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Rachel Cooke, "Joan Jonas: 'You don't know what you're doing sometimes. You just begin,'" *The Guardian*, March 4, 2018

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Joan Jonas: 'You don't know what you're doing sometimes. You just begin'

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▲ 'It's important not to slip into repetition': Joan Jonas photographed in her home studio in New York. Photograph: Mike McGregor for the Observer

In the era of the selfie, the American visual art pioneer is more relevant than ever. As a major exhibition opens at Tate Modern, in which she will perform, the SoHo survivor talks about her work, the 70s scene, and the roles women play

At the beginning of the 21st century, New York's SoHo has become just another shopping mall, Guess cosyng up to Banana Republic, Dean & DeLuca arm in arm with Bloomingdale's. Walking its streets, it's impossible to believe that any artists live or work here now, let alone the kind who knew it back in the day, when it was all rusty factories and wild "happenings". And yet they do. Behind a door in Mercer Street is an elevator that takes you up to the loft of the performance artist Joan Jonas, a space where she has lived and worked since the early 70s. To open this door, and to ride this elevator, is discombobulating: it's time travel, of a kind. Surrounded by the dozens of objects she has accumulated over the decades – a realm of authenticity that includes pebbles, baskets, bowls, dolls and masks – you feel suddenly

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ashamed of the long minutes you just spent staring at the windows of the Prada store that stands on the site of the old SoHo Guggenheim.

It's a sensation that isn't exactly eased by Jonas herself, a coiled spring of a person with tousled grey hair and a veritable shadow of a poodle called Ozu, which barks proprietorially every time her hand loosens on its lead. She dislikes doing interviews, and her somewhat minimalist answers, at least at first, give me the strong sense that my questions are as dumb as any she has ever been asked. Add to this the essential problem that, like most of those who come to talk to her, I have seen her performances only in photographs (as she and I will discuss later, there is a sense in which her work can be said not really to exist beyond the moment of its production), and the potential for misunderstanding would seem to be bigger even than this vast room. Oh, well. At least I know the way out.

Later this month, a major survey of Jonas's work – the largest ever presented in the UK – will open at Tate Modern. It will include an immersive gallery exhibition, in which some of her installations and items from her personal collections will be displayed, and a 10-day live performance programme in the Tanks in which Jonas, now in her early 80s, will appear on two occasions (she will perform *Mirage*, a piece from 1976 that makes use of chalk and a blackboard; other works, including iterations of the famous *Mirror Pieces* from 1968-71, will be performed by younger collaborators whom she will, in effect, direct). The idea is that this show will reveal Jonas, whose name is not well known in Britain, as a pioneering figure whose way with a video camera – she was the first artist to incorporate live video feeds into her work – seems newly relevant in this, the era of the selfie and the smartphone.



▲ Jonas in *Mirage* at Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1976. Photograph: Babette Mangolte

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Is she excited about the show? “It’s hard to be excited,” she says, giving me a look. “I have so much to do.” In any case, the years have done little to change the anxiety involved in performing. “Confidence is totally important,” she says. “You have to be confident to get up in front of an audience, or to be able to give the illusion of it. I still get a little nervous. If I do a bad performance, I feel awful for weeks.”

What about if she does a good one?

“If it works out... I can’t say it’s satisfying, but it is fulfilling.”

Is she aware that in photographs of her performances, she gives the impression of immense power, that she seems almost to be the size of a giant? (When the lift doors opened, I could not believe my eyes; she is tiny.) At last, the ghost of a smile. “Other people have said the same thing. But that’s what happens when you’re photographed. You’re not *you*. I was just in Jamaica, and I met Grace Jones, and she is not tall at all. She’s only a little bigger than me.”

How did she come to meet Jones? She flaps her hand dismissively. “Oh, we don’t have to go into that.”

The last few years have, she agrees, been good ones for her: the Tate retrospective follows the 2015 Venice Biennale, at which she represented the US (her show was described by the *New York Times* as a “triumph”). “I didn’t expect to be in this position,” she says. “I’ve always been a little on the edge of the art world, albeit purposely in the beginning, when I was using different spaces, trying to avoid the white cube of the gallery. And it is wonderful to be recognised.” But it is also important to keep working – “it’s what keeps us alive” – and for this reason she is wary of the tendency to describe her as the godmother of performance art. “If I thought of myself like that, I wouldn’t be able to function. I’m pleased with the effect I’ve had on other artists, and on the students I’ve taught. But I can’t put myself in some exalted category. It’s important not to slip into repetition.”

/// I was very involved with changing my appearance, and observing myself, and the persona I was creating

Is there really much danger of that? It’s hard to imagine there is. As the painter Susan Rothenberg once put it, hers is an “excruciatingly odd” kind of a mind. You never quite know what she will do next.

Jonas was born in Manhattan in 1936, and grew up there and on Long Island. Neither of her parents, who separated when she was six, worked for a living – her father, who lived on a boat, was a failed writer – and she won’t tell me how they funded themselves (perhaps some private money was involved). But they and her wider family had artistic leanings that seem to have rubbed off on their daughter, whom they would also enrol in a progressive school on the Upper East Side where the days began with the children being asked what they wanted to do.

