

# Joan Jonas Movements



*Movements* is a tool designed by DHC/ART Education to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in *Joan Jonas: From Away*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, DHC/ART educators intend to inspire dialogue about the exhibition and encourage visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes through their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these traveling concepts<sup>1</sup> are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

*Movements* also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body—its senses and its movements—as much as the intellect. The body's physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilizes our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed—mind and body—in DHC/ART exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

1. BAL, Mieke (2001). "Concept". *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

# Context: *Female Subjectivity*



Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, Performance at the Galleria Toselli, Milan, Italy, 1973. Photo by Giorgio Colombo.

*The first thing I do is make a space for myself; I claim it for myself and I move in that space*<sup>2</sup>.

## Joan Jonas

In her recent study of contemporary women fiction writers, Radha Chakravarty details what she refers to as a historical 'double move': in appropriating the written word, women storytellers marked their entry into the public sphere, securing a space for themselves in the mainstream while simultaneously challenging the male canon. She suggests that "[i]n this double move lies the potential for theorizing subjectivity, demonstrating how the very grounds for subjectivity-as-subjection...can provide the springboard to the acquisition of subjectivity-as-voice/agency, as a mode of female self-empowerment"<sup>3</sup>. Chakravarty goes on to describe a concept of freedom based on "[...] fluid subjectivities with porous borders. The emphasis tends to be on intersubjectivity, connectedness, or collectivity [...]. Subjectivity, hence, emerges here as a concept embedded in notions of interrelatedness"<sup>4</sup>. These same notions also shape her 'multiple perspective' analysis, which not only considers representations of female subjectivity, but also the subjectivity of the author, the reader, and the structures of the text itself<sup>5</sup>.

A parallel can be made between the 'double move' in the literary world and Joan Jonas's own artistic trajectory. This, both in the climate in which she emerged as an interdisciplinary artist in the male-dominated art world of the 1960s and 70s, as well as her forays into self-intertextuality through video, whereby she revisits and references her previous works in the creation of new ones. As she explains, "New technology gave women a new way of expression. [...]. This was a time of women talking, becoming more open, sharing how they were represented, revealing their position. My work developed against this background; I became involved in the roles women play"<sup>6</sup>.

Chakravarty's descriptions of fluid, inter-subjectivities provide an equally relevant framework when we consider specific strategies Jonas has employed in her ongoing explorations of ritual, narrative, and identity. The connections Jonas makes between her own embodied experiences and those of others—be they alter egos, mythological female protagonists, performers, students, or 'readers'—have been a constant in her practice. Her use of closed circuit video in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), for example, was an extension of her earlier use of mirrors as tools for examining and representing herself and the spaces she claims. This reflection, or transmission, also created revealing, if not self-conscious moments for her audiences as they were invited to look at her, look at her looking, or look at themselves looking. Incorporating masks and other objects, Jonas addresses key concepts of authenticity and artifice through a fragmentation of images, time, and, in turn, her own personas (including 'Organic Honey', her masked alter ego). She states, "I attempted to fashion a dialogue between my different disguises and the fantasies they suggested. I always kept in touch with myself through the monitor. I was never separated from my own exposure"<sup>7</sup>. Thus Jonas's reflexive engagement with technology not only facilitates these dialogues, these stories, it creates the very opportunities for us to respond to their myriad voices.

*Name other artists that you think have made a 'double move' throughout history to now. How might intersectional feminisms and critical art histories shape our understanding of such a move in a contemporary context?*

*What are some ways that inter-subjectivity shapes the perception and expression of our unique selves? What works in the exhibition do you think demonstrate your examples?*

2. FARIA, Oscar (2005). "Joan Jonas: anything but the theatre." Vector, no.2 (July). Online. [http://www.virose.pt/vector/x\\_02/jonas\\_e.html](http://www.virose.pt/vector/x_02/jonas_e.html)  
3. CHAKRAVARTY, Radha (2007). *Feminism and Contemporary Women Writers: Rethinking Subjectivity*. New Delhi/London: Routledge, 14–15.  
4. *Ibid.*, 18.  
5. *Ibid.*, 15.  
6. ELIZABETH A. SACKLER CENTER FOR FEMINIST ART (2016). "Joan Jonas". Online. [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/feminist\\_art\\_base/joan-jonas](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/feminist_art_base/joan-jonas).  
7. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART (2016). Joan Jonas. "Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy". MoMA Multimedia. Online. <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/47/959>.

# Content: *Nature*



Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2012, performance at Hangar Bicocca, Milan, Italy, Light Time Tales, 2014. Photo by Moira Ricci.

*Where the glacier meets the sky, the land ceases to be earthly, and the earth becomes one with the heavens; no sorrows live there anymore, and therefore joy is not necessary; beauty alone reigns there, beyond all demands*<sup>8</sup>.

