

# ARTFORUM

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## Double Takes

PAMELA M. LEE ON THE ART OF JOAN JONAS

IF THE WORD *retrospective* suggests a certain nostalgia, then it's fitting that JOAN JONAS, in her celebrated showing at this summer's Fifty-Sixth Venice Biennale, has rejected the retrospective principle entirely. Her exhibition of new work in the US pavilion is not a career summation but a distillation of the tactics and sensibility that have made her a touchstone for generations of artists. Jonas's amalgam of installation, drawings, video, and performance immerses the viewer in incantatory visual and sonic rhythms and specular fragmentations of space—an environment in which oppositions, whether between form and content or between humanity and its others, emerge as complex interrelations. Here, art historian PAMELA M. LEE considers the full breadth of a practice best understood not through retrospection but via the concept of revision, while critic JOHANNA FATEMAN zeros in on Jonas's feminist fracturing of the closed circuit of self-surveillance.



Still from Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll, 1972*, video, black-and-white, sound, 19 minutes 38 seconds. Photo: Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

ON THE OCCASION of Joan Jonas's 1980 retrospective at the Berkeley Art Museum in California, Douglas Crimp wrote what would prove to be the most influential statement on an artist whose manifold practices—video, performance, installation, drawing—had long defied summation. Crimp identified a “single strategy, paradigmatic in this respect, [that] informs all of Jonas's work.”

“That strategy,” he asserted, “is de-synchronization, usually in conjunction with fragmentation and repetition.”<sup>1</sup> Crimp cited Jonas's early outdoor performances as signal examples of this tendency. He noted that for the works *Jones Beach Piece, 1970*, and *Delay Delay, 1972*, performers struck wooden blocks together “in wide overhead arcs” inspired by classic Noh drama, and that, because the spectators

were stationed at some distance from the actual event, there was a temporal lag between sight and sound: “The gesture was seen well in advance of the sound it produced.” Jonas would confirm the point: “The basic idea behind these outdoor works,” she wrote, “was how distance alters image and sound.”<sup>2</sup>

THAT DELAY BETWEEN seeing and hearing, stimulus and perception, would serve as bedrock to Jonas’s art in the decades following. Decoupling the visual and the auditory, she has consistently undercut our assumptions about the image: its putative transparency, its ostensible integrity and transmissibility across time and space, its capacity to be fully present, to offer itself in totality to the viewer’s perceptions. Crimp’s analysis was critical for many writers (the present author included) on Jonas. And the cinematic valences of the term desynchronization are especially relevant to her technologically mediated investigations.

Consider the pathbreaking 1972 video *Vertical Roll* and the performances that preceded and followed it—works in which the artist’s interaction with the video monitor and her use of costumes and props set the stage for so much of what was to follow. Starring Jonas’s then alter ego, Organic Honey—a masked “electronic seductress” crowned by an exuberant headdress of peacock feathers—the video exploits the monitor’s receiving and transmitting frequencies to extremely disorienting ends. The vertical roll (a term for an effect sometimes seen on a malfunctioning TV, where the image scrolls across the screen from top to bottom) lurches fitfully, halting and stuttering like a needle stuck in a groove. A horizontal black bar, or scan line, rolling repeatedly across the screen, becomes the focal point; the sound track—a spoon striking a mirror—is jarring, violent, hard, like a machine: It’s an audio artifact out of sync with the sinuous body of the performer represented.

The image of Organic Honey is likewise disintegrated. Structural incoherence is thus revealed as immanent to the medium and the various registers in which it produces meaning. The transparency of the image as coherent, present, whole, is shattered in the process. Which is to say: There is nothing organic about Organic Honey.

CRIMP’S ANALYSIS is powerful and incisive. But ironically, while he took pains to stress the fragmentation and diversity of Jonas’s work, the critical reception of that work has congealed, in subsequent decades, into a rather monolithic edifice: Jonas, we read over and over again, is a pioneering video, performance, and media artist. No doubt, she is a pioneer. And yet the descriptor is more hyperbolic encomium than rigorous characterization. It fails to capture the many ways in which she deploys her materials and narratives, repurposing and recycling them without conforming to the means-ends imperatives of communications media. Nor does it reckon with necessary questions of what form might mean for an artist who came up in the age of Happenings, Judson Dance Theater, and Conceptual art—an artist from a generation for which the closed-circuit monitor was integral.