Her mother, a keen collector of things, took her to galleries and the opera, and her father introduced her to poetry; a great uncle made dioramas, and an aunt was a painter. Her step-parents, too, were influential. She got her love of magic shows from her stepfather, a jazzman who was also a talented amateur magician; her stepmother had a sister who knew, among other artists, Gorky and de Kooning. (Jonas was never introduced to either of them, but their spirit was somehow in the air.) “I knew I wanted to be an artist from the age of five or six,” she says. “And my father encouraged it, perhaps because he had been disappointed himself artistically. But it wasn’t until I was in my 20s that I knew I *could* be one. It took me a long time to get there, as a woman.”

Having studied sculpture at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Jonas returned to New York to attend Columbia as a postgraduate, this time with a husband in tow; it was through Gerry Jonas, to whom she was married for five years (she has never remarried), that she came to hear about the various excitements that were then going on downtown (Gerry’s Yale friend Henry Geldzahler, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s first curator of contemporary art, would call the writer Calvin Trillin to let him know what was happening, and Trillin would in turn call the Jonases). And as her interest in dance, music and the strange happenings then being staged by artists such as Claes Oldenburg and Robert Whitman grew, so did her dissatisfaction with her own Giacometti-like sculptures.

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"I was lucky to see those things, and they affected me deeply, so I switched to performance," she says, as if it was the simplest thing in the world. And she destroyed all her sculptures? "Yes, and I'm not sorry I did."

Did this change feel daring?

"I didn't feel so, no. I was driven by my interests. I'd always liked poetry and films; I saw what I was about to do as related to their structure." She didn't worry, particularly, about how she would make a living. At first, her husband supported her; later, she found ways of supporting herself, working in a gallery and as a proofreader for the *New York Review of Books*. Sometimes there were grants, too. "I survived all those years. I just had to be careful to live within my means."

She didn't use the word "performance" at first: "I called them pieces." Her first fully realised piece was *Oad Lau*, in 1968, in which she and another performer, dressed in costumes to which small mirrors had been glued, walked stiffly back and forth across a New York gymnasium in parallel lines (she was all the while reciting passages from Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*). Meanwhile, five other performers (friends and fellow artists) built a string structure on which sheets of plastic were laid; it blew in the breeze generated by some large electric fans. This performance, which ended with the structure being pulled down, involved many of what would become her motifs: choreography; a sense of ritual; an engagement with nature (the plastic sheets suggested a watering place or pond); above all, an interest in mirrors. It was intensely precise, but it was also highly contingent, and its meaning, as opposed to its effects, remained largely obscure. (I've yet to find someone who can talk or write about Jonas's early work in a way that makes sense of it; those who were there at the time are not, alas, the ones compiling the catalogues or curating the shows, nor does it seem to have occurred to them to find and interview those who were.)



▲ 'I don't know any performance artists who have been heckled': Jonas in Robert Ashley's *Celestial Excursions*, New York, 2009. Photograph: Hiroyuki Ito/Getty Images

After this, she was on her way. In the course of the next few years, she made some of the work for which she is probably still best known. The *Mirror Pieces* [1968-71] involved groups of women moving in tightly choreographed patterns as they carried full-length mirrors, the first batch of which she had picked up at a five and dime

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store; or, in the case of *Mirror Check*, a naked Jonas inspecting every part of her body with a small hand mirror. In *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* [1972], she performed as her masked erotic double, Organic Honey, wearing an extraordinary feathered head-dress as she engaged in repetitive activities that riffed on female narcissism (by this point, she had been to Japan, where she had bought her first video camera; the audience, then, was able to watch both the performance and a live feed of it, a juxtaposition she loved).

"I was very involved with changing my appearance, and observing myself, and the persona I was creating," she says. "Dancers look at mirrors, and I had taken workshops with dancers. One thing that interested me, it still does, is that [in these pieces] the audience is reflected in the mirrors; what gave it all an edge was that they felt uneasy. You don't want other people to see you looking. It's the taboo of the mirror. Visually, also, the mirror breaks up a space; your perception of it changes."

These pieces have things to say about the perception of women's bodies, and about the tension between what is public and what is private (well, this is my interpretation of them). Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that at the time she made them, Jonas was a member of a women's group. "It had a big effect on my life," she says. "The whole [women's liberation] movement did. Our group was small. We had a lot of pent-up anger about the whole situation. [We went in for] self-examination, and for revealing intimate aspects of one's sensibilities. *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* was all about asking the question: what is the feminine? I was concerned with the roles women play."

Did she feel vulnerable making this work, particularly *Mirror Check*?

