Helen of Las Vegas, or the War Today

Patricia Maloney

The War is the first and only thing in the world today.[1]
– William Carlos Williams

Why do I doubt? Why wonder?…Was War inevitable?... Who won? Who lost? / Must the battle be fought and fought? [2]
– H.D.

In 2002, Joan Jonas went to war. *Lines in the Sand*, her multimedia performance and installation commissioned for Documenta XI, was created just months before the United States invaded Iraq, when troops were already engaged in Afghanistan. *Lines in the Sand* is not about the war on terror, nor does it illustrate it. Instead, *Lines in the Sand* is the politics of war read through H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*. According to a surviving fragment by Stesichorus of Sicily (640-555 B.C.E), from which H.D. crafts her book-length poem, Helen was never in Troy. "Helen of Troy was a phantom….The Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion."[3] It was a trade war, fought over gold, cinnabar, dried fish, and Chinese jade. Helen was as present as weapons of mass destruction.

But we cannot read *Lines in the Sand* merely as political theater, nor Helen as metaphor. Jonas places Helen not in Egypt but in the desert sands of Las Vegas, beside the ersatz monuments of the Luxor Hotel. In one moment, projected as video, Jonas stands on a low wall, waving her arms in a fitful choreography. A construction vehicle—a feller buncher—with a lowered arm passes before her; it appears like a battering ram. "Obviously Helen has walked through time into another dimension," H.D. writes, and Jonas enacts this.[4] Location is irrelevant; regardless of place, Helen is always absent—"Past, present, future, she was never there"—and therefore, war is always at hand.[5] William Carlos Williams asserts the same thing in his "Introduction" to *The Wedge*: The "today" he refers to is the continuity of time, an ever-insistent now.

Poet Susan Howe echoes this sentiment in her 2003 conversation with Jonas, invoking the *Iliad's* brevity and brutality as resonant in our contemporary moment. Howe and Jonas, who have been friends since the early 1960s , are the same age, and Howe describes the violence of their mutual childhood: "[B]arked orders, bombs, swastikas, marching soldiers, newsreel shots of children being torn from their parents, such fear everywhere."[6] Suspended and re-enacted, war is a trauma that is lived again and again, without comprehension or resolution. The actions of *Lines in the Sand* are fragmented; in her customary style, Jonas lays down one movement and picks up another without transitions between them. But embedded in the structure are layers of repetition, gestures such as drawing and pacing performed over and over, each iteration just slightly removed from the previous, a wobble or gap to create difference, but not progress. "The War is the first and only thing in the world today."

These gestures form the structure of the performance, which is the structure of a poem. In the conversation with Howe, Jonas describes how she arrives at her compositions by reading poets such as Williams. The movements described above—the passage from one scene to another and the asynchronous repetitions—eschew redundancy, which Williams himself rejects for poetry, ascribing to his art instead the efficiency of machines:

> As in all machines, its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.[7]

In *Lines in the Sand*, Jonas employs text as a soundtrack for, not a narration of, the performance; it is at once unassimilated yet inherent to every gesture. She works against the text with her images, creating a perceptible gap in the interplay between them that duplicates the variances—the wobble—found within the repeated gestures.

Williams argues that the poet composes his words "without distortion which would mar their exact significances."[8] But Howe cautions us regarding the limits of language, noting that while it might "convey the essence of the violence of war," the language of pain is writ only with great difficulty.[9] H.D. articulates this further in *Tribute to Freud*, from which Jonas also recites:

> The effect they have on mind and body is different. They are healing. They are real. They are as real in their dimension of length, breadth, thickness, as any of the bronze or marble or pottery or clay objects. But we cannot prove they are real.[10]

Lines in the Sand hovers between this exactitude and this deficit. What we witness in the movements of Jonas and her three fellow performers are illusions conjured in an effort fill the space created by Helen's absence, which exists not only as a physical void, but also a state of incomprehensibility.

Jonas notes that, while editing *Lines in the Sand*, "With every choice I made, I was thinking of the situation in the world."[11] Williams states that the arts do not exist apart from or as a diversion from war; artistic activities are as "compatible with frustration" as any other aspect of life. Perceived through this double lens of worldly consciousness and historical compatibility, *Lines in the Sand* does not simply reinterpret contemporary events through myth; it provides us with a language for a war we know is real, but for which we can perceive no end.

1. William Carlos Williams, "Author's Introduction (*The Wedge*)," *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, 1969), p. 255.
2. H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (New Directions, 1974), pp. 31, 34, 35. Presented as a single statement by Jonas and in the transcription accompanying the exhibition *Light Time Tales*, presented at the HangarBicocca in Milan, October 2, 2014 to February 1, 2015.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
4. Ibid., p. 107.
5. H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, as paraphrased by Jonas and presented in the *Light Time Tales* transcription.
6. "An Exchange between Joan Jonas, Susan Howe, and Jeanne Heuving," http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v2_3_2005/current/workbook/joans/exchange.htm
7. Williams, "Author's Introduction (The Wedge)," p. 256.
8. Ibid, p. 256.
9. "An Exchange between Joan Jonas, Susan Howe, and Jeanne Heuving."
10. H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (New Directions, 1974), p. 35.
11. "An Exchange between Joan Jonas, Susan Howe, and Jeanne Heuving."

