

# THE YEAR IN PERFORMANCE

## Catherine Wood



From left: Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2010/2012/2013. Performance view, HangarBicocca, Milan, October 21, 2014. Photo: Matteo Scarpellini. Ieva Misevičiūtė in collaboration with Sanya Kantarovsky, *Apricot Juice*, 2015. Performance view, Studio Voltaire, London, April 18, 2015. Photo: Devron System Films.

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JOAN JONAS stood at the center of the year—as both a singular presence and a pervading force. In July, she mounted a series of performances at the Venice Biennale in the Teatro Piccolo Arsenale: In those works, mirage-like layerings of choreographed movement, projected video landscapes, and real things set between gauzy scrims created an exquisite microcosm of theatrical disorientation within the theater of the miasmic city. Jonas's practice, at the core of so much new work happening now, channels history, culture, time, and nature in ways that confound the idea of contemporaneity. She stands for a post-1960s idea of cross-disciplinarity, of “performance art” proper based on carefully calibrated indeterminacy. And that space of performance—carved out in a moment when subjectivity and traditional skill were rightfully being taken apart—is generatively with us still, though it has begun to shift and transform with increasing intensity of late, quietly welcoming forms of virtuosity and disciplinarity into its realm. In Venice, the contribution by jazz pianist and composer Jason Moran was sublime in its precision, underscoring Jonas's seemingly improvised yet actually planned use of props found in Venetian antique shops—a wooden oar from a rowboat, a stuffed bird—and her casting of the children of her friends and neighbors. As ever, Jonas drew on her own life with a confidence and ease

that were breathtaking, even in the stifling humidity.

These passing performances in Venice stood on the solid foundation of an extraordinary retrospective of Jonas's work at HangarBicocca in Milan, curated by Andrea Lissoni. Here, the artist's radical warping of temporality as a space and a place for imaginative inhabitation became fully apparent: Her oldest works, such as *Songdelay*, 1973, and *Mirage*, 1976/1994/2005, as well as newer pieces like *Beautiful Dog*, 2014, made in Nova Scotia, were freshly immersed in a moving matrix of relations—the object props appearing in specific configurations, linking our own haptic proximity to their filmed theater; chalk and ink drawings serving as occasional maps to the artist's potentially limitless territory; wormholes and vast expanses opening and closing in turn in the open-plan, darkened space.

Jonas's powerfully fragile figure may have dominated the year, but her singular female presence as both performer and initiator also resonated with impressive live performances by younger artists. Conventional notions of authorship and existential subjectivity (usually straight, white, and male) were combated in the post-war era (via strategies such as de-skilling and indeterminacy), yet Jonas, coming at the tail end of this period, provisionally began to turn back to some of the very notions we once tried to do away with—to intentional

gestures and personal narratives. Younger artists, following her lead, have continued to invent and express new forms of affective subjectivity, filling the void left by the neo-avant-garde. Emily Roysdon's deliciously “discomposed” performance, *Uncounted (performance 1–3)*, 2014, woven through the Performance Days festival in Amsterdam, thrilled the eye and bent the mind with clocks; painted MDF cutouts of wave shapes; handmade costumes; repetitions; and casual, synchronized choreography. Channeling the spirit of Jack Smith (also a formative influence on Jonas), Roysdon queered our experience of time itself. During the same event, Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Fatima Hellberg's performative discussion of nervousness as a means of institutional critique drew attention to the conventions of public presentation, a focus that was hardly lost on the audience here given the sensitive intelligence of Performance Days as a whole. (The event was organized by the superb Netherlands-based curatorial platform If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution.) Ieva Misevičiūtė's quirkily unplaceable blend of performance, circus, and dance, pleasing, sharp, and funny (and only fleetingly resembling Rebecca Horn, with her arm-extending costume), was seen in multiple locations, including London's Studio Voltaire, where she collaborated with Sanya Kantarovsky, whose



From left: Emily Roysdon, *Uncounted (performance 1)*, 2014. Performance view, Performance Days, Ruydsdaelkade 2, Amsterdam, November 28, 2014. Photo: Kyle Tryhorn. Ulla von Brandenburg, *Baisse-toi Montagne, Lève-toi Vallon (Get Down Mountain, Arise Vallon)*, 2015. Performance view, Kaaitheater, Brussels, March 18, 2015. Photo: Robin Zenner. Still documenting Beth Collar's *Hand of Glory*, 2012–, Cubitt Artists, London, March 12, 2015.



paintings were then on view (and who designed for her a pleasing cat-shaped stage). At Sadler's Wells, London, choreographer Mette Ingvartsen presented the 2012 work *Speculations*, directing audience configurations to conjure elaborate fictions from scratch. With a burst of swirling silver confetti blown under the stage lights at the end, the piece resembled a campfire storytelling session for the twenty-first century. Beth Collar's *Hand of Glory*, 2012–, at Cubitt Artists, London, fused the durational performances of the '70s to the technology-driven identity formation of today. Standing in an inconspicuous place outside the opening of "The Cipher and the Frame," curated by Hellberg and Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, Collar raised her hand in the air, held it there, and filmed it for the duration of the nearly three-hour event: painful and melancholic to witness.

