

The First Time I Became Another
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I started working with narrative texts, with fairy tales, with stories... manipulating the narrative in different ways.... That interests me a lot, how those stories are retold in modern or contemporary terms and how they can mean something to us.¹

—Joan Jonas

How does Jonas parse story from history from narrative from fairytale? Where in her work do the overlaps and distinctions between different kinds of storytelling eclipse, displace, or become one another? As Jonas says, for her,

performance is not straight illustrative story telling. It's manipulating the narrative in different ways.²

What is this distinction?

We are always in the realm of interpretation with any artist's work and any retelling of story. But Jonas's interpretations are never linear—although she works with texts that may have linear plots. *Manipulation* comes from *manipule*, “handful” (a pharmacists' measure), from Latin *manipulus*, “handful, sheaf, bundle,” from *manus*, hand. It includes a sense of “skillful handling of objects,” extended to “handling of persons.” In emphasizing *manipulation*, then, Jonas calls our attention to the hand and the handling of persons and objects as opposed to the illustrating of a story's moral or any other fixed meaning.

In the realm of narrative, we could think of this deliberate intention—to manipulate in a nonlinear fashion instead of to illustrate—as a focus on *telling*, since telling is the tool or hand of story. Jonas's work can be seen as a telling about telling itself. Telling is handled by being told and told about, in order to highlight performance as a scene of the inescapable collision of tellings and being told in which we all circulate. We see this in the repetitive drawing in chalk that Jonas performs in many of her videos, the camera following her moving hand. She does not draw conclusions, plot, or content. She draws drawing, just as she tells telling. Chalk is easily erasable with the side of a hand, just as any version of telling that she enacts may be replaced by another version.

Yet this is not to suggest that Jonas uses content randomly. We are given, for example, very precise ways to think about Helen in Jonas's use of *H.D.'s Helen in Egypt* (1961) in *Lines in the Sand* (2002). Jonas makes a new Helen via her handling and rearrangement of fragments, including content, props, location, her own body, and the bodies of others. Both telling and being told about, traversing the inside and outside of her performances, she confounds the inside and outside of the story, the storyteller and the act of telling. Thus interpretation is as much a material in Jonas's hands as is video, costume, or gesture.

It could also be said that all art making is manipulation. But not all makers wish to show us—in fact to foreground—the manipulation they are up to. Jonas calls us to watch ourselves as audience watching, to watch her “skillful handling” showing us the seams—but perhaps at the same time, enacting a sleight of hand. She enchants, that is manipulates us. But not only us. She too is perhaps manipulated. In the realm of such cultural texts as history, fairytale, epic poetry, “The old enchantment holds,” to quote H.D.

Jonas helps us think about this when she says:

I have to interpret them [stories]. It's something that I've dealt with a lot over the years: how stories have come down to us in fragmented forms.... I'm very interested in how stories are retold, of course. That's what we do—we retell stories.³

Jonas eats the story, digests, broadcasts it through bullhorn cones to those who can't hear, talks it to someone else who may run with it, pours hydrochloric acid on it and gives it to someone else as fake gold, sometimes a pipe is just a pipe, sometimes a shadow is a real shadow, sometimes drawing is a telling gesture: the drawing of blood, the drawing of lines in the sand, the drawing up of water. Jonas serves up to us her version of story as to us a Medusa's head on a platter. She cannot and does not wish to report on it directly.... as Kathleen Fraser says in *Something (even human voices)*:

I do not wish to report on Medusa directly, this variation of her writhing. After she gave that voice a shape, it was the trajectory itself in which she found her words floundering and pulling apart.

Sometimes we want to talk to someone who can't hear us.

Sometimes we're too far away. So is a shadow a real shadow.⁴

Or...as Richard Foreman and Tirza Latimer say in *Nothing (like human memory)*:

*you understand
but instead variation
—like a broken self, multiple voices,
and in those cracks systems of knowledge
the wind of real things at last, through a radio—
invisible but touching distance
I re-imagine a world entire,
living the rest of my life forgetful,
asleep, deadpan, death of the unconscious. [...]*

When Was I telling a story?