What are we to do, moreover, with the myriad sources that surface, resurface, and circulate in her art, and that remain largely unassimilated in the critical record? In Jonas’s work, the world is revised, always to begin again. Reading about her art—and writing about it, in turn—proves a comparable exercise in stalled exegesis, a textual analogue to the stuttering image in *Vertical Roll*. There’s the feminist reading of Jonas’s work and the mediated body to account for.<sup>3</sup> There are the labyrinthine fairy tales collected and rehearsed, and the peculiar ethnographies, as well as art histories, animating her investigations. Far-flung destinations (India, Iceland, Japan) are drawn closer to hand. Outer space and cosmological elements take their place. There’s the poet H. D., and her protagonist Helen of Troy, in Egypt; William Carlos Williams; Jorge Luis Borges; Aby Warburg among the Hopis; and countless other semiotic excursions. There are cones made out of paper and tin, diorama-like boxes, blackboards, graphic scrawls and whorls, mirrors,

masks, and dogs.

What to do with all those dogs?

More than mere props, the cones, mirrors, and other objects Jonas deploys in performance and installation serve to knit her works together across time. There is also a rich layer of sonic “content,” for sound and music have always been essential to Jonas’s art; she has collaborated with musicians from Alvin Curran to Jason Moran. And all of these elements—allusions, references, images, objects, sounds—stand in excess of whatever media platform the artist recruits. But rote attempts to merge media with symbolic content won’t quite do here, nor will an iconographic tallying of Jonas’s diverse references. How do we treat such elements in tandem with her media, without oversimplifying a decades-long practice or forcing the work into a thematic straitjacket? In particular, the risk for the critic is to fall back on the rhetoric of eccentricity or eclecticism to explain Jonas’s approach. In the case of an artist shaped by second-wave feminism, the latter approach in particular could only invite skepticism, with eccentricity standing as code for her marginal preoccupations.



Joan Jonas, *Mirror Piece I*, 1969. Performance view, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, 1969.

ON THE OCCASION of Jonas’s serving as the US representative at the Fifty-Sixth Venice Biennale, we

might revise Crimp's argument. We could reframe his notion of a distended temporality to chart what Jonas's work can reveal only belatedly, with desynchronization but one feature of this structural deferral. Jonas herself would seem to have again confirmed the point, for such a reframing would entail a consideration of "how distance alters image and sound," with distance now signaling the dimension of time as much as place. With the critical distance afforded by the passage of nearly fifty years, processes of desynchronization take on new, historiographic import. The delay between appearance and meaning in such work speaks to a mode of historical transmission that we can now name revision.

Revision takes on the significance of both looking backward (re-vision) and forward (as in revising something toward new ends), as well as the artist's sustained engagement with repurposing and rewriting narrative—her own and others'. The logic of revision is not simply retrospective—it does not stem from a critical impulse to narrate history as if in a straight line, subject to conventional notions of influence. Jonas is patently uninterested in autobiographical readings of her art in any case, and the use of the term revision here will not trade on associations with nostalgia. Instead, revision describes an iterative tendency in which the transitional, recursive, poetic, and ritualistic combine to effect a working through of the mechanics of perception and comprehension, simultaneously restoring and anticipating the interests of media.

The question that follows, then, is: How does this work in practice? I'll sketch three modes in which revision functions for the artist (although there are, as all of this would suggest, countless others). They are doubling, drawing, and dogs.

**DOUBLING:** The surfeit of mirrors in Jonas's art surface, resurface, and circulate in excess of whatever media platform she recruits. In 2006, describing her conception of the video monitor, Jonas wrote: "I was always aware of a glass reflective surface." If it seems fair to say that the monitor, particularly in her early video performances, functions as a kind of looking glass, she has deployed mirrors as a closed-circuit technology in their own right. In the performances known as "Mirror Pieces," 1968–71, Jonas used reflective glass to create perceptual loops. These performances recall the references to looking glasses in Borges's *Labyrinths* (an influential text for many artists of Jonas's generation, and one that she has cited in performance), as well as the reflective surfaces deployed by her post-Minimalist contemporaries (Robert Smithson, Robert Morris), while also conjuring the subject of narcissism, both as a trope of pathologized femininity and as a term that, via Rosalind Krauss's 1976 analysis, has become inextricable from the contemporary understanding of video art. But the implications of the mirror for Jonas go beyond what it represents as a specific object, especially as we move beyond the early part of her career toward the present. What the mirror does as an instrument—the kind of work it performs—has been the very motor of revision in her art. This is the work of doubling, and it is not limited to the material forms of mirrors, or any material, for that matter, so much as it is a gesture of self-production and proliferation.

