

Karen Archey interviewed by Barbara Clausen and Glenn Wharton, April 22, 2020

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<http://artistarchives.hosting.nyu.edu/JoanJonas/karen-archey-interview-april-2020/>

Barbara Clausen:

Hello. So hello to everybody. We're here today to interview Karen Archey, curator of contemporary art, time-based media at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. It's Glenn Wharton here and Barbara Clausen from the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. It's the 22nd of April, 2020. Thank you Karen for joining us today to be interviewed for the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. We would like to start out in a very simple and basic way. Maybe you could tell us about how did you get to know John Jonas's work and the artist?

Karen Archey:

Well, I learned about Joan's work actually in university. So I first came across her work—I believe—in a class on women's art from the 1960s and 1970s taught by Faith Wilding at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and also in my contemporary art seminar and also through books like *Art Since 1900*. I don't specifically remember reading about her through that, but I remember her being a part of my foundational art education.

Karen Archey:

Then as I became an art writer and a professional, I was able to differentiate a bit more between some of the postmodern practices that I've learned about in school and the different characters that they had. I was always attracted to Joan's work, partially because of the kind of image landscape that she worked with but also because of how she ... She has a kind of—I don't know if I would call it protofeminist position—but a position that speaks to women's issues in a way that I find very reflective. I think that spoke to me in my twenties and thirties. I've always found her work really ... also just beautiful, and I think that for me as a curator, that's something that I actually really care about.

Karen Archey:

So, yeah. Then I, of course, saw her work being presented at the Venice Biennale at the American Pavilion. I thought that that was a really nice presentation of a very wide breadth of her work that was also reanimated of course. There's something that clicked about that presentation for me. I got to know her through, I believe, Amanda Wilkinson actually because I was a big fan. I had curated an exhibition of Dara Birnbaum's work for Amanda in 2012. I believe that the Documenta in 2012, I had gone to see the exhibition. Joan had done, I believe, a version of *Reanimation* in Kassel. Then I saw that work, and I met her

afterward. Then around that time I had lunch with her in SoHo just to get to know her and talk to her about her work. We met at Le Pain Quotidien in SoHo next to her apartment and all of that.

Karen Archey:

And yeah, I just kept in touch with her after that. Then, the performance program at the Stedelijk came into being. I started at the Stedelijk in 2017, in April, and I organized the performance program to mostly be focused on younger artists and emerging artists. For the jubilee of the Stedelijk I wanted to work with an artist who had a special history with the museum. Knowing the interesting, very, very transformational for the museum and also for her 1994 retrospective, I thought that she would be an interesting major figure to revisit within the performance program for the 125th anniversary of the Stedelijk. So that is how I came about to working with her. So this is the first time I've worked with Joan, and we have a performance scheduled for November 2020.

Barbara Clausen:

Will this work be a new work or will this be an older work or an existing work?

Karen Archey:

This'll be an adaptation of *Moving Off the Land*. So when I had invited her I ... It's weird, it's just like one of those things that, "How do you ask Joan what she wants to do?" And like, "And what is a new work?" So I had just given her carte blanche to do what she thought was interesting and doable and suitable for the occasion and just went through the museum's spaces with her and asked her what she thought was appropriate and talked through what she might need in terms of resources with her and Sekeena [Gavagan]—I guess studio manager would be her title—and her galleries. So it's been about, I would say, a year that we've been in conversation, and then there'll be another six months before the performance.

Barbara Clausen:

Karen, you've been extremely helpful and generous with facilitating the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base to have access to the archive of the Stedelijk. Because Joan, of course, has a long history with the Stedelijk. Could you speak a little bit about that history and maybe also about her big exhibition in 1994 and what this means to you?

Karen Archey:

Yeah. So in 1994, the director of the Stedelijk was Rudi Fuchs. He is not really actually known as being a champion of women's arts. He's known actually as being someone who ... On the one side he was director of the Van Abbemuseum and was very interested in institutional critique in the 1960s and 1970s and I believe curated a Documenta and was a very big name in the

Dutch or European art world. But when he came to the Stedelijk his tenure was marked by German abstract painting. So it was a very big highlight, I think, in his career to choose Joan to work with. I know from speaking with her that they were friends, Rudi and Joan. So I have no idea what that camaraderie looks like, but I find it really interesting.

