The temple of Apollo itself rises farther up the cliff; the earliest construction rose in the eighth century B.C. and was made of beeswax, feathers, laurel and bronze – a building made like a mask or a costume in which to dress the god and make his beauty visible. The later temple of stone stood on a rampart of irregular-shaped stones, and this is mostly what remains. Some of the stones are hexagons, others pentagons, and all are smoothly fitted to make a very slightly inclined wall just fit for writing on. For the whole expanse of this encircling stone is entirely tattooed, from one end to another, with inscriptions that record the thanks, the prayers, the exploits, the longings of visitors to the shrine. The temple is a manuscript of past desires, rubbed, faded, and indecipherable now to anyone but the most learned Greek palæographer. Visitors peer at the messages, trying to understand something, exclaiming in a Babel of tongues all around. To see the letters at all, you need to pour water on the stones and bring out the relief in the gleam and shadow of the spill. In other words, you have to perform a libation.

Performance art, as practiced by Joan Jonas, invites us into a private ritual; rituals enact stories and release their powers of protection and healing by recapitulating the sacred events in the right sequence, with the correct phrasing and gestures. Through their patterns, however wayward and profoundly mysterious, they magically re-establish order and give participants their bearings and strengthen their moorings, to self and to community. It would again be quite wrong to accentuate any religious tendency within the tradition of official churches. But one of the salient characteristics of contemporary art has been its shamanism. Unlike Joseph Beuys, Joan Jonas does not like to use the word of herself, but she recognizes its aptness all the same.

> "*In order to go from one world to the next you must finish a drawing in sand which an old lady, the devouring witch, begins at the boundary between life and death.*"[5]

1. Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (Harmondsworth, 1954, rev. 1996), p.19
2. Joan Jonas, "Closing Statement", in *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968-1982*, exhibition catalogue, University Art Museum (Berkeley, 1983), p.139
3. Joan Simon, "Scenes and Variations: An Interview with Joan Jonas," in *Art in America*, July 1995, p.74
4. Michael Wood, *The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles*, (New York 2003), p.6
5. Joan Jonas, note on *Mirage* 1976/1994, in *Joan Jonas Works 1968-1994*, exhibition catalogue, Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam, 1994), p.50

This is an extract from Marina Warner's contribution to the catalogue *Joan Jonas: Five Works* (Queens Museum of Art, New York, 2003).

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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.

On Oracles & Beginnings: Some Reflections of the Art of Joan Jonas

Marina Warner

> "*I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea; I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.*" (*The Pythia at Delphi, c. 600 B.C.*)[1]

> "*The performer sees herself as a medium: information passes through.*" (*Joan Jonas, 1993*)[2]

At Delphi, the oracle spoke with a double tongue and her enigmas were difficult to untie before fate revealed the plots they encrypted; by then, it was too late. The oracle told Croesus that if he went to war with Persia he would bring about the fall of a great kingdom. He was overjoyed and heaped more presents on the temple sanctuary, huge vessels and sculptures in precious metals, to thank the god, who was on his side and had said so through his medium, the Pythia. She was the priestess who sat in the *adyton*, the forbidden and hidden cell under the temple, and prophesied in answer to the questions put to her. Croesus did not understand that she was warning him he would destroy his own kingdom. And so he did. But sometimes the oracle spoke so clearly her words continue to strike a pure, ringing note: *Gnothi seauton* (*Know yourself*), she replied when asked what was the greatest good a human being should strive for.

I was visiting Delphi, and thinking of Joan Jonas, and her work, of her riddling stories and enigmatic performances. She assembles fragments; she reflects on vision and its illusions and its revelations; she mediates compressed, resonant images that form part of stories. As she draws and erases the drawing from the slate, then draws again, she summons presences that evanesce and drop away, then materialize again and are bodied forth; as she creates musical patterns, and traces shapes and even plots with dance and gesture, she is following a cluster of secrets that we can intimate as we become absorbed in her performance. She struggles to know herself, scrutinizing her face and body for clues and exploring the way the world experiences that self back in echoes, images and reflections. In Jonas' film *Volcano Saga*, the seer says, "Tell me your dreams," and many of her performances convey that inward, skewed atmosphere of dream experience.

