

# DRAWING MY WAY IN

## Joan Jonas in conversation with Bonnie Marranca and Claire MacDonald

**T**rained as a sculptor, Joan Jonas has been a pioneering force in video and performance for more than four decades. Early on she explored the use of live camera during performance and incorporated drawing as part of the process, and for the last two decades she has made installations featuring video, objects, photographs, and drawings. In recent years, the artist's work has been shown at WACK! Art and Feminist Revolution, the fifty-third Venice Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art, and DOCUMENTA. Since 2005, Jonas has worked with the innovative musician and composer Jason Moran to develop pieces with live music, namely *The Shape*, *the Scent*, *the Feel of Things at DIA: Beacon*, and *Reanimation*, seen during the recent *Performa 13*. A retrospective of her work will open at Milan's *HangarBicocca* in September, accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue, edited by Joan Simon, entitled *In the Shadow a Shadow*. This interview was conducted by PAJ editor, Bonnie Marranca, and PAJ Contributing Editor and UK writer, Claire MacDonald, in New York City, September 7, 2010, and for *Reanimation*, December 20, 2013.

MARRANCA: What seems ongoing from many of the earliest pieces, over four decades, is the practice of drawing in performance, and on so many surfaces. Drawing while holding a blackboard in front of you, sometimes not even looking, drawing projected before the audience, drawing on sand, drawing on your face. Can we begin by speaking about the place of drawing in your work?

JONAS: I am a visual artist. Drawing was important to me before I stepped into performance. I was interested in how to draw and what to draw. When I started doing performance I saw that it could be a place for drawing in a new way. I became interested in what it was to draw in front of an audience and to draw while I was being witnessed. I also make drawings in my studio that are autonomous, but I felt like what I was exploring was how to make a drawing in relation to the particular performance that I was working on, which meant how to make it in relation to the technology or to the subject or the space.

MACDONALD: Visual artists have always been educated through drawing. I want to ask you about your own education. When did drawing start? How important was it as a way of thinking?

JONAS: It started when I was a child. It was very important. Recently, I've been looking at all these drawings from the fourth grade.

MACDONALD: Did you keep them?

JONAS: Oh yes. I am doing something in Norway, and I just found this notebook with a cartoon-like narrative about the Vikings, made in the fourth grade. I'm thinking about using it in Norway. I went to a progressive school in the kindergarten and first grade—the Walt Whitman School on East 78th Street. They said, "What do you want to do today?" and I said, "I just want to paint." I enjoyed that. Children draw naturally.

MACDONALD: Was drawing absolutely essential to that education, as it was for Rudolf Steiner and Waldorf education? Was it drawing from observation?

JONAS: No, it wasn't from observation. Later I went to a school called Brearley, a girl's school. They had art classes there. Art was very important to me early, and I went back to it later.

MARRANCA: But then you ended up at the university studying sculpture.

JONAS: Yes, I studied sculpture, art history, and literature. After that when I went to The Museum School in Boston I focused on drawing. In a way, you have to learn how you are going to draw.

MACDONALD: What does it mean to learn to draw?

JONAS: For me, specifically, I studied with an artist named Harold Tovish. His way of teaching how to draw was to meticulously follow the outer contour of the figure. Not to make a typical art school rendering. At The Museum School we were working from the model. It was about the line and how to depict what one saw. I draw a lot because it's a matter of practice and repetition and development on a flat surface or in space.

MACDONALD: One of the things that interests me about the history of drawing is how central it is to certain performance practices, and, yet, how certain other people have never drawn. Choreographers have used notation but never really drawn. Is that a different way of thinking than what you're describing, where you've learned to work through the line as an approach?

JONAS: I was looking at the world close at hand and asking how I could represent this experience. Later on, because I was interested in ritual, when I began to do performance I read about other cultures and rituals and observed how drawing functioned as ritual. I experienced drawing in performance as a ritual. I thought of what I did in performance as a kind of present-day ritual. It was important that anyone in a particular culture could learn that ritual and make that drawing. I thought about drawing from that point of view. I am very interested also in art by the mentally

unstable. The work of Wölfli and the art in the Prinzhorn collection has interested me a lot. Wölfli wasn't in the Prinzhorn Collection, but his work is an example of that kind of work. Elaborate cosmologies. Obsessional. Also, I started using blackboards because I was interested in the way we begin, as children. I always thought drawing should be part of a practice for children, like reading and writing.

MACDONALD: What did you draw with at first? Chalk?

JONAS: Yes, pencil, chalk, and paint.

MACDONALD: These are very simple questions, but they interest me because of Deanna Petherbridge's book on the history of drawing. What is it that people learn to draw with? Is the pen still drawing? Is the brush still drawing?

JONAS: Oh yes, definitely. It's about the line. I see it all as drawing with different instruments. I don't call anything I do "painting." I make drawings with paint.

MACDONALD: Do you think there has been, within your generation, specific approaches to drawing that one could put in a historical context? Did drawing go through some big change?

JONAS: There is always transformation and change. When I was beginning, in the fifties, many of the artists I knew made drawings that were more or less diagrams and very abstract.

MACDONALD: Diagrams were such an integral part of art in the 1950s. That has been an important part of your work, as well. The grid, the diagram, the cone.

