

Drawing & Joan Jonas: Material or Immaterial?

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“I didn’t see a major difference between a poem, a sculpture, a film, or a dance. A gesture has for me the same weight as a drawing: draw, erase, draw, erase—memory erased.”—Joan Jonas¹

In the complex ecosystem of Joan Jonas’s work, drawings hold a particularly precarious place. They appear, on the one hand, to be symbolic, archetypal, and auratic, and, simultaneously, we read them as banal, deadpan, and even haphazard. The interpolation of hand-drawn images into the technological realm of video complicates an easy reading of their meaning. Most of the time, in fact, the viewer experiences her drawings in motion. They have either been videotaped during their production—that is, drawn for the camera—or, in a live performance, they are layering onto, interacting with, and interrupting a projected video. They rarely exist as finished “objects” in the gallery for extended contemplation.

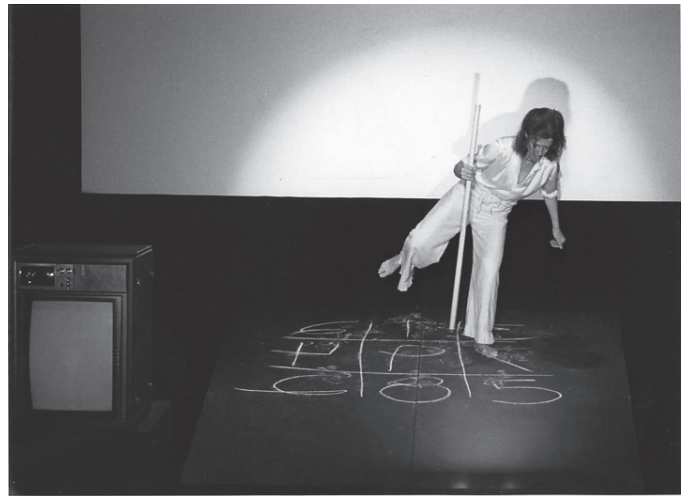


Joan Jonas, still from *Reanimation*, 2012



Joan Jonas, still from *Ice Drawing*, 2011

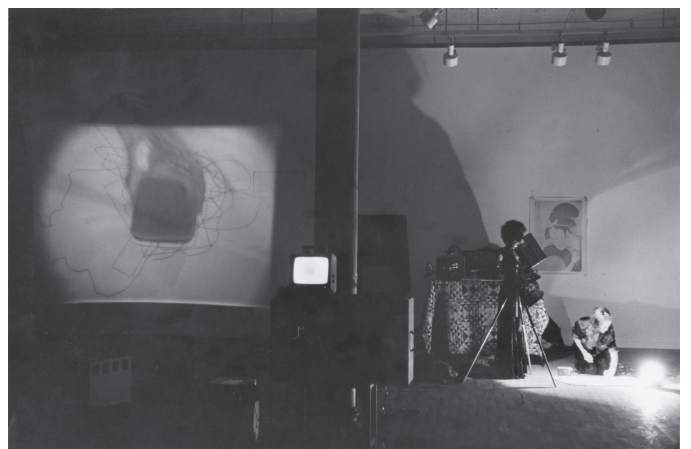
If the viewer perceives her drawings to be elusive, Jonas redoubles this sense by distancing herself from facility, using prostheses like long sticks with chalk or charcoal attached to the ends. In *Ice Drawing* (2011), we watch Jonas draw handfuls of ice cubes over puddles of dark ink, subtly manipulating the two materials as they interact with and adjust to each other. The ice becomes inky, the ink is diluted, and the artist’s fingertips darken with stains. In works like this, the aleatory, improvisational character of drawing comes to the foreground.



Joan Jonas, *Mirage*, 1976

Alternately, drawing can appear in her work as a ritualized practice, repeated over and over again until proficiency is achieved, or overcome. In *Mirage* (1976), Jonas stands at a blackboard making basic, geometric drawings: a circle becomes sun and moon, and a triangle becomes a pyramid. When the drawing is complete, she erases it and starts anew.

Most of the time, the figures Jonas draws are straightforward: primary forms, elements of a human face, the head of a dog, or the body of a fish. The simplicity of Jonas’s drawing lexicon, however, belies the significance of its role in her project. Through drawing, the juxtaposition of the hand-made and the machine-made create a palpable tension in her work, opening up a space between the human and the technological, between *factura* and factory, between nearness and distance. In *Organic Honey’s Vertical Roll* (1973), Jonas’s drawing is mediated by a monitor: she watches the outcome of what she is drawing not on the paper itself, but on a screen. The viewer completes the circuit when watching her performance of the drawing on a monitor in the gallery. If drawing had traditionally been the marker of the presence of the artist, here we have no paper trail to follow, only a video that loops us around again, and again.



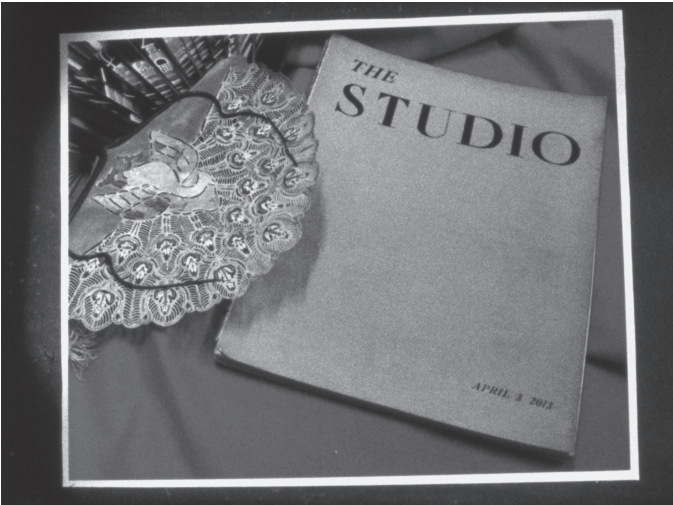
Joan Jonas, installation still from *Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy*, 1972, Loguidice Gallery

“A lot of what I do is trying to choose subjects that are basically invisible things you can see through. There is not quite enough there to satisfy you, so you look for something else, so maybe instead you look for what happens between things, or why these things are connected together.”
—Paul Sietsema

Paul Sietsema is an artist whose drawings and 16 mm films explore the mediated and conditional nature of representation with deceptive simplicity. The everyday objects explored in his films are sculptures created by hand for the express purpose of being filmed. The objects are straightforward and obvious, such that one does not doubt their veracity. However, they often present a paradox about the nature of art’s facture and reception, one central to the discourse of photography and film: the objects seen on screen were often consumed in the process of their filming. Even while we are seeing them in front of our eyes, and turning them over in our mind, we know that they cannot be taken up by the hand. Sietsema presents his film *At the hour of tea* (2013).



Joan Jonas, *Mirage*, 1976



Paul Sietsema, *At the hour of tea*, 2013, 16 mm film, color, no sound, Approx. 17 minutes, looping | ©Paul Sietsema, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.



Paul Sietsema, *Untitled figure ground study (Degas/Obama)*, 2011, ink and enamel on paper, 54 3/4 x 66 inches, 139 x 168 cm | ©Paul Sietsema, Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery.

Joan Jonas is on our mind.

An interdisciplinary research group of CCA faculty members reflects on the work of Joan Jonas for the entire 2014-15 academic year. Public events are held each month.

1. Joan Jonas, “Closing Statement,” in Douglas Crimp, ed., *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions* (University of California, Berkeley, 1983), 137.

2. Paul Sietsema, interview with Andrew Bernadini, *Mousse Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 16 (December 2008).