"No art is beneath your power": Joan Jonas Dancing on a Wall

Frances Richard

In this scene from the video portion of the performance/installation *Lines in the Sand* (2002–04), Joan Jonas is in Las Vegas, in some scrap-metal lot on the city's outskirts. A low cement-block wall borders the yard. She is standing on the wall: a lithe and small-boned woman in her sixties, wearing an apricot-colored dress of transparent gauze over a silky undershift, with trousers under that, and black sunglasses. Her head is wrapped in a blue scarf—we can't see it in detail, because the scene is shot from the middle distance. In one hand she holds a sheaf of something grain-like; in the other a length of white veil-like material. She is dancing, waving her frond, manipulating her veil as it flies up in the wind, unfurls, collapses around her. Sometimes, conversely, her hands are empty, gesturing. The footage feels sped-up slightly, so that her movements are herky-jerky, puppet-like. But since nothing else in the frame moves, the artist's spastic-yet-elastic gestures appear exclusively her own, as if she were possessed, like a bacchante—or as if the cinematic mechanism were operating from inside her body.

Two hands, two objects, two dresses, two sides of the wall. The frond is *like* grain; the cloth is *like* a veil. The dance is like a puppet's or a ritually maddened girl's. But, in *Lines in the Sand* as elsewhere in Jonas's art, similitudes multiply and each arises out of and phases into every other; every detail is contingent, fluid. In this scene—presumably—the performer makes herself an avatar for Helen of Troy as described in H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* (1961). Jonas takes this poem as a source-text for her project. Yet "source" implies too tight a filiation, for H.D.'s epic is itself an essay in repetition-with-a-difference. Paris and Achilles each see Helen on the walls at Troy, as H.D. tells us. "But she was never there." Helen has been doubled, left as a phantom haunting the palace under siege, while her consciousness is "transposed or translated" to a liminal plane or vision-state called Egypt.

In *Lines in the Sand*, we watch elongated shadows, male and female, argue on a beach and later, black-and-white photographs from a 1910 tour of the Nile flicker before the lamp of a projector. (The young tourist photographed in broad-brimmed hat and flowing skirts will become Joan Jonas's grandmother.) Live onstage, a young man (Sung Hwan Kim) lies down to die or dream in a shallow sandbox, and an older man in white pajamas (Henk Visch) reads passages of H.D.'s text. The soundtrack, composed in 2002 by Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky and remixed live for the 2004 performance by Stephen Vitiello, segues from droning static to Yoruba drums to Satie to the Carter Family. And the video returns to Vegas; the camera cruises past the Luxor Hotel & Casino on the Strip to gaze at the black-glass pyramid and uneroded, simpering Sphinx. The herky-jerky dance comes around again onstage as Jonas and another woman (Ragani Haas) perform in tandem, the video washing over their live bodies in an edge-to-edge

barrage of megawatt neon. Each is wearing a papier-mâché dog mask.

Jonas draws from a kaleidoscopic repository of narratives and actions, engaging not only a given plot or method but also her audience's prior associations with it; as a master storyteller and mythographer, she sculpts what we already (think we) recognize—Helen of Troy, the white flag of surrender, the idea of the Middle East or "Egypt"—and beams it back to us disrupted and renewed. The palpitatingly physical, real-time manipulation of immaterial materials such as memory and association, not to mention sound and moving image, is Jonas's métier.

"No art is beneath your power," H.D.'s Achilles says to Helen in rage or fear or admiration. *Lines in the Sand* was produced in the grim and anxious period between 9/11 and the American invasion of Iraq—another war, in another desert, fought (as H.D. says of the Trojan war) "for an illusion." Jonas is dancing on the wall. Then from the right side of the frame, a huge red truck comes into view. A hoist-arm juts over the cab, making a horizontal V like a monster's jaws. As the truck crosses the frame, it seems to swallow the woman signaling on the wall.

But she is unconcerned, twitching and bopping as if she could go on forever. She could go on, because she is a manifestation of film, of myth, of history, and as such is knowingly ridiculous, frail, exposed, menaced by the machines but also, as the artist, conducting them.

Joan Jonas, still from "*Lines in the Sand*," 2002

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Joan Jonas is on our mind.

An interdisciplinary research group of CCA faculty members will reflect on the work of Joan Jonas for the emtire 2014–15 academic year. Public events will be held each month.

*,) The Wattis Institute