JONAS: I was making sculpture and my friends were all artists, especially sculptors, and I followed that kind of work closely. Like Sol LeWitt. I also explored the use of the grid in the drawings of a New Guinea tribe. In their *Book of the Dead*, they used a grid to make a looping drawing in the sand. I used it in *Organic Honey*. It was the perfect performative drawing that one can make in a performance.

MARRANCA: I know in your books some things are referred to as "drawings," some are "performance drawings," now you are saying "performative drawing." Is there a distinction between these terms?

JONAS: Performance and performative refer in different ways to an action. For instance, there are the dog heads I draw that are portraits of my dogs. They are elaborate. I don't make them the same way in performances. I cannot spend time perfecting something, and erasing, the way I do sometimes in my studio work. I am interested in an act and how it becomes a gesture, or in its relationship to the medium. Then it becomes performative. But I do call the drawings made in performance "performance drawings."

MACDONALD: Are they always the same when they are repeated in these cultures?

JONAS: Yes. You learn to do it.

MARRANCA: When you prepare to do a performance will you make many drawings ahead of time and have a sense of what you want to do in the performance? Do you duplicate some of those? Are drawings in the performance more intuitive? It's difficult to see, as a viewer, what is spontaneous and what is prepared.

JONAS: In the ones in the *Reading Dante* piece, for instance, there are lots of things that look like scribbles, where I am trying to draw the outlines of shadows that are moving in the video projection. In a way, that is spontaneous, but it is always the same exercise. I am always trying to do the same drawing. They are related but scribbly looking. I practice beforehand. I always prepare. I never make a drawing in my performance that I haven't made before. Also in *Reading Dante* I draw over black and white footage of an improvisation at night in the downtown Wall Street district that was shot in 1976. In that case, I was drawing and erasing on a chalkboard the image of which was superimposed over the video footage. I was making a drawing that directly relates to the images that it overlays.

MARRANCA: You don't make a drawing in the performance you've never made before it, as a form of practice? It's like a pianist who practices a piece for hours every day and then goes to a concert and plays.

JONAS: Yes. I practice drawing on different levels.

MARRANCA: You started talking about learning from drawing. Do you learn from each piece? Is there a certain kind of problem that you solve through drawing? If so, what did you learn from *Dante* that you didn't know in *Lines in the Sand*?

JONAS: It's not that I learn something. I experience something new. I can make another drawing in a new way. Like drawing over a moving film image—I am interested in that. I can do that again with another image, another film, with black and white, but also with color.

MACDONALD: We haven't talked very much about repetition. Is that how preparation becomes something else? You prepare, you practice, you repeat. You practice, you prepare, you repeat again. What you are actually materializing is never the same.

JONAS: That's why it's similar to ritual in which something is known and not known. As far as repetition, people are always asking—What does that mean? I enjoy making the same drawing over and over again, and having it change. In the thirty-minute sequence of drawing on the blackboard in *Mirage*, you see me drawing stars over and over again. I was fascinated with the hopscotch number system and got involved with connecting the numbers in different ways.

MACDONALD: Going back to the history of drawing and how we learn to draw, a received idea about drawing is its originality. Its likeness to something. You are really talking about a different trajectory.

JONAS: I can't draw like a classical artist. For example, Botticelli or Ingres, whose drawings I love. No way. Even if I draw from life as part of my practice. It takes a huge amount of skill and practice. I am continuously exploring new situations and ways of drawing in relation to video and the space of performance that result in images that surprise me in the way they relate to the text or the content of the project.

MARRANCA: Is the image just another surface for narration? There is so much going on, even in the way the text is published for *Lines in the Sand*. There are three tracks: the sound, the action, and the text. I've always wondered whether the drawing is almost a form of dramatic action. I know that is not exactly the right word—"performance" action? Is it a gesture towards a performance act? Does it move the narrative forward? I don't mean a linear narrative. But how is drawing related to the rhythm and movement of a performance work?

JONAS: More and more I have been able to work on my movements. In the beginning, it was more like one thing after another and I walked from one gesture to the next. Now the pieces flow in a different way. The drawing becomes part of the general movement. I've always made little dances, working with props, music, space, and content as inspiration.

First of all, there is the idea of scale. I can make large drawings on a board or even larger ones on the floor. The audience can see that. I can also make small drawings for the camera that can be seen in the video projections. Drawing for me is a visual language. In *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* I made large drawings with paint of a snake, which is my way of relating to the text. I can't translate into words the meaning of my drawings. I take motifs from the content of the text. In *Lines in the Sand* I draw a pyramid because of the Egyptian reference. With chalk I drew the pyramid and the sphinx over and over again.

MARRANCA: When you made the drawing in the sand, then you moved into dance. Into movement.

JONAS: Yes, drawing involves the body moving in different ways in space. I made a video for *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* on the beach in Canada, recording the lines I made with a stick in the sand as I ran. I wove curves while referring to snake-like patterns.

MARRANCA: Drawing becomes a kind of performance as a form of speech. Is drawing a form of automatic writing then, or is it more intuitive?

JONAS: In *Mirage*, there is a series of images that are like signs. I made one drawing and followed it with another, like frames in a film. For the series of blackboard drawings that became an animated video in the *Dante* installation at the Yvon Lambert gallery, I was drawing a pagoda-like structure over and over again, as well as depictions of Dante's universe altering them, and continuously changing them into something else by drawing and erasing. I didn't do exactly that in *Mirage* in the blackboard drawings. There it was a series of images, one after the other.