Karen Archey:

So basically Rudi introduced Joan to Dorine Mignot who was erstwhile a visual arts curator. I believe her title was curator of painting, sculpture, and video, which I love. So Dorine, of course, curated Joan's 1994 exhibition and—as I believe it's been written about in several sources—this was the first moment that Joan's videos or performances were turned into installations.

Karen Archey:

So that I find really incredible, that Dorine—who I really consider to be my predecessor, and I've written articles about her and her work— really worked on one of the key issues of presenting time-based media and exhibitions, which is: how do you do that? How do you represent a performance in an exhibition setting that's not time-based, or it's experiential, but it's not event-based? So I find that is a really amazing contribution to the field, also a contribution to helping an artist's work evolve. Yeah, I feel just very proud to be part of that history even if it's through a lineage.

Barbara Clausen:

Absolutely. At that time, was the idea of that show in 1994, Joan's first retrospective ... Joan presented several works. I don't know if you can speak a bit about that, because Joan had also already been part of group exhibitions before. Could you speak a little bit ... Do you remember a little bit about that exhibition or does that have an influence for you today as a curator?

Karen Archey:

As to how the exhibition looked, I should also note that some of these ... It's like how I would go about preparing for this conversation and researching is also a little bit limited given the pandemic situation. I would say that indeed if I were preparing a similar show that had a lot to do with installations of many objects in projections, I would look at the floor plan of that show. But the way in which Dorine Mignot archived was basically a secretary took her desk at the end of an exhibition and put it in a box.

Karen Archey:

So I've done some research on *The Arts for Television*, which was one of her exhibitions from I believe 1987 and *The Luminous Image* from 1984. It's really just tons and tons of banal correspondence in various languages and once in a while a floor plan. But in terms of that exhibition, the two works that

we acquired from that were [*Revolted by the Thought of Known Places*] ... *Sweeney Astray* and *Organic Honey*. I'm most familiar with the set-up of *Organic Honey*, which is of course very, very many small objects, as well as some projections and also monitor-based videos. So there were several installations of that nature within the exhibition.

Barbara Clausen:

Thank you. Glenn?

Glenn Wharton:

Karen, I'm really interested in what you've been saying. I'm struck by the fact that you're a younger curator who has come into the museum having this great legacy of work with Joan Jonas. We've interviewed a number of conservators for the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base, and these conservators tend to be younger. They didn't work with Joan for the last twenty-plus years, so they've come to her work in the same way you have in the sense of they've studied her, and now all of a sudden they're working with her and her work. I imagine that a number of future users of the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base will be more in your situation, where they didn't know her and work with her for years, but they're having to dig up the legacy and go through the archives. So could you talk a little bit more about your approach, maybe like learning about *Organic Honey* and when it was acquired and how the artist was involved? What is your approach, and what have you learned?

Karen Archey:

Yeah. Thank you for the question. I would say that it's a premier in terms of how I go about educating myself about a specific work. It happens in various different kinds of systems and formats. So one is our software of course, Adlib, and I see the documentation that is included in Adlib. Then that goes to other platforms where I can find information and reports. I don't believe that I actually found ... Yeah I did not have access to Sandra [Weerdenburg] and Rebecca's [Timmermans] report before you sent it to me. So that was really incredible to have access to. I've since contacted Sandra and Rebecca directly to talk to them about how impressed I am by their research. We actually don't collaborate that often because they're responsible for object-based work. Rebecca is the sculpture conservator, and I work mostly with time-based media that's not object-based and specifically with Gert Hooegeven who is also the AV art handling coordinator.