**Halldór Laxness**

The beauty of nature is called upon in much of Joan Jonas's work. This is beauty that is beyond words, beyond definition, or as Laxness states above, beyond demands. Along with its beauty, the force of nature is ever present in Jonas's art production. She calls our attention to the fluidity and rhythm of the natural world, with its sounds, movements and textures. At times nature is strong and overpowering, as in *Wind* (1968); other times, we are awestruck by its sublime quality, as in *Glacier* (2010). But beyond simply referring to nature, its force and its beauty, Jonas's engagement with the natural environment and the animals that inhabit it is paramount to many of her works.

This is most poignant in *They Come to Us Without a Word* (2015), where spaces are dedicated to bees, fish, the ocean, and the wind. In this work, Jonas addresses the very present danger of climate change and the

extinction of numerous animal species. One of Jonas's inspirations for this work is John Berger's influential text, "Why Look at Animals?" from 1980, in which he discusses the evolving relationship between humans and animals throughout history. In reference to this text, Jonas states: "I think of the honeybee and how it functions, building combs, pollinating flowers, making honey, and dancing in order to communicate to the bees of the colony [...]. Bees are in trouble, as we all know. We depend on their existence"<sup>9</sup>.

Jonas taps into our relationships with both animals and nature in her theatrical choreographies. In *Reanimation* (2012), she transforms into a fox with a mask and a gesture. With a series of movements, fluid and agile, she becomes the animal interacting with its environment, as images of Icelandic landscapes are projected onto its body – onto her body. In this way, she also becomes the landscape, connecting with the ice, glaciers, mountains, and volcanoes that inspire this work, as outlined in Laxness' poetic description above.

Perhaps, as Laxness suggests, we do not need sorrow, nor do we need joy. Perhaps the earth and the sky are indeed one. Perhaps all we need is the honeybee, the fish, the wind, and the ocean, offering us a sublime and transcendental beauty. This is what we must strive to protect. Should we become one with these natural elements, as Jonas does, and as Laxness suggests, our prospects might look brighter.

*Nature has been a popular subject matter for artists throughout history. Through painting, drawing, photography, and installation, artists have explored many different views of the natural world (for example, nature as wild, tame, sublime, beautiful, overpowering). How would you situate Jonas's practice in this long tradition?*

*In "Why Look at Animals?" John Berger writes: "In the last two centuries, animals have disappeared. Today we live without them." What do you think of this statement?*

8. LAXNESS, Halldór (1969 [1940]). *World Light*. Translated from Icelandic by Magnus Magnusson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.  
9. JONAS, Joan (2015). "'Why Look at Animals?' by John Berger. *Five Artists, Five Book Reviews*". The New York Times Sunday Book Review, June 25 edition. Online. [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/25/books/review/five-artists-five-book-reviews.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/25/books/review/five-artists-five-book-reviews.html?_r=0).

# Composition: *Gesture*



Joan Jonas, *Lines in the Sand*, performance at Documenta XI, Kassel, Germany, 2002. Photo by Werner Maschmann.

*The real artist, then, is someone who lives in “renunciation of reason and the unconditional surrender in and to the gesture”<sup>10</sup>.*

**Vilém Flusser**

Decoding the meaning and references behind gestures has been fundamental to the discipline of art history. Iconographic dictionaries, like Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, listed poses, costumes, and objects, which artists could use as symbols or allegories. Later, art historians like Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky developed iconology, a method that owes a great debt to the various meanings behind gestures and attitudes. The classic example used to explain how iconology functions is to consider the act of tipping one's hat to greet someone on the street. After identifying the elements of the gesture in itself, one *conventionally* interprets the gesture (the person is probably greeting someone during an encounter), after which one can look beyond convention to figure out and juxtapose other meanings to the gesture<sup>11</sup>. Such a system could be applied to Joan Jonas, whose body of work is rich in references to other narratives: gesture is then understood as a movement that symbolizes or enacts meaning(s) in a given piece.

But Jonas's work often goes beyond the referential role of gesture, making it one of the materials of her practice. Gesture is then closer to what Vilém Flusser defines as “ritual”; something “essentially aesthetic—not concerned to change the world or to communicate anything but to ‘act out’ a unique way of being in the world”<sup>12</sup>. In *Wind* (1968), for example, the gesture is carried out by the performers who are reacting to the force of the elements applied to their bodies; other videos, like *Street Scene with Chalk* (1976/2008/2010) or *Vertical Roll* (1972), are deployed with a similar interest in ritualizing the gesture.