MARRANCA: Why is there so much drawing in *Reading Dante*?

JONAS: I've just become so obsessed with drawing.

MARRANCA: Why, do you think?

JONAS: Because I am getting older. I like the idea that I can do something that doesn't have to be an elaborate performance. I made a lot of drawing in *Reading Dante*, just on the side. Images that came out of his ideas, like planets, spirals, and animals. I became interested in the structure of his universe—a spiral-like, cone-shaped form that extended down into the earth as well as into the sky. Now, I'm drawing more and more.

MARRANCA: Your work seems to be moving more into the realm of something that is commonly talked about now, between theatre and art. Of all the performance artists I can think of, your work seems the most theatrical in a sense of the costumes and masks and the interest in text. What I want to ask you is, is it possible to speak of your work in terms of performance technique? It's not something that one usually talks about with a visual artist but rather with a theatre artist.

JONAS: I couldn't describe a technique except to say that I think very much of how I move, that it be economical in the way that I perform a task and then move from one thing to another. The result is that you use your body, arm, or hand in relation to drawing. My performance technique started out in the 1960s with a task-oriented approach influenced by the Happenings. Then it developed and became more elaborate in relation to props and objects, media and space. Props and objects added another dimension to the language. From the very beginning, I've been interested in a layering of all the elements of a performance—text, objects, media, sound, and movement. This all has to be constructed with the idea of having a unified concept and experience. It is in a sense the way the brain works. I conceive in terms of the visual image, continuously constructing and moving from one to the next.

My idea of layering came when I began to work with different spaces of perception. For instance, by using a large mirror in a performance as a prop carried by the performer one could see the real image of the performer simultaneously with reflections in the mirror moving in space. At the same time I was doing my outdoor works in the landscape I was working with perception of movement and forms in the distance and at different intervals from the audience. Then in my video performance, in which the audience saw simultaneously the live performance with a detail of that live performance projected, I began to think of juxtaposing different images and time sequences. These examples were obvious layerings in space.

MACDONALD: I think of choreography and marking the stage.

JONAS: I think of figures moving in space, definitely. I just did one of my early mirror pieces from 1970 in the Guggenheim in June. I really found it interesting. I didn't have any score, I just had a few photographs. I took all the images from



*Reading Dante II*, Performing Garage, 2009.



*The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, DIA: Beacon, 2007. Photo: Danny Bauer.

that performance and I made up other movements. I had seventeen students from Hunter College. It really interested me to choreograph this piece again. The way I choreographed it now was rather different from the way I choreographed it the first time. I was very interested in having this complex flow of mirrors and reflections and bodies. I look at films a lot and I see the way people move in films. Before I started doing performances myself I looked at Giacometti, sculptures of figures moving through a space in a city, or else paintings in which figures are standing in a certain space, like Piero della Francesca. I was also inspired by the films of Busby Berkeley, although this might not be evident.

MACDONALD: How did you work with the seventeen students this time? Did you draw a score?

JONAS: What I did was set up improvisations and had them move through them, beginning, for instance, with two pairs here, two pairs there, and two pairs in another place, then having everybody exchange positions while moving the mirrors in different ways. It was always the same, but always a little different. Then I drew pictures and diagrams of all the different set-ups, like a score. I also used many configurations from the original performance.

MACDONALD: Do you think the gesture of young people now is different? Is the body making shapes differently in an intuitive way?

JONAS: I think that because I'm different, this was different.

MARRANCA: That's fascinating—the idea of having people move around and drawing pictures of that. I'm thinking of Robert Wilson's visual book. He'll draw the whole production first, scene by scene, and the actors will begin to work in silence. Do you think your particular procedure is unique, in terms of a visual artist working with improvisation in a more actorly way? That's why I asked about performance technique. You never hear people from visual arts talk about techniques or methodologies. Everything is conceived of as an act, a task, or movement.

JONAS: I think it comes from all those different things because I'm a visual artist who performs. I'm very aware of how I'm moving and where I am in the picture. I have to be in shape when I do a performance. I have to exercise. My body has to feel a certain way. I've always been involved in swimming, walking, and running.

I was always influenced by the structure of film. It has been important for me to look at the way filmmakers frame a scene and have people move through a space. The way I actually work is, I make up a movement, and then I sometimes show it to someone else. I don't have a picture of it beforehand. With these mirror pieces, as in other works, I develop a movement and show it to the performers and have them imitate me. They would do it slightly differently.

MACDONALD: That's why I ask about working with the gesture of young people now and working with your own gesture and movement. It's interesting how the



body is informed and then how the informed body passes that on. It is a dance practice, what you're describing. To create a phrase and make it on somebody directly.

JONAS: I hardly ever work with dancers. These are all young art students. So they're a little bit like me. Untrained. But they have a kind of grace. However, there are always some dancers.

MARRANCA: How long do you rehearse with the performers?

JONAS: I rehearsed with them for the mirror piece for a month, a few times a week.

MACDONALD: We talked about the diagrammatic drawing, and the line, and also choreography as drawing. Another abstract idea in drawing, which comes up in American art in the 1950s and 1960s, is the idea of the scrawl and scribble. Roland Barthes wrote about it in an essay on Cy Twombly. He talked about gauche writing. I see that in your work, as well.