Karen Archey:

So there's a bit of a different approach to research, to a more practice-based conservation or working with art one could say. So one is through these systems of documentation, another is through oral history. So I spoke to a few colleagues who I knew were around during the 1994 exhibition. I spoke with Leontine

Coelewijn, who is the curator of contemporary art. I asked her if she had known anything about the acquisition of Joan Jonas's works and specifically how the kind of decisions to acquire her works were being made. So luckily within the Netherlands—and maybe in institutions in general—there are some people who do indeed stay around for decades. That oral history is such an incredibly important part of our work and how I find knowledge.

Karen Archey:

Then of course on the other side there are articles in the various publications that the Stedelijk has produced that I've looked at, like within her catalogue and from the 1994 exhibition. I would really love to have a copy of the Tate catalogue. I do not have that, but I would like to buy it. So I'd go about familiarizing myself with her work in that way. We have published some articles like in *Stedelijk Studies*, the Stedelijk's academic journal. Then of course through experiencing the work itself, seeing her exhibitions and going to her performances.

Glenn Wharton:

It's so interesting. Also what you mentioned about connecting with colleagues at the institution. I know for many years of working in museums myself, including at MoMA, that everyone's always so busy, but they're not necessarily in discussion. They're not aware of what people have done in other departments or what kind of documentation they have. Many of us are working to try to get museums to be better at documenting and collaborating and sharing documentation. This is a little off topic, but could you say just a word about what you would like to see at the Stedelijk? You mentioned that the archives originally were just throwing everything in a box. What would be a better process from your point of view?

Karen Archey:

Well, I think Dorine was the person who was throwing ... Her secretary was the person throwing her desk in a box. Some of the curators were really good at archiving. I believe that Michiel [Nijhoff], our librarian, has digitized everything up until a certain date. So that's incredibly impressive and positive. Then I think the physical archive of the Stedelijk has gone to the city archives. But in terms of being able to retrieve that, it's not always super straightforward or easy. Then in terms of how we archive now, that is through self-selecting, filing our emails and correspondence and other documents in a system called 360. I believe that's actually made for medical filing, like record filing. So that's a Microsoft product that is certainly an imperfect system, but that's just what we have. Then we don't have a content management system. I forget the ... I don't know if it's called CMS but—

Glenn Wharton:

TMS, the collections management system, TMS.

Karen Archey: We have Adlib which is similar to TMS, but there's something else that our systems expert wants us to purchase, which is something that sounds like a content ... Or it's like an asset management system. Anyway, the way in which all of these systems interact is not always good. It's not always easy, for example, to find videos to watch. I can't access a lot of this from home. So I think system integration would be a really positive step forward for the Stedelijk.

Glenn Wharton: Well, we're living in a time where a lot of new systems are coming on, and museum staff are realizing that they need to be better about documentation. No doubt in the future the world will be perfect and all documentation will be available to all people. So let's move on. Actually, you mentioned a report or some work that Sandra Weerdenburg and Rebecca Timmermans did, two conservators at the museum. What have you learned about that, and what did they do?

Karen Archey: Well, I learned that ... I think that one of the things that strikes me about the Stedelijk is how informal a lot of the agreements had been made in decades past and how the museum has gone about professionalizing its work—one could say securing its assets—in the last twenty years. So I believe that Sandra and Rebecca wanted to—and also Anne Mink actually, a former I believe intern who is now a nurse, I think, and doesn't work in conservation anymore—they attempted to properly document this piece with Joan, *Organic Honey*, because Joan's involvement became so integral to putting it up that it became a risk to have her not be able to be involved.

Karen Archey: So the question was posed by Rebecca, not Rebecca, sorry, Anne Mink and Sandra: what is this piece if Joan isn't there to actually put it up? And how can we go about making sure that we have an intelligent manner or way to install this work without her involvement, should she pass away or be unavailable? So they, from what I understand, went to the process of documenting this work, its previous iterations and then tested, interviewed Joan and then also put it up in a sample installation in the Stedelijk Museum central station building when the Stedelijk was closed.

Glenn Wharton: Fascinating. Well, let's move on. Could you talk about any other works related to *Organic Honey* that the Stedelijk has acquired?