Much of Jonas's work is performance-based and therefore subject to ephemerality. For two decades, the artist has taken this opportunity to reinterpret her gestures using different apparatuses and technologies. Gestures are reappraised through what Jonas identifies as translation, considered as “a migration among forms”, the “transfers [of] content from one form to another, creating dynamic correspondences among different aspects of her art”<sup>13</sup>. Gestures are then understood not just as symbols or as rituals, but as forms to be constantly reappropriated by the artist and her audience. This echoes W.J.T. Mitchell's thought: “Perhaps gesture is best understood as the moment when thought becomes visible, tangible, or palpable, staged and framed as form—something to be held and to hold us in mutual prehension”<sup>14</sup>.

*W.J.T. Mitchell continues: “What will philosophy become when a thought, an argument, a system can be framed as a citable gesture, held out to the beholder in the signing space of the human body?”<sup>15</sup>. Following this, could the same question be asked of art? What can art become if (and when) it is thought of outside of logocentrism and through the body?*

*Identify some gestures that are recurrent in Jonas's oeuvre. How do you relate to them with your own body? What do these gestures suggest/refer to? How do you understand their symbolic, ritual, or formal components?*

10. ROTH, Nancy Ann (2014). “Mira Schendel's Gesture: On Art in Vilém Flusser's Thought, with ‘Mira Schendel’ by Flusser”. *Tate Papers*, n° 21 (spring). Online. <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/21/mira-schendels-gesture-on-art-in-vilem-flussers-thought-with-mira-schendel-by-flusser>.

11. HOLLY, Michael Ann (1985). *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 40–41.

12. ROTH, Nancy Ann. Op. cit..

13. WILLIAMS, Robin Kathleen (2015). “A Mode of Translation: Joan Jonas's Performance Installations”. *Stedelijk Studies*, vol. 3. Online. <http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/a-mode-of-translation-joan-jonass-performance-installations/>.

14. MITCHELL, W.J.T. (2002). “Utopian Gestures”. *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*. Volume 2. Berkeley: University of California Press, XXI.

15. Ibid.

# Considerations: *Ghost*



Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us without a Word* (still), 2015.

*One can be one's own ghost and roam about in various places, sometimes many places simultaneously, [...] a ghost is always a result of botched work, a ghost means an unsuccessful resurrection*<sup>16</sup>.

## Halldór Laxness

Such as Laxness conceives of the ghostly, for his part Derrida considers the ghost in an articulation of the following existential desire: *"I would like to learn to live finally"*. According to Derrida, this learning to live doesn't happen from life but, rather, "[o]nly from the other and by death. In any case from the other at the edge of life". This implies learning *"to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship (...) of ghosts. (...) And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations"*<sup>17</sup>.

Joan Jonas's video *Vertical Roll* (1972) captures details of a performance during which she carries out a series of movements as both herself and as her alter ego 'Organic Honey', an "erotic electronic seductress". In creating the video, the artist desynchronized the monitor's transmission and reception signal, thereby provoking a technological glitch; the resulting images travel in vertical spasms, resting at the bottom the screen only to bounce back towards the top. This results in a dislocation of the filmed body;

hands, stomach, face, and legs all simultaneously reflect disappearance/appearance, absence/presence, falling/persisting. These effects confer upon the figure a spectral quality, suspended between life and death. Seeing this ghostly, frenetic black and white space as a mirror of herself (and this other, 'Organic Honey'), Jonas refuses to simply endure it—instead she plays with it, hitting wooden blocks to the rhythm of the moving images, or jumping above the lines that separate them. It is thus through this active and playful statement that Jonas proposes that learning to live indeed happens "from the other at the edge of life"<sup>18</sup>.

In *They Come to Us Without a Word* (2015), a work that expresses a profound ecological consciousness, Jonas explores the natural elements and our relationship to them. For example, one element of the work reveals the extraordinary world of bees and their gradual disappearance, while another allows us to hear fragments of ghost stories that are still to this day shared amongst some Cape Bretoners. In this work, the artist plays with layered projections, and children manipulate various shapes of paper in order to emphasize, isolate, or move certain details of the projected elements, thus creating spaces and a temporality that are interrupted, kaleidoscopic. In doing so, Jonas opens up possible confluences between past and present, and thus multiple possibilities for "being-with specters".

*In They Come to Us Without a Word, Jonas enables all sorts of phantom presences to express themselves. In doing so, in what ways does she enter into dialogue with Derrida's assertion that learning to live happens in the companionship of ghosts?*

*Inspired by myriad ritual practices, Jonas maintains an animist connection to the objects in her works. In what ways does this counter the relationships to objects more commonly held in capitalist societies?*



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16. LAXNESS, Halldór (2005 [1968]). *Under the Glacier*. New York: Vintage / Random House, 25.

17. DERRIDA, Jacques (2006). *Spectres de Marx : l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*. Paris: Galilée, 14–15.

18. Ibid.