JONAS: That came up when I choreographed movement sequences for the Robert Ashley piece *Celestial Excursions*, while I was drawing to his music. I liked the idea, in that situation, to just scribble. I became interested in scribble drawings. I could just scribble in time to his music. It inspired me to do that. I do it again in the *Dante* piece, but in relation to an image.

MARRANCA: In the Ashley work, did you develop those scribbles in rehearsals?

JONAS: They can't be the same. I didn't even develop them, I just started making them. The scribble builds up. It starts out with a few lines and then as the page is covered it gets darker. That can be done in relation to the music.

MARRANCA: I wonder if the blank sheet of paper or the blackboard is another variant of the mirror.

JONAS: Maybe. I never thought of it that way, but it is a surface that I project on.

MACDONALD: It's also, even with a scribble, about the poetics of the blank page. In the symbolist poets, such as H.D. and William Carlos Williams, there is always a very visual relationship to the page, isn't there?

JONAS: I like paper. I like to go to the paper stores.

MACDONALD: Is the page a sculptural object as well?

JONAS: I think of paper as having sculptural qualities, especially the big, stiff pieces I sometimes use. They don't collapse. I can draw on them and hold them. Then they can be a surface. I've used them that way. Also, when they became part of a feedback in the video projection the image becomes cubist. Paper itself I find very beautiful. It's hard to put something on a piece of paper. It interests me to struggle

with that. When I am in a performance. although I know the image I will draw I don't worry about it.

MARRANCA: I bought a beautiful leather-bound book of handmade paper in Venice about twenty-five years ago and I could never decide what to start on the first page — what was good enough. I've never used it.

JONAS: I know. That's the problem.

MACDONALD: You have a blank sheet of paper, and then you have to begin. In a sense you've got no option once you're tied into it. You have to do it. There's no other way out.

JONAS: You have to. It is a gesture. It's not about making a precious object. I don't like, in performance, the romantic idea of watching an artist draw. That I try to dispel.

MACDONALD: Is all art post-Cage, then? In the sense that the idea of art becomes totally anti-romantic. That it's about the doing of the work.

JONAS: For me, no. It has something to do with Minimalism and the aesthetics of the dancers in the sixties — anti-romantic. I don't think its just Cage.

MACDONALD: Is it anti-expressive then, as well?

JONAS: I'm not against that. I'm just talking about the idea of the image of the artist at work. The way I crumple paper and throw paper down, that's what I'm talking about — the careless treatment of the drawing. But some of my drawings do end up saved and framed and exhibited. Many of them have been thrown out. I edit them afterwards. In a way, it's too bad. But some are on very cheap paper. Once I included these in an installation and they looked like big pieces of wrinkled lead.

MARRANCA: How do you choose your papers and utensils for different performances? Some things are small pieces of chalk, some are long sticks with chalk on the end. Where do these choices come from?

JONAS: I choose what is practical. The big, black pieces of paper are photographic backdrop paper. It's the biggest paper I can get, but it's not particularly good paper. It's heavy enough and it works in that situation. I've been drawing with sticks for a while because I can make a bigger drawing and I can extend my body with a stick. The sticks are extensions of my body in performance. I can't remember when I started drawing with sticks, but it's a way to lengthen my arm and make a drawing. You can make a drawing on a wall with a stick. Matisse used a stick. It's not an original idea. I choose the stuff that's going to work best. Chalk works well. It's soft. I choose it for its properties. On the paper, magic marker works. I also draw with brush and ink and paint in performances.

MACDONALD: Do you do drawings outside of performance?

JONAS: I do, all the time. I recently made ink drawings in Japan. I drew images of double lunar rabbits. I used a brush with red and white paint in *The Juniper Tree*. I made paintings on silk in the performance and then used them to decorate the set. I was thinking of calligraphy. For the Japanese calligraphy is a performance.

MACDONALD: This takes us to the relationship between drawing and writing. It is writing as drawing.

MARRANCA: Then we need to make the leap between drawing and the creation of the narration, which we touched on earlier. That's very curious and interesting, in terms of the rhythm of a piece, propelling the action some place or stopping it. The drawing and erasing brings you to a liminal state. Is it the drawing that is leading the performance? The idea of the image and the text is fascinating in your work. What part does drawing play in it in terms of the start through the finish of the piece, and how it moves through time and space?

JONAS: The drawings punctuate the piece, in a way. They occur at different moments in it. In *Organic Honey*, the image of the dog, for instance, had a certain reference to the content and it gave you an idea of the animal, although there wasn't a narrative text in that piece. I did make a drawing in the performance, but it was a very simple outline of a dog. Then I had a drawing of my dog made in the studio hanging in the performance like an icon.

In pieces where I start working with stories, for example *The Juniper Tree*, I wanted to produce more drawings. I concentrated on the idea to develop different approaches to drawing in my work. With *The Juniper Tree* it involved painting. There was a boy and a girl in that story, so I chose opposite colors, red and white, the colors of the story—blood and snow, the materials of this fairy tale. I analyze the text and then I find images and motifs to pull out and represent graphically. Once I made a drawing while listening to a William Carlos Williams poem, which starts out “it was a big mirror.” It is a description of a man painting on a mirror. I made the same drawing that he is describing in the text for the video *Big Mirror*.

