



Street Scene with Chalk can be described as multiple things: an artwork, of course, but also a fragment of an installation, a section of a video, documentation of a performance, and a talismanic symbol for an artistic approach. Its material has been repurposed into a number of different works: it is both a thing and a vector, not unlike a mirror. Its recurrent status in Jonas' work struck me courtesy of the unusual dating of the piece in the exhibition brochure for *Light Time Tales*, the mammoth survey of her work that was opened last year at Hangar Bicocca, Milan.

9 *Street Scene With Chalk* (1976/2008/2010)
Single-channel video

The three dates refer to the inclusion of *Street Scene with Chalk* as a component part of two larger projects: *Reading Dante* and *Mirage*. *Reading Dante* is dated twice, as 2008 and 2010, a period in which its configuration became complete. *Mirage* was a performance, later a film (*Mirage II*), made in 1976, which provoked the original outdoor actions that are recorded in *Street Scene*. Jonas describes the making of this document in an interview with *Bomb Magazine*:

"...there's a projection where I'm drawing and erasing over the video footage of *The Night Street Improvisation*. One night in 1976, while I was working on my performance *Mirage*, I organized an improvisation near Wall Street, which was deserted at night. Andy Mann was the cameraman. Pat Steir and I played with several of my props—nine-foot metal cones and a six-foot metal hoop—while singing "Row Row Row Your Boat" and running about. An unidentified man joined us. I loved Fellini and this was as close as I got to that particular poet of film."²

The drawing and erasing element – in which Jonas' hands rapidly trace and delete lines of movement within the 1970s document – was superimposed on to the original film in 2008. The video that I watched on the cathode ray tube monitor in Milan was first realized in 2008, but the original 1976 performance remains readable and cogent, hence the allocation of a 32-year lifespan for the piece in the brochure. As is evident, the process of demarcation, isolation, and indexing in the maze of Jonas' work is a slippery task.

Jonas is one of the few artists I can think of whose knowledge and fascination with art history produces a relaxation of responsibilities, rather than introducing an intensification of academic or critical signifiers. Jonas' works, often with wildly various source material at their center, willfully bleed into one another, with particular formal fixtures (automatic drawing, certain camera movements, conical forms) creating a malleable grammar that is shared by Jonas with those who care to look consistently. There is a degree of abandon to how Jonas mobilizes her own material, always privileging the evocative and structural purpose of each work.

Street Scene is instructional in this respect, a microcosmic document that features in two of Jonas' major projects, and subsequently sequenced in at least four distinct iterations of these two works.

As such, it creates a connective point of assembly between how Jonas addresses the conditions of performance (the depicted actions of Jonas and Steir), film (their documentation), video (the editorial execution), and installation (its physical configuration).

"When we look at art history, we look at the Renaissance, we look at the 15th century. We don't look at, like, 1484 and 1494 as being that different. And if you look at the '70s, the '80s, and the '90s, there are all kinds of overlaps and continuities."³

The recurrence of *Street Scene* points to Jonas' willingness to mine and remodel these images afresh, according to the needs of a given project or environment. Let's remember that the performance itself already contains a number of elements that persist in other areas and works in Jonas' oeuvre: women performers, cone-like sculptures, the folklore of the nursery rhyme, mystical ground (Wall Street), improvisational actions. In Milan, *Street Scene* was presented by itself – it is certainly a compelling work when shown independently – and its inclusion was described in the brochure as being:

"...a reference to and evocation of *Reading Dante*"⁴

So in spite of its being exhibited independently, *Street Scene* actually stood as a conduit to a much larger work of Jonas', the remaining material of which was entirely absent from Hangar Bicocca's colossal galleries. Jonas seems to actively pursue a temporal collapse between phases of her own activity as an artist. By insisting on *Street Scene*'s value as an instrument, as well as a record, Jonas can construct an internal play of relations within her own arc of work, one that parallels the generative engine of affect present in her earliest artistic endeavors: the feedback loop.

The work of Joan Jonas is inextricable from the technologies that she has continually experimented with and through. Perhaps we could understand this appetite to apply ideas through new equipment and software as a process that lends direction for each new project. It is surely no coincidence, then, that Jonas counters the improvisational risk of new creative tools with a desire to tune into the pulse of material that was shot long ago. Jonas looks backwards with new means and in doing so creates simultaneous fabulations of time that twist into focus through the perceptual presence and inclinations of each individual viewer.

1. Scan from *Light Time Tales*, exhibition catalogue, Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2014
2. "Joan Jonas by Karin Schneider", *Bomb Magazine*: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3521/joan-jonas>

3. Joan Jonas interview with RH Quaytman, *Interview Magazine*: http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/joan-jonas_
4. *Light Time Tales*, exhibition catalogue, Hangar Bicocca, Milan, 2014, p.26

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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 entire 2014–15 academic year. Public events will be held each month.