*It seems to me—that in a certain room,
a certain radio was absent. framing another
narrative somewhere⁵*

Joan Jonas and Doug Hall both work with the materials of video, performance, and narrative to borrow, strangle, recall the

shape, the scent, the feel of things—

the emotional and actual landscapes we have experienced, but cannot articulate. Hall's interest

in narrative is

not only...the unfolding of events in the sense of a story, but more importantly, a temporality that flows and takes the viewer along with it—like a leaf fallen into a river, moving at a speed that's determined by the current.⁶

In the beginning there was a river.

writes Ben Okri:

The river became a road and the road branched out into the whole world. And because the road was once a river, it was always hungry.

In that land of beginnings, spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. [...]

There was not one among us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see.⁷



Letters in the Dark, video still from the two-channel projected video installation with sound, Doug Hall, 2014

Assuming numerous forms like a river, Jonas helps us, the blind, not looking forward to being born but already having been, to learn to see

language, which is visual, become(s) woven into the total form or text of the piece so it's no longer separated.⁸

So Jonas writes with objects and draws our attention with chalk to the animate world in which the language, objects, and motions of a composition are all becoming one another, “no longer separated.”

She says:

The first time I became another was when I created the persona of the erotic seductress Organic Honey, through which I followed the process of my own theatricality. Then I entered into various fairy tales and played the female characters. I really entered into those characters.⁹

As performer, listener, and viewer, Jonas has repeatedly and simultaneously become another and watched that becoming. Her hand in the frame in the video *Street Scene with Chalk* (1976/2008/2010),

for instance, is a “tell” of her making and interpreting presence. In much of her work, she moves about the stage performing a watching that is interpreting, or a giving of the body as a theatrical sign of interpretation. By entering into and playing the female characters in various fairytales, Jonas proposes by enactment that the most radical feminist action is to *not* stay still—not to identify exclusively as the erotic seductress Organic Honey, or as the missing Helen, or as a stationary anyone or thing. To refuse stable identification as any singular gender or character or genre or animal: sometimes a shadow is a real shadow, sometimes a fairytale is a real history and a real history is a narrative text or an epic poem, but never is a girl a real girl.

We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries.

Many of us were dogs, or had the snouts of dogs, eclipsed by the wind we displaced or became one another.

It seems to me—that in a certain room, a certain radio was absent, framing another narrative somewhere



"The only way to live is to be silent, here as well as there," Pigment print, 33" x 44" from *Letters in the Dark*, Doug Hall, 2014

1. Joan Jonas interview with Robert Ayers, in conjunction with the John Hansard Gallery exhibition, *Joan Jonas: Lines in the Sand and The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*, November 16, 2004–December 23, 2004. Published online, (<http://www.hansardgallery.org.uk/event-detail/103-joan-jonas-lines-in-the-sand-and-the-shape-the-scent-the-feel-of-things/>)
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Kathleen Fraser, *Something (even human voices) in the foreground a Lake*, Kelsey Street Press, January, 1984.
5. Tirza Latimer in collaboration with Richard Foreman's *Ontological-Hysterical Theater Notebooks* (<http://www.ontological.com/notebooks.html>). Foreman makes his

- notebooks available online and invites the public to collaborate. Latimer produced this cut-up collaboration on March 9 during the Wattis Gallery's Joan Jonas seminar.
6. Doug Hall, Interview by Richard J. Tuttle, Exhibition catalog, *Doug Hall: In Finite Spaces*, an exhibition organized by Erik H. Neil and Richard J. Tuttle at Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA (August 23 – September 28, 2003).
 7. Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* (Anchor Books, 1993), p. 1. Originally published by Nan A. Talese/Doubleday in 1992.
 8. *BOMB* 112 (Summer, 2010), “Artists in Conversation: Joan Jonas by Karen Schneider.”
 9. Ibid.

Joan Jonas is on our mind.

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