MACDONALD: Do you think *Organic Honey*, which doesn't have any narrative text, still has literary references?

JONAS: For me it does. Underneath it. In all my early work, for me—but I don't expect other people to know—there is a subtext, which is my reference to myth. Not only to particular stories but also to the idea of myth and how it relates to literature and painting. In painting, there's always a story. I'm talking about the history of painting. From the very early times, paintings have had stories behind them. That interested me. Silent objects that have a story.

*Organic Honey* was really about what it means to be female. I was exploring the idea of whether there is such a thing as female imagery. That was being discussed then in the late sixties and early seventies. For instance, the moon as female.

For the character, *Organic Honey*, I was exploring an erotic persona through costume, gesture, and mask. I had gone to see Jack Smith, who had greatly affected me. He was so different from everything else that was going on at the time. He was much more baroque and that interested me a lot. It gave me inspiration. I wanted to break away from what was going on then in dance. There was an anti-literary stance. People didn't want to deal with literature, but from the very beginning literature was important to me.

MACDONALD: I'd love to talk about that. What kind of literature? I know that poetry is very important.

JONAS: I loved *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and how Joyce used myth in that. I am interested in how myth can be used.

MACDONALD: I was going to refer to that in *Organic Honey*. There's a moment where you step over to the other side of the mirror and the person that emerges, the other person, is someone created out of a fiction.

JONAS: Then I was interested in Cocteau's films, in which the characters went through a mirror to the other side.

MARRANCA: It is very interesting that for a shy person, as I know you've described yourself, myth is a way of not dealing with autobiography.

JONAS: Definitely. I never wanted to deal with autobiography.

MARRANCA: Yet drawing is a very private act that you've given public exposure. You've found masks to create some sort of distance. Drawing in a performance is also a type of distance.

JONAS: A lot of people said to me, in the early days, that when they looked at my performances they felt they were looking into a private world. I didn't consciously make that decision, but I was obviously able to express myself in performance in a way that was impossible for me to do verbally or in any other way. I didn't want to be autobiographical, but I was able to express things that had to do with my inner spirit. I liked strange writers. Djuna Barnes. She wrote *Nightwood*. And the French writers, like Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute.

MACDONALD: I am also wondering about a strange book that was popular in England. It was *Marianne Dreams*, by Catherine Storr, about a girl who has three images: an empty landscape, a house, and a face looking at a window. She draws her way into the world.

JONAS: You'll have to write that down. It sounds great.

MACDONALD: Surrealism is one of your interests, isn't it?



*Organic Honey's Vertical Roll*, Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, 1972. Photo: Roberta Nieman.



*Lines in the Sand*, dOCUMENTA (11), 2002. Photo: Werner Maschmann.

JONAS: I also felt a little bit like I was schizophrenic, but that was because of a book from an English psychologist.

MARRANCA: R.D. Laing?

JONAS: No. I don't recall his name. People were thinking about psychology in a different way then and experimenting with the ideas.

MACDONALD: I think the interest here is not about literature as a narrative but literature as a world into which you step.

JONAS: Right. And you mentioned the big landscape. There was a French feminist—Monique Wittig—who wrote a novel about women warriors. For me, that was perfect—the idea of a big, flat, empty landscape. And the Antonioni films that came out before I started making performances.

MARRANCA: You haven't mentioned Maya Deren. She must have been important.

JONAS: I know it's hard to believe but I didn't see her films until 1976. The ones I first saw were the ones she shot in Haiti. I didn't see her other dance films until later.

MACDONALD: And Borges was published in the 1960s. He provided an informing context, in many ways.

JONAS: Absolutely.

MARRANCA: You mentioned Jack Smith earlier. One can see, especially in *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* and *Reading Dante*, a poetic, visionary cinema of people out in nature, in costumes, dancing—an illusion is created and a sense of freedom.

JONAS: Don't forget that Anthology Film Archives was here and I went several times a week. There was not just Jack Smith. Major effects on me were the early Russian, French, and German films. Vigo and Dovzhenko. As far as filmmaking goes, there was the whole world of Anthology, overlapping the art world.

MARRANCA: It's very interesting, for your generation, how much knowledge of different art forms that you have. I'm sorry to say that a lot of that is gone today because everything is now so focused on the contemporary. It has always seemed to me that your generation used art as a language. That makes the work so much richer.

JONAS: I studied art history in college.

MARRANCA: You also read books, you saw films, you knew dance, you traveled. It is more and more difficult for people to have the money to travel. A lot of people have no concept of a library now and don't buy books. Research has shifted to the realm of the social rather than to the humanities and art and history.

MACDONALD: There were huge social and artistic changes when I was a student around the enormous amount of publishing and translating in the 1960s and 1970s. I went to school in Leeds when I was seventeen and I saw all of those films locally—Antonioni, Pasolini, Fellini, and the Russian and German films. When I see your work, it makes me think of literary and film associations.

MARRANCA: You can go to your work and engage in the history of imagery, like Warburg, the figure at the center of *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, who was involved with the history of images.

JONAS: That's the way I approached Warburg, through his writing about the Hopi Snake Dance, and his experience in the Southwest. Partly because in the sixties I saw the Hopi Snake Dance, and it was a profound experience.