Karen Archey: Do you mean by Joan or by other artists in general?

Glenn Wharton: By Joan.

Karen Archey:

Well, we have a lot of single-channel videos by Joan that we show with quite some regularity. I organize a quarterly screening series, and almost always there's a Joan Jonas video in one. So I would say, yeah, it seems like almost all of her single-channel videos we have. There's also ... *Sweeney Astray*—the proper title for that is longer. There's also, I believe, another installation. I could double-check the title of that.

Glenn Wharton:

Well I guess what I'm curious about then is ... So the institution has been building a rich array of works by Joan that are related to each other. I'm curious about exhibiting them on loan. So when, say, another museum approaches the Stedelijk about borrowing, what kind of requirements do you have for loaning the work out? And then how does that actually work in terms of helping other institutions get it right from your perspective?

Karen Archey:

From what I ... Well, the process would be that an institution writes a loan request letter and sends it to our registrars. Then, that request is brought to the responsible curator, which would be me. Then I would say "yes" or "no". I would principally research whether the work will be shown anywhere else, including the Stedelijk, during that time. If it's a complex work or a fragile work, then I research with the conservators what would be necessary in terms of climate control or lights levels and also installation staff. So for the works that we acquire and have gone through a proper documentation process for a time-based media, we always ask the artists what are the kind of requirements in terms of art handling personnel. In a kind of acquisition intake interview scenario for works that's this old, generally it's documented. This work was actually damaged before when it was shown at the Queens Museum in 2004 or *Organic Honey* was, to be specific.

Karen Archey:

So I believe that we've been fairly selective about loaning or granting loan requests for this work in the past. Because a lot of the works are fragile, and there's just so many of them. It's very difficult to get the installation right. So if I were to receive a loan request now it would, of course, be in conversation also with Joan. If it were to be in a moment where she wasn't available or otherwise not alive then, yeah, we would look at the installation requirements of the individual work and talk to them about what kind of stuff they have. Also I believe within Joan's or any artist's studio there would be a person appointed to help install that work or be the person who is designated to carry out the check of the installation of a work. But I'm not sure actually if that's the case with Joan or she's thinking about that.

Barbara Clausen: Yeah. I think she is partly. But I'm wondering also about the question of documentation, which in all these different questions comes together and plays such an important role. I'm wondering if you could talk to us about your personal viewpoint on the question of the importance of documentation and what types of documentation for multimedia works and interdisciplinary works, such as that of Joan?

Karen Archey: Yeah. It's absolutely crucial. I think I was hired by the Stedelijk because of my view on documentation, that it's absolutely crucial to properly document works of contemporary art and particularly time-based media. Time-based media and performed media, of course, provide an especially challenging case for conservation and documentation because of their variable nature. So, yeah. I also met Glenn of course through a course that I took at MoMA that was sponsored by the Mellon Foundation on documenting and caring for time-based media works in museum collections. So I had come from just a curatorial background. I had known Ben Fino-Radin, and then worked with Rhizome and had known about preservation but had never really been involved with media preservation before. So it was actually through a lot of conversations I had before and my interviews at the Stedelijk that I learned a lot about preservation and even wrote about the Teiji Furuhashi conservation project at MoMA for *ArtNews*, just to dip my toes into the field.

Glenn Wharton: Wonderful. Maybe we could shift now and think about the future of the works or *Organic Honey* specifically, let's say. What are some of your concerns for the future in terms of conservation, future documentation, exhibition?

Karen Archey: I think that one of my most major concerns is quite practical, which is that any work of a significant cultural or economic value that has many small elements that are all so easily concealable by someone who would steal them, require a security guard especially mounted to that work. That makes it prohibitively expensive for museums, well, the Stedelijk specifically to show those works. So I think that *Organic Honey* ... I mean Joan's works are true cultural treasures. They're works that we've spent so long working to acquire and preserve. But that means also that we have to be very, very careful about how and when we exhibit them, which unfortunately limits their exposure to the public. So for me, that's the crux. Also, finding funding for that kind of research and presentation is not always easy.

