



**JOAN JONAS**  
AUSTIN, TX

The inception of *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* is striking: On a Southwest trip some forty years back, Joan Jonas witnessed the Hopi snake dance, a memory given new life in the early 2000s when she read a reference to the dance by the German art historian Aby Warburg. Years lapsed between Warburg's time with the Hopi in the late 1800s and his writing in 1924 about their dances and rituals. As Jonas later wrote, he was then "recovering from a mental breakdown," his essay acting "as a cure, or proof of one, to himself as much as to his physicians." Jonas explains how *Shape* is the "result of an ongoing concern with the subject of ritual and performance," also drawing from her 2002 project for Documenta 11, *Lines in the Sand*, which pivoted around the writings of Imagist poet H.D. and the poet's sessions with Freud [Fusebox Festival at Texas Performing Arts; May 4 and 5, 2012].

The multimedia performance relied upon a vast scale of parts in its deliverance of a theatrical whole. Jonas was joined by José Luis Blondet and Ragani Haas, who enacted a range of expression from silent tableaux to monologues, and toward the end Kate Fenner sang. Playing a significant role was Jason Moran, on stage continuously performing his original piano score—his presence and music a unifying force. Prerecorded video was abundant, and the more whimsical the footage (e.g., Jonas and others appearing in loose skits), the more incidental the material felt to the piece as an entirety—only adding to the sense of sprawl. More compelling was the punctuation of the prerecorded video with live video: the onstage action cycled through a video capture and projection loop in an infinity mirror effect—this exploration of sensation and form through performance and technology was reminiscent of Jonas' earlier canonical video *Vertical Roll*, 1972.

Jonas also used her own disembodied voice (apparently both prerecorded and live from offstage), the occasional written text projected onto the screen, which was otherwise preserved for the moving images, amplified sound of live actions, and many set pieces, props, and

art mediums. A taxidermied coyote on wheels figured prominently, and while the understanding was that the animal had literal and symbolic import, in eliciting light humor and not a deeper, more visceral response its potential power was not actualized. I think of *I Like America and America Likes Me*, 1974, in which Joseph Beuys interacted with a (live) wild coyote for his show at New York's René Block Gallery. Even experienced only secondhand via image and text, it poses tough challenges to subsequent works seeking to plumb the depths of the coyote, real and imaginary.

Jonas' inquiry into abstract and minimalist form (sculpture) is where her expansive lexicon most excites—and where her project dialogues resonantly with *Dia: Beacon*, for which it was originally commissioned, in 2005. A long, white bench with three sets of wheels, on which performers Blondet and Haas faced each other as if on a seesaw, was fully explored for its multiple interpretations, not least of which, as Jonas spiralled the bench around the stage, was snake dancing; an interlocking series of white walls (again on wheels) was once a house, then a barrier, then a train; and metal rods were pounded against the floor, their sound amplified. In the most stunning of these minimalist sculptural actions, Jonas rolled a large ring around the stage. The moment of its release was thrilling: the inanimate object took on a life of its own as it gyrated in seeming protest against its steady and gradual descent.

Some hours later, awakening to thunder and lightning, I had a sensation of being enveloped by *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*. Uncanny was the continuity between the actual Texan storm and Jonas' mimicry (and invocation) of thunder by flapping a piece of sheet metal she held in her hands against a backdrop of a video montage of storm clips. The performance's strength lay in how particular images and scenes came to the fore as ritual enactments. This work-in-progress could