MACDONALD: What about Borges? Was he a lasting influence?

JONAS: I was greatly influenced in the sixties by his references to the mirror. I quoted him. I was very affected by his writing as everybody was. I've gone back to him over and over again. But I could never make a piece out of one of his stories, because he's too particular about a place and time. I love *The Garden of Forking Paths* as a title, even. It relates to the Internet, actually. The infinite library is very contemporary.

MARRANCA: I'm wondering if you're making a case for your work as a "failed" attempt at drawing to approach writing—an existential, philosophical position, as it were.

JONAS: Maybe, because I always think I can't write. Writing for me is very difficult.

MARRANCA: So you keep drawing and drawing and drawing, in the hope that you will approach writing.

JONAS: Yes.

MARRANCA: If you go from the early works of *Organic Honey* and through the middle works, it now seems that there is more drawing. Can you point to works where you got to a different level in drawing or thinking about drawing? What were these transformational moments?

JONAS: They happened in the outdoor works in the late sixties and early seventies when I made large drawings in the landscape and on the ground, while at the same time I began to work with video and made drawings for the camera, the monitor, and the space.

*Organic Honey* was the first piece when I used imagery in that way and where I thought of it as visual language. The idea of telling a story with images. The idea of this endless drawing from New Guinea. I return to earlier ideas. Later on I made many drawings based on Celtic patterns that had a relationship to the Irish epic

*Sweeney Astray*. There are threads. It's hard to answer your question, actually. In all of my work, I develop ideas for drawing, like in *Volcano Saga*, where I made drawings taking images from slides that were projected on the wall one after another in order to construct another image on the page. I drew the same images over and over, but the drawing was always different. I was responding to slides flashing by.

I never did that again. In the last few pieces—*Lines in the Sand*, *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things*, and *Reading Dante*—the scale of the drawing is larger in general, and the pieces are larger. They're more epic, *Sweeney Astray*. There was a whole period where I was copying Irish and Celtic patterns. I didn't show them in my work because it was almost corny, but I enjoyed it. I also tried to copy some of the illuminated manuscripts. Before that, when I started working with narrative—*The Juniper Tree* and *Upside Down and Backwards*—I worked with painting big and bold. I made paintings as backdrops for *Upside Down and Backwards*. I haven't thought to describe them in this way, but definitely my style changed in different periods. For instance, I made dog drawings in the early *Organic Honey*, very rough and black and white. Later on I made colored dog drawings in my studio because I became obsessed with my dog. I was reading about the Celts—there is an obsession with people's heads. I think there is some relationship but I don't know what. The idea that you draw somebody's portrait over and over again was interesting to me.

MARRANCA: How did the changes in drawing impact the performances as you moved through the decades?

JONAS: In the early work when I was using video I was very interested in drawing without looking at the paper, drawing for the camera, while looking at the monitors. It's indirect drawing. It still interests me. It made me draw in a different way. That affected the idea of drawing in performance. You're not really looking because there are so many things going on. You're just moving your hands. Gradually I learned how to move my hands. Letting them move, by themselves, in a way.

MACDONALD: As if they need to have agency. Do you think the body knows?

JONAS: Yes. It's in my body. When I make a piece now it is not the same as at the beginning, when I was on the brink of something. Now I have that experience, which I can use.

MACDONALD: Does the body feel freer, in a sense?

JONAS: Yes. Definitely. When I started out I had no experience in performances. I was very stiff. Everything had to be just right. Now I am much more free.

MACDONALD: When I look at the history of dance, it is what the great dancers have always known. Whatever tradition you come from, it is the knowledge that is there in the body.



JONAS: The body including the brain. You build up a repertory in your body, in your mind. I don't like to repeat myself. Some people like that. Although one does, you can't help it. I'm very interested in inventing something else.

MACDONALD: As you speak, I'm thinking about the film *Paul Swan* that Andy Warhol made about a dancer just getting dressed and moving. You keep seeing the particular gesture of his training, his generation, his way of moving his hands.

JONAS: Another image comes to me—Matt Mulligan. His visual work is very geometric, but what interests me about him is that he becomes hypnotized for his performances. This can be very hard to watch. It seems undefined. One thing he does is that he stands with his back to you and he is writing something on the wall that you can't see. I like that gesture. It is complete privacy.

MACDONALD: There is a long tradition of artists and writers working like that—automatic writing. Learning to write must have an important effect on drawing. The education we've talked about, at Waldorf and at Walt Whitman, tend to bring drawing in well before writing.

JONAS: I didn't learn to read or write until second grade. But then my family sent me to a different school because all I did was paint. I had to be tutored over the summer. I was in Germany last summer, and we did a performance of *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things Scent* in Stuttgart. A lot of people I know from the city were there, and I found that almost everybody went to the Rudolf Steiner school.

MACDONALD: They all had that observational and drawing-based education. And movement.

MARRANCA: Speaking of Steiner, were you aware of his blackboard drawings before Joseph Beuys's? They seem closest to yours.

JONAS: I didn't know much about Rudolf Steiner, actually.

MARRANCA: Steiner's are more cosmic, in the manner that yours are, in comparison to Beuys.

JONAS: Beuys was a teacher. He was demonstrating.

MACDONALD: It is very interesting that artists have turned to drawing again, as if it had been tremendously overlooked.