Karen Archey: Yeah. So I would really love to display *Organic Honey* again, but that unfortunately does require the presence of an appointed security guard. For the length of the duration of an exhibition, we always estimate that that would be around €40,000 to €60,000.

Glenn Wharton: That's significant.

Karen Archey: Yes.

Glenn Wharton: So interesting. I wasn't expecting that answer. But from a real curatorial point of view I can see that you really are concerned about the works, and this is what it would take. Are there other concerns that you have or is that the primary one that comes to mind?

Karen Archey: I think making a very clear case ... In terms of thinking about the future—and it's not just Joan—but thinking about artists in general, having a clear stewardship scenario in place should they pass away. I speak about that with artists in their thirties. I find it very, very important, especially for choreographic works, for installations. It's very important to feel that someone has the authority to okay an installation. Luckily, we have Rebecca and Sandra on staff. They can, with authority from their experience working with Joan, put this work up and install it with authority and with confidence. But as they leave the institution, that knowledge is also for some part lost. So that's also why it is so incredibly good that they have created the documentation that they have because that will stay within the institution and can be shared and also can be shared with other people in other institutions.

Karen Archey: I would also say that I've noticed that people—especially curators, younger curators, maybe of my generation—tend to not stay in their positions very long. I've been in my position for three years and people are like, “Where are you going next?” I'm just like, “I just got here.” So I find that to actually be a bit of a threat, this idea that progress should be accelerated and accelerated within the curatorial field, and that authorship is so commodified, I guess you could say. And that also, when it comes to caring for artworks, having a normalcy of moving through positions on a very quick basis, quick meetings, two to five years, that means that also your care and knowledge of certain works in collections is just going to be by nature limited.

Barbara Clausen: I think it's also interesting to say that if we look at different museum institutions that have departments and collections for performance art, there are a number of curators that have and

are staying dedicated to really ensure the conservation, the exhibition, the scholarly research with a more long-term engagement. So I think that's interesting too that these types of interdisciplinary works really demand a certain dedication.

Karen Archey:

Yeah. I think immediately about Catherine Wood, for example. I think about her a lot in terms of being someone who has really formed a program and collection. I think it is very responsible, I guess you could say, and really a figure that I look up too in that way.

Glenn Wharton:

Well, we've covered a lot of territory. Can you think of anything else that you'd like to add that we might've missed or that you'd like for people in the future to know about Joan, her work, the Stedelijk?

Karen Archey:

I don't know. I think the thing that I'm also very drawn to about Joan is her personality, who she is as a person and her fashion sense. She's such an incredible figure and leader in the field. She's so active. She's also extremely over herself. Like she really just wants to get on with her work and do what she wants to do. Whenever I see her, even like in Venice for example, people are always coming up to her and they're like, "Oh my God. You're Joan Jonas. I love you." And she's like, "Oh. Thank you. I gotta leave now."

Karen Archey:

She has a very great balance of knowing her worth and knowing that she contributed to this history of art in such a special way but then also not full of herself. She's very down-to-earth and also incredibly curious, still doing like tumbling in her performances. I just admire her so much. I guess I would just maybe end on that note, that I just find her to be such an incredibly interesting and important person. I know a lot of people who live in SoHo, artists from that generation, and they don't approach their legacy in such a kind of interesting and healthy way, I would say. She's really exemplary in that way. So, yeah.

Glenn Wharton:

That's a delightful way to end this interview.

Barbara Clausen:

Yes. Yes. Very generous of you and really wonderful. Thank you so much.

Glenn Wharton:

Thank you Karen for your time. We really appreciate it.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. Thank you.

Karen Archey: Thank you both. It was super fun and great to be in conversation.

Glenn Wharton: Okay. Bye-bye.

Karen Archey: Bye-bye.

This transcript is intended to provide an accessible form of interview audio content. It has been edited for factual accuracy and clarity. Any alterations are noted with brackets.