If Jonas's work in the '70s set the scene for provisional configurations of open-ended, time-based experiences in art, as well as for a questioning of the kinds of de-skilling so central to the neo-avant-gardes (one that a generation of younger artists has continued to pursue), it is precisely within the domain of performance that we are witnessing a dramatic increase in another kind of re-skilling: a return of highly determined, practiced, and composed art, typically by way of other disciplines, whether in the form of curators inviting practitioners of theater, dance, or music to perform in museums or galleries, or artists borrowing these disciplines wholesale as ready-made formats. This prompts us to ask new questions about contemporary art's limits and its needs, its rapacious consumption of other disciplinary specificities, and how performance art draws our attention to the performative nature of medium formats and institutional structures themselves.

Artists including Ulla von Brandenburg, Joëlle Tuerlinckx, and Paulina Olowska made theater pieces proper this past year; others, such as Nick Mauss, Lucy

Beech and Edward Thomasson, and Pablo Bronstein, imported "dance" into their practices; still others, like Philippe Parreno and Haroon Mirza, invited musicians to play in their art. Meanwhile, choreographers had gallery exhibitions: Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's nine-week exhibition of dance at Wiels Contemporary Art Center, "Work/Travail/Arbeid"; Boris Charmatz's *If Tate Modern was Musée de la Danse?*, 2015, at Tate Modern; Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuš's *Public Collection*, 2014, at M—Museum Leuven, Belgium; Yvonne Rainer's performances of *The Concept of Dust, or How do you look when there's nothing left to move?*, 2015, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and at the Louvre, Paris; and let's not forget long-ago-dancer-turned-artist Tino Sehgal's survey at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which, in its grandeur, felt somehow like a possible end to his seductive promise that ephemeral performance might erase the art object altogether. (Where this leads next in the field of art is a question, as it seems unlikely he'll be returning to the dance world anytime soon; in a conversation at Art Basel, he boldly declared, "We cannot be contemporary in a theater, it's impossible.") Stage designer Chloe Lamford created an environment, *Echo Chamber*, 2015, for the Royal College of Art's curatorial-studies thesis exhibition in March, in London; likewise, also in London, theater designer Jeremy Herbert was commissioned to make an underground chamber at Frieze Projects. With respect to musicians, Björkgate at MOMA in New York may have dominated in the news, but the presences of Tarek Atoui and Moran in the gallery context, alongside the more regular appearances of Florian Hecker, were notable in that they signaled a reexploration of practice-specific notions of play, participation, and performance.

Dance in the museum, as an apparent "activator of space," seems to have been singled out for particular scrutiny and suspicion this past year. Indeed, in his new

book *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, Hal Foster links the institutional embrace of "experimental performance and dance" to contemporary art's pervasive state of indeterminacy and provisionality, which, in his view, have lost their bite. Once powerful means of critique, these artistic strategies are now celebrated blindly for their own sake. At the same time, contemporary art wants and needs to draw on the specificities and techniques of other disciplines (itself being essentially disciplineless in any technical, material sense) and, equally, is attractive to those other disciplines because it offers a space that remains apparently free in relation to the conventions of theater, dance, or music.

Not only do these displacements make extra visible contemporary art's own frame—itself built of discourse, architectural convention, and behavioral protocols—they also push at its limits. A dancer's, actor's, or musician's skill is distinctly apparent to us, the art audience, because it is clearly "alien"—a mastered discipline imported from another world. Yet this performed virtuosity now takes place against a larger backdrop in which artists have begun to revisit traditional media—painting especially—in re-skilled ways. (Think of Lucy McKenzie studying decorative painting in a Belgian atelier in order to perform complex moves within and outside art's frame.) Today, it seems, painting, dance, music, and even film and photography, when reimagined wholesale as readymades, can intersect in new ways with what we call contemporary art. And performance, which sets its own formats and positions, has become the central arena for this larger state of play. These other practices, with their distinct textures and specificities, might add nuance to art's capacity to create images and forms and to shape experience, or they may even push art's frame to a breaking point. This is the moment to chart the ground moving beneath our feet. □

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