JONAS: Drawing is a basic practice.

MARRANCA: Your most recent work, *Reanimation*, was seen in New York at Performa this fall and earlier at dOCUMENTA. It uses several selections from the novel *Under the Glacier* by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness. What connected you to the book?

JONAS: In the eighties I did a big project based on an Icelandic saga. I spent a lot of time in Iceland at that time and I began reading all the sagas. Then I read contemporary literature and I found Halldór Laxness. Many of my friends have read *Independent People*, his most well-known novel. I became intrigued with *Under the Glacier*.

MARRANCA: It's such a strange novel. Susan Sontag had high praise for it, which she referred to as science fiction, philosophy, dream novel, allegory. One of the things that struck me, in terms of using this as a starting point, is that there seems to be more drawing in *Reanimation* than in anything you've ever done. Is that true?

JONAS: I'm not sure, but there is a lot of drawing in it and it's because I have become increasingly more involved with drawing, as my performance becomes a little less.

MARRANCA: It seems almost now like a theatre of drawing.

JONAS: I guess it is, yes. In a way, I rely on it to say things. I speak through the drawings.

MARRANCA: What function does the drawing have in *Reanimation* that the video or the text can't accomplish?

JONAS: I make drawings that represent many of the things that Laxness is talking about. I refer to, say, the bumblebee, but I don't make a drawing of a bee. I use Rorschach tests to make drawings of insects. I pour ink on paper referring to snow and oil and I draw fish referring to fish in a visual language. So it really highlights certain things.

MACDONALD: I remember that the last time we spoke you said the way you like to use literature is to draw out particular images and motifs and then replace them in a different form.

JONAS: There are subtexts. When I began to work on it a few years ago the first thing that came into my mind from *Under the Glacier* is that glaciers are melting now. Of course that's not in his text, because he wrote it in the sixties. But you can't do something about glaciers without making that part of the issue. When I use a text from the past I bring it into the present and refer to present situations. All through the performance is a reference to the idea of melting and that's why I used all the water images. Some imagery was from an old piece made in 1973 in a swimming pool. The subtext for the bee, for instance, was a newspaper article that I cut out that said "Two busy bees . . ." so it referred to the situation of the bee now. When you talk about the miraculous action of the bee taking pollen from the flower, everybody understands that's in jeopardy.

The way Laxness talks about nature is in a very poetic, beautiful, and touching way. Nature is being threatened. Everything we know is threatened now. The planet, the globe. So that was my subtext for this piece. Then the bird. I drew the bird in rela-



*Reanimation*, dOCUMENTA (13), Kaskade Theater. Photo: Rosa Maria Råhling.



*Reanimation*, Performa 13 biennial, 2013. Photo: © Paula Court. Courtesy Performa.

tion to a certain text about how strong and very fragile a bird can be in a face of the storm and, as in many other parts of this piece, I was inspired by Jason Moran's music. He plays live during the entire performance. That drawing was in relation to the text but also in relation to his music. That was my favorite.

MARRANCA: Sometimes the music is very beautiful and elegant, and at other times there's a lot of dissonance. At one point there were images of ice and also the sound of these lower keys on the piano that gave the feeling of icicles. There was a kind of synesthesia between the image and the music. One of the things that struck me in the piece is that there is a very strong attention to process. It actually seems a literal sense of *story telling* through many different kinds of media—drawing, image, text, and music.

JONAS: This piece became unified in its way because of a particular interaction with the music. Jason and I work together very well and have performed this piece in dOCUMENTA and then in Sweden right before Performa. It became more energized and coherent.

MACDONALD: It's a really interesting approach isn't it? Partly old fashioned, in the sense that it's almost like silent film accompaniment.

JONAS: I guess so. Yes.

MARRANCA: I was fascinated by all the drawing in the video and on the projections. Is that a form of re-writing? You are always drawing your way into the images. There is so much outlining of images of the animal faces, of the landscape, and the topography. Do you feel that this work is taking you to another place or is it refining what you already knew?

JONAS: In a way it has taken me to another place. I'm not sure what it is though or how to talk about it. I worked with the music in a different way. It wasn't at all accompanying me. It was part of my body and my space. Partly because Jason is a jazz musician, he has the same way of interacting with what's going on.

MARRANCA: How do you prepare for the strenuous performance that you do, being active the entire piece?

JONAS: It's actually not hard, physically. But as you know I'm getting older. For the performance in New York and in Sweden I went to yoga classes, and in London, where I was at the time. I watch what I eat and don't drink too much. I have to feel physically fit. But physically, for me this piece is not overwhelming at all. There are moments, like during some little dances, when it's difficult because of how old I am, but even the part with the instruments—one of my favorite sequences—where it looks like I am working hard, I'm totally enjoying it so it gives me energy.

MACDONALD: I had the feeling in a strange way that it was Laxness who had come to you. He has this one phrase about time, which seemed to me to be very

important and something very much out of your sensibility. A character in the novel refers to time as the one thing we can agree is supernatural. It's the beginning and the end of the world.

JONAS: That phrase about time I find endlessly mysterious. But also time in relation to what's going on, say, with the glaciers. There are so many different levels. I like it because I couldn't figure it out. He makes statements like that. Like what he says about the bee getting the pollen. It's such a beautiful little story. It has to do with people's relation to an idea of what is God, you know, and how do you talk about that. That's not a word I ever use, "God," but I do think that nature is composed of things that seem miraculous to us, and that are, actually. As they are threatened we see how miraculous they are. Anyway, the world is changing very fast and so we have a different concept of time.

