all.

Glenn Wharton:

We were talking before about reperforming her work, and we'll be speaking with her specifically about future reperformances and reinstallations of her works to really understand her point of view.

David Ross:

Yeah. I'd love to know what ... if you pose a question: It's 2060 and you've been gone for some time. The Metropolitan Museum or the Museum of Modern Art or whatever on the occasion of your hundred and fiftieth— whatever, they want to do it. You have the ability, right now, to write the plan for that show. What would it be?

Glenn Wharton:

That's what we plan to ask her, but I wanted to ask you as well, and you worked with your—

David Ross:

I think it'll be a great curatorial challenge if that's not there.

Glenn Wharton:

Yeah.

David Ross:

The chances of that work having remotely the range of qualities that it would need to have to be at the center of the target, it would be zero to nil if Joan doesn't leave sufficient instructions. Then the chances are getting a good conductor/curator to bring all those pieces together, who understands the work, who can read through the work, who can pull together Joan's instructions ... And more importantly, Joan's ability to transmit the look and feel, which is something that's very hard to put in words but it's a form of poetry that that artists need to understand how to write these days if they are going to leave complex instructions. Because it's not just, "Have a yellow light at a thirty-degree angle from a wall that's fifteen feet away from a wall that's green." Okay. There's that, but there's something else to making it come to life. It's the difference between when you hear Esa-Pekka [Salonen] conduct and when you hear some clunker conduct.

- David Ross: There are conductors who cut deep in the material and would just understand it on such a profound level that they can bring an entire orchestra to that moment.
- Glenn Wharton: Working with the same score.
- David Ross: Working with the same score that some clunker which is like, "Well, what was that I heard?" That will be the issue with those works if she chooses to allow them to be done. She also has the option of saying, "Once I'm gone, the documentation that exists, the videos that we've made: that will be the work. The objects that we've made, that we've very carefully outlined how they get represented, that's what remains. I don't want to take that risk that somebody is going to totally misread what this work was about and present it to another audience." That's her right and that's her choice.
- Glenn Wharton: She sure does have that right. When I was the time-based media conservator at MoMA, I had been a sculpture conservator before that. I shifted my practice. What I realized for media works installation, performance works, is that the heart of what I needed to do is to build thick description or institutional understanding of what the works have been and what they can be in the future. That was multilevel. Everything from floor plans and specs of monitors to artist interviews and even ethnographic descriptions from working with the artist in the gallery, videos, images ... That's what we're trying to do here.
- David Ross: I'm really very pleased that you're doing this. I only hope that this effort can be brought around for other artists as well. As much as I love Joan, and I do, there are so many other artists of this moment whose work will be literally lost to time.
- Glenn Wharton: The larger idea of the Artist Archives Initiative is to create models for other people to do this kind of work, because we're only a few people.
- David Ross: You need to be teaching a technique somewhere. Are you teaching this?
- Glenn Wharton: I am teaching in ... Yes.
- David Ross: Is this what you're teaching?
- Glenn Wharton: Well, among other things, but yes. I have a class called The Museum Life of Contemporary Art. It's in Museum Studies at NYU, and students learn documentation techniques. They all



interview artists as part of the course. They read a lot of this emerging literature on documenting contemporary art in museums.

David Ross:

Yeah.

Glenn Wharton:

It's very much—

David Ross:

I'm glad to hear that.

Glenn Wharton:

... part of what I'm interested in.

David Ross:

That's great.

Glenn Wharton:

Anything else that you would want the future to know about curating Joan's work?

David Ross:

No. I trusted Joan. Who are you going to trust—I would say to those artists—who are you going to trust? You can't just trust yourself. You've got to trust Joan in some way or another if you're going to work with her work. You've got to be able to experience the ineffable parts and bring that to bear because that's what elevates her work and makes it transcendent. It's the quiddity, those small things, the real small differences in the way things will happen when she's there to make them happen. How to learn that, how to document that, how to reproduce that or represent that sensibility. It's not the same as putting up a Brice Marden show, which is not an easy thing to do either. It's not even the same as putting together a Bill Viola show. Because of his wife, that stuff is going to be really very carefully documented. Technically, that'll be possible to be done.

David Ross:

I can think of other video artists whose work will be hard to do. Dara Birnbaum, a perfect example. I would hope somebody starts working with Dara, sooner than later. Dara's health has always been questionable. She's had terrible times in her life health-wise. She's an extraordinary artist, and the work is so complex. I've worked with Dara, and I know how meticulous and demanding she is on a detailed level. Maybe that's the next project for the archive project.

Glenn Wharton:

It could be.

David Ross:

Sure would be a good one.

Glenn Wharton:

We chose Joan because of the complexity of her work.

David Ross: Yeah. Yeah.

Glenn Wharton: We're looking for an artist that would be a challenge for us to put together this documentation. With that, unless you have anything else to add ...

David Ross: No. I'm honored that you've asked me, and I'm really pleased that this is happening.

Glenn Wharton: Thank you very much for your time.

David Ross: Yeah. My pleasure.