It seems prophetic that Joan Jonas' grandmother, traveling in Egypt at the beginning of the last century, took a photograph of the Sphinx. Joan's stepfather liked conjuring, she has said, and she makes magic shows in his footsteps. There always tugs at us, while we watch her performances, a growing fascination with what lies beneath, with where and when the dream will open up its meanings, like those the young seeker tells the seer submerged in the healing sulphur springs in *Volcano Saga*.

But Joan Jonas' relationship to expression is not exactly Delphic, and invoking oracles needs to be nuanced here, for she provokes further thought rather than providing answers. She deepens the strangeness of fairytale and its conventions when she breaks into them and exposes their elements, as with *The Juniper Tree* in 1976. In the 1979

piece *Upside Down and Backwards*, she cuts, intercuts and reverses the plot flow of *The Frog Prince* and *The Boy Who Set Out To Discover Fear*, then recites them in an affectless monotone. This treatment effectively strips them of consolation. To "know yourself" through fairy tales does not mean finding yourself out, or resolving the issue with a return to a defining trauma, let alone, God forbid, ticking off boxes in a multiple-choice personality questionnaire. Rather, the quest exacts locating a mood, a state of being that eludes the grasp of consciousness, and falls instead with soft footfalls into the unconscious. In the early performance piece *Mirror Check*, Joan Jonas slowly scrutinized her naked body inch by inch with a small round mirror, and the early videotapes *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* and *Left Side Right Side* (both 1972), *Glass Puzzle* (1973), and *Disturbances* (1974), find her plumbing the mysterious doublings in both mirror and monitor, water and reflection with poetic and obsessive intensity.

Volcano Saga, video installation

Mirror Check, performance

"I like to reveal the way the illusions are made." [3]

In a poem Adrienne Rich conjures an oracular figure of Memory looking into her "smoky mirror" to see there the truth of history and the reflections of the world. But when Memory first speaks, she warns, "Don't count on me." It is not so easy to follow the Delphic command; or perhaps, ironic wisdom about the inaccessibility of knowledge lies embedded within those words, "Know yourself," since, if it is so difficult to know ourselves, how do we continue with anything else? Renaissance emblems used to illustrate the Delphic oracles' precept by showing a man looking at himself in a mirror and beholding there the picture of a fool, an ass, or some such warning of vanity. But the moral certainty of this despair is smug compared to the instability and uncertainty that Joan Jonas' play with mirrors holds up for view. Through innovations in her use of technical media, the artist in performance has looked at herself

carefully to disclose how infinitely complex the illusory capacities of reflection itself are: she made things apparent in order to reveal how they elude the grasp of the mind, and even vanish from view.

Poets who drew on classical myth liked to imagine the old gods and goddesses after their decline, how they lived in retirement, how they looked back on their centuries of power and glory, muttering together about human beings' fickleness and feeling remorse that they could have done things differently. The oracles were closed down all over the Roman Empire by the Emperor Theodosius in a decree of 391, around two generations after Christianity was declared the official religion.[4] But the pagan prophets had already begun falling silent. One of the most famous, the Cumæan Sibyl, whom Aeneas had consulted about his descent into the Underworld, left to take refuge in the Italian Appenines, and survived for a long time in deepest Umbria; magicians and sorceresses, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, still made the pilgrimage to dedicate to her their grimoires, their magic handbooks. The Pythia of Delphi had stopped prophesying, however, even before Christ was born. The historian and essayist Plutarch, who for a long while served as a priest at the temple, reported that the pilgrims stopped coming after the spring dried up. The Pythia's powers depended on its sweet-scented waters; they rose beneath the tripod where she took up position on her "high seat." Still in *The Matrix* she makes a reappearance, in good voice again and full of wisdom, hauntingly incarnate in an old black working woman living in a small apartment nowhere special. She has a clear message in that film (though I forget what it is).

Omphalos, Roman copy of Greek original, Museum of Delphi, Greece

At Delphi, the enigmas now inhere in the stones themselves: the site is reticent, explanations and signposts scanty. Archaeological sites themselves speak in riddles: so much has vanished, and what remains lies in fragments, keeping their secrets. It would be easy to pass by the sacred *omphalos* without noticing it: this stone, a softly rounded cone like a huge pineal gland, marked the mythical center of the world, its navel. It's draped with a lattice of woolen skeins, carved in stone; these represent the umbilical cords that were offered to the oracle by new parents to secure their babies' futures and discover their fortunes. (Oedipus' father heard what lay in store, and presumed he understood the oracle's meaning – with those tragic consequences we all know so well).