MACDONALD: It is very interesting thinking about time and age, isn't it? You are saying that these are things you have thought about for a very long time. Times have changed and yet those tools still work for you.

JONAS: They do, yes. One thing about this piece is I'm very happy that I found a new energy in my work so I'm interested in going on performing. I always think, "Maybe I'll stop, this is ridiculous." But this particular piece gave me another look at that.

MARRANCA: You have the ability to capture the spirit of childlike wonder and a real playfulness with little toys and objects and tools. I don't know how you feel about this, but it seems that there is among the different kinds of work that we see today work that deals with the world of imagination, and then there is work that just duplicates the crises of the social world. One could do many different kinds of works dealing with ecology or climate change. But your work has always remained so much in the world of the imagination and the spirit. What does that consist of for you?

JONAS: From the very beginning I thought of children's play as being an important part of my process. The idea of play is, of course, how I begin, as a child does. I just watched *Fanny and Alexander*, the Bergman film. What I noticed about it was that he shows the children looking at magic lanterns and being told stories and looking at puppets and being afraid and trying to understand the world. He juxtaposes this with the terrible bishop who marries their mother and who doesn't allow them any toys or anything. It's very cruel, and you see that a child without those things really cannot grow. Fantasy and imagination are so important in one's life. It's what I know best, in a certain sense. I could go and make a very down-to-earth documentary but this other world of the magic of film or what you can do in myth and poetry, interests me to continue. I think it's very important that this be in your life.

MARRANCA: Childhood attractions and real interests can remain with people for an entire lifetime. How can artists retain that sense of childlike surprise?

JONAS: It's very important to constantly be unsure of what you're going to do next, and to be open and not fall into habits. It is very hard not to.

MARRANCA: One of the things that seem to be a through-line in the work is about getting into the center of the earth. In some ways, I see you drawing yourself into this landscape as a means to try to get inside the world, into the image.

JONAS: From the very beginning space has been one of the most important elements in the work. The treatment of space, whether it be landscape space or the space of the media—the TV or the camera. When I started working with video I thought of crawling into the monitor. I imagined the monitor was a box that I could crawl into. Drawing is about defining space, so different drawings are appropriate for different kinds of space, like the space of the TV, or the space of the performance area, or the landscape, or the space of the projected image. Drawing it does draw you in.

MARRANCA: Without getting too interpretive, you said earlier you couldn't really address the question of time exactly, but that it was attractive, that it draws you in, and that you don't know what it's about or know how to think about it. I have the feeling that you are trying to grasp the mystery of existence. It's that mythic and imaginative impulse of trying to get out of reality and into the landscape. Is there anything to that?

JONAS: Well yes I'm sure. But I would just say briefly that one thing that has come with age is wanting to really think about spiritual matters and concentrate more on things of the spirit. In a way, that's very down to earth. Laxness has a sense of humor so you don't have to be sentimental about it. I don't understand the universe. When you hear about space and where the end of space is, that's something I don't think anybody really knows what it means.

MACDONALD: It's very metaphorical, isn't it? In a sense "getting down to earth" in this work is getting down to some real surprises. What's under the earth and the volcanic mysteries of under the earth? The ground is never quite the ground. About the spiritual—that's another thing. Iceland is an interesting country in relationship to mystery and the spirit.

MARRANCA: What do we mean when we talk about spiritual things? We have such a limited vocabulary that it is really difficult to know what anyone means. The subject could turn toward religion but aren't we also just talking about the mind?

JONAS: I'm not talking about religion when I say "spirit" or "spiritual." I'm talking about the whole body. It's not just the mind. It's one's whole existence. For me it has to do with nature and one's feeling about awe-inspiring nature.

MACDONALD: That is probably the great question of our time. What does time have to do with our relationship to where we are now?

JONAS: Some of the images of Laxness I didn't figure out how to deal with. Like what he says about time.

MARRANCA: Is drawing a way of thinking through the novel?

JONAS: I think drawing is a way of finding for myself. With the drawing on top of the Icelandic slides in the performance, I draw over one slide and then it changes and I continue the drawing over another. It didn't produce great drawings, I have to say. But it's an interesting tracing of one's memories in trying to make something coherent out of them.

MACDONALD: You said before that the drawing has begun to be the performance. Has that got somewhere to go for you, or is that more a statement of practicality?

JONAS: I don't know where it will go. But that is something I know well and I'm interested in continuing to do. Right now each time I do a performance I exhaust my possibilities. So I have to invent another way of doing it. I'm going to continue to make drawings but in relation to something else. I have to start in a different place now. I don't know where it will lead. I'm going to continue doing performance for a while.

MARRANCA: One can go on making new discoveries, if there is always that energy to return to.

JONAS: I hope so.

MACDONALD: The idea of drawing that we talked about—as a practice of the entire body into which you can step—is another metaphor. There's something very hopeful in that.

JONAS: Well, yes, there should be. I think that that's what art can give us. It gives us pleasure, hope, function. Inspiration. It is necessary for life. It's sort of what life is. It should be a constant challenge.