"It seemed to other people I had made myself vulnerable, but it really wasn't the case. It wasn't autobiographical. Also, I was protected by the distance from the audience, and in my work, no one breaks the wall – or they haven't so far. I don't know any performance artists who have been heckled." In the beginning, her audiences were small, and they were composed of people she knew: other artists, curators, musicians. Now, they're bigger, more diverse and more receptive (there seems to be a real hunger for performance art at the moment – witness the popularity of Marina Abramović's show *512 Hours* at the Serpentine Gallery in 2014). What's strange, though, is that Jonas doesn't feel the audience changes the work from performance to performance. There is a sense in which, in spite of what she has just said about the crowd seeing itself in the mirror, she doesn't care about it at all. In this way, if no other, her practice is very different from that of a theatre director, or an actor.



▲ On stage at New York venue the Kitchen in 2016: "If I do a bad performance, I feel awful for weeks". Photograph: Paula Court

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As the years went by, the work grew richer, her frame of references wider. She moved away from the site-specific and into gallery spaces, which is how she came to start making installations, as a kind of pendant to the performance itself. *The Juniper Tree* (1976), which told the story of an evil stepmother using, among other things, wooden balls and a ladder, was inspired by the Grimm brothers' *Fairy Tales* and Bruno Bettelheim's book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, which applied Freudian psychology to them. *Lines in the Sand* (2002) was inspired by HD's [Hilda Doolittle] poem *Helen in Egypt*, and deployed some of the marvellous photographs Jonas's grandmother had taken when she visited the country in 1900. *Reanimation* (2010-13) has its source in the novel *Under the Glacier* by the Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness.

"There is a continuity in the work," she says. "And sometimes one thing segues into the next. But I always try to choose a new subject or form. Sometimes, you don't know what you're doing. You just begin. One piece, *Funnel* [from 1974], began with a cone. It evolved entirely from that. The set was cone-shaped, and I used cones as props."

How long does the process take? "About a year, usually."

How does she know when something is finished?

"There is no one finished product."

This takes us to some of the tricky issues around performance art, whose intangibility presents something of a problem in an art world that fetishises objects. I wonder: does a reconstruction (I would call it a reproduction if that word didn't seem so loaded in context) of a piece have the same value as it did originally, or is something lost in translation? And what about if it is performed by a collaborator, rather than by Jonas herself? Is it still the same? Above all, how firmly must she stick to what we might call her original rubric? (I've seen pictures of the typescripts of the directions involved in her early performances; they read a bit like something out of Pinter.)

She thinks for a minute. "The *Mirror Piece*, which I will do at Tate: I have reconstructed it before, at the Guggenheim in New York. I took all my old photographs and all my old directions, and I based it on those. I find it very interesting seeing it now. I enjoy it. But it is a slightly new version, yes. These things can never be the same as they were, never, never." The Tate will also stage *Song Delay*, an outdoor piece from 1973 (it will be performed by collaborators; Jonas will not participate). "We will do it by the Thames at low tide, a site quite different from where it was originally performed. It's a new work, based on old work, with the same props and movements." It takes me a moment to notice that she hasn't really answered my questions. But perhaps, for her, they are unanswerable – matters to be left to the critics and the theorists.

The 80s were difficult, she admits. Art was suddenly all about money, and painting, and her work "kind of disappeared... it wasn't quite the same for a while." But the 90s were good, she says – as they were for many female artists of her generation. She no longer feels, as she used to, that the art world is overly masculine. "When I went to art school, there were no women teachers. Now there are many. It's still harder for women: men get more shows. But there are some very strong women out there now: Barbara Kruger [the American conceptual artist and collagist], Louise Lawler [the photographer, also American]."

What does she make of #MeToo? (At the time of our interview, allegations of harassment have been made against the dealer and collector Anthony d'Offay, and the publisher of *Artforum*, Knight Landesman.) "It's like a revolution, and it's very important, a necessary explosion. The only thing I criticise is the lack of due process. I don't think it is fair to be accused and taken down without one."

I wonder what she's like to work with. Is she collaborative or tyrannical? "In between," she says, barely missing a beat. "I am forceful. But with something like the Tate, I don't have time to do everything, so I will have to rely on the judgments of others." Will she mind what the critics say? "You can't help caring. Art is communication."

Her escape hatch is Nova Scotia, where she has a house and a studio, and spends her summers. "It's important. I like to be in the country, and I do a lot of work up there... the freedom." Yes, SoHo has changed beyond all recognition. But she won't move, not now: that would be too big an undertaking. "I still like the buildings early in the morning and late at night,

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and there are still places like this [she gestures at the windows, today's thin winter light streaming through them and on to the little white models of the gallery spaces at Tate Modern]. A lot of us are still here."

Is it lonely, though? Her assistant has just arrived, but a practice like hers involves a certain amount of necessary seclusion. "Sometimes," she says, "but not often. I have many friends, I collaborate." She looks at her hands, her long fingers. "I don't worry about whether my work is *right* any more, but I do still constantly have to think: is this working? Is this any good?"

*Joan Jonas is at Tate Modern from 14 Mar-5 Aug and is performing as part of BMW Tate Live from 16-25 March.
Tickets available from tate.org.uk*