Doubling encompasses the breadth of Jonas's media and motifs, working both within the space of individual works and across pieces throughout time. Here one could cite, as a somewhat overdetermined example, the video *Double Lunar Dogs*, 1984. Based on a 1980 performance of the same title, the work is a fragmented sci-fi tale replete with doubles, from various split-screen symmetries to a Bergmanesque pair of characters (played by Jonas and Jill Kroesen) whose painted renderings of each other's faces might be mistaken for self-portraits. Unlike reflection, which suggests a relationship between an original object and its identical secondary (or virtual) manifestation, or conjures metaphysical associations of an autonomous selfhood, doubling need not entail exact resemblance, does not carry such hierarchical connotations, and extends to the notion of sound as well as vision. It is an uncanny act, heightening the sense of the replaying of time, of temporal return, such that stable notions of origin—whether place-

bound or historically fixed—are perpetually recalibrated. In the twenty-four-minute video *I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)*, 1976, twenty-five vignettes move from inside to outside, from a vista in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where the artist has long spent her summers, to the enclosed space of a television studio. Back and forth and back we go, from windswept fields and waves to interior shots that resemble what critic Susan Morgan calls “a manipulated still life, a little theater of the mind.”<sup>4</sup> Among the most charged images in the work are those of the video monitors installed in the enclosed interior. Like mirrors, they redouble the image of that space—a space that, in its function as a TV studio, is devoted to the propagation of images across time and distance. Props such as cones (resembling wizards’ hats, as it happens) are set out and restaged in the studio, changing from one vignette to another. Along the way, two dogs, twinned canine avatars (whose white coats suggest a distinctly lunar effulgence), appear and reappear, like totem animals abetting the re-creation of these scenes.

Flash forward to the late 1990s. Jonas has produced three versions of a video installation called *My New Theater*. She has made new theaters, three times over that restage a number of elements, themes, and locations from previous works. Among these are a traditional step dancer from Cape Breton (*My New Theater I: Tap Dancing*, 1997), a dance performed by Jonas and a dog jumping through a hoop (*My New Theater II: Big Mirror*, 1998), and explorations of site, outdoors and in, from Cape Breton to the studio (*My New Theater III: In the Shadow of a Shadow*, 1999). Each iteration is organized around a “portable video theater,” a wooden structure that the artist describes as a “squared-off cone shape.” Recalling Morgan’s allusion to a “little theater,” each of these wooden forms encases, and dwarfs, a video monitor, creating a sense of uncanny miniaturization. *My New Theater* represents the artist’s “desire to continue to perform, but in situations that did not always require a physical presence.” So instead of her actual presence, we get her double or virtual substitute in the form of an on-screen Jonas (playing the role of a woman in black), or the step dancer, or another female dancer. And located in the gallery in front of the conical theaters—both mediating devices and sculptural objects in the viewer’s actual space—are “little props that refer to the context of the video,” like a rabbit or an owl figurine.<sup>5</sup> Here Jonas has given us the theater and its double—as if to suggest that the representational frame of the proscenium simply redoubles a framing inherent in vision itself.



Joan Jonas, *Double Lunar Dogs*, 1984, 16 mm transferred to video, color, sound, 24 minutes 4 seconds. Photo: Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

**DRAWING:** Drawing doubles, and is doubled, throughout Jonas’s work, functioning as a pivotal mode of revision and transmission, such as when she draws for the video monitor. When Jonas draws and redraws

as performance, whether broad circles or conical shapes, faces or dogs or astronomical bodies, she cuts through our assumptions about the image—its transmission and comprehensibility in the present tense—just as surely as when she desynchronizes recorded image and sound. And the correlation between drawing and writing as modes of graphic inscription further underscores the narrative or poetic dimensions of her work, as that which unfolds in, and folds back on, time.

An artist colleague of mine once said that if he were forced to limit his teaching to two practices, those practices would be drawing and video. He was implicitly suggesting what Jonas's work effectively performs: that these tools of representation, one age-old, the other of recent vintage, might cover the bases for capturing space, time, narrative, and movement. In Jonas's case, the use of a blackboard as her perennial drawing surface furthers this sense of doubling. Unlike paper, the blackboard encourages revision through erasure, while recalling principles of demonstration associated with teaching and learning. Erasure itself is as important in Jonas's work as the act of making marks in chalk. Discussing the representation of one of the props in *My New Theater III*, Jonas notes: "I draw on a blackboard the wooden deer over and over, erasing, drawing and later editing to make the drawing jump, disappear, and reassemble itself. This has been an ongoing concern; how the act of drawing in performance for an audience or for the camera alters the image or the impulse. The drawing passes through the medium. I look for reasons to include this act. This is another metaphor for the work itself."<sup>6</sup>

DOGS: Drawing "passes through the medium" of video and performance as a kind of vector; the artist's body also serves as a vehicle that figures a sense of perpetual, or recursive, transmission. What else—who else—performs this revision? Jonas's wide-ranging investigations invite diverse collaborators equal to the scope of her vision: musicians, artists, dancers, performers, poets, and storytellers. For all the talents of these interlocutors, the delay between one register of perception and another will find an especially cherished, four-legged analogue in Jonas's steadiest companions: dogs.

What to do with all those dogs? We don't typically take dogs in art that seriously. (The late Robert Rosenblum was the notable exception.) Yet if we scour the writing on Jonas's milieu, we find that the animals turn up often as agents of sociability, even of collaboration. They will be occasional actors populating early narratives of SoHo, bolstering that neighborhood's romantic associations of bohemian communalism. (Consider Glaza, "art dog" and denizen of both 112 Greene Street and the restaurant Food.) Or they might stand in for a more recent generation of artists, eavesdropping on exchanges with friends (as with a glamorous poodle named Jacob, whose mistress is the painter R. H. Quaytman).<sup>7</sup> They're everywhere in Jonas's circles, as they're everywhere in her art. The dogs redouble as they are drawn throughout the arc of her career. Sappho, Zina, Ozu: Each of Jonas's canine companions will take its place as a four-legged mascot for the artist's decisively nonhieratic (some might even say posthumanist) attitude toward her collaborators.

As far back as the 1972 performance *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, a drawing of a dog appears. The drawing is a kind of Platonic form of the canine species—long, vulpine ears, pointed snout—save for its curious eyes: one light colored, one dark. In one version of the performance, the dog is rendered that much more uncanny when Jonas draws its eyes twice, one pair superimposed on the other but slightly off-register. The image recalls stop-motion photography (think of Man Ray's 1922 portrait of the spectacularly eccentric Marchesa Casati, with her wild, doubled eyes drawn in kohl), as if to represent the act of the animal looking, glancing, darting. This double vision seems less about an inability to fix the gaze than an attempt to provide multiple foci or points of view over and against time.

White, pointy-eared dogs like the one in *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* will show up repeatedly as both

drawn image and Jonas's "animal helper"—as with Zina in *My New Theater III*. More recently, a white poodle named after a vanguard Japanese director has appeared in Jonas's work, venturing with the artist into new-media terrain: namely, the ubiquitous GoPro camera. In 2014's *Beautiful Dog*, for example, Ozu collaborates with Jonas on-site—in her summer haunt, Cape Breton.

Given its many appearances throughout her career, you would think that the artist knew this landscape intimately. And you might think of the presence of the seascape more generally in her work as formative for her earliest, desynchronized investigations, such as *Jones Beach Piece* and *Delay Delay*. If those landscapes are a point of departure, however, they are also a point of return. Indeed, with a GoPro strapped around his collar, Ozu virtually "redraws" the scene as only a dog running on a beach on a summer day can. Perception is rendered exuberant and embodied as the canine auteur paws the ground. Sky and sea refuse an easy parting of ways; vision acquires a new vantage point, on four feet. In Jonas's work, if with a dog's collaboration, the world is revised, always to begin again.

Joan Jonas's exhibition "They Come to Us Without a Word," presented by the MIT List Visual Arts Center and curated by Ute Meta Bauer and United States Pavilion Commissioner Paul C. Ha, is on view at the 56th Venice Biennale through Nov. 22.

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#### NOTES

1. Douglas Crimp, "De-synchronization in Joan Jonas's Performances," in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Berkeley: University Art Museum, University of California, 1983), 8.
2. Joan Jonas, "Space Movement Time," in Joan Jonas, eds. Anna Daneri and Cristina Natalicchio (Milan: Edizioni Charta, 2007), 50.
3. For example, see my "Bare Lives," in *X-Screen: Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s*, ed. Matthias Michalka (Cologne: Walther König, 2004), 70–89.
4. Susan Morgan, *Joan Jonas: I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)* (London: Afterall Books, 2006), 3.
5. Joan Jonas, "My New Theater" (1997), in *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation 1968–2000*, ed. Johann-Karl Schmidt (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), 135.
6. *Ibid.*, 140.
7. R. H. Quaytman, "Joan Jonas," Interview, December 2014/January 2015, [interviewmagazine.com/art/joan-jonas](http://interviewmagazine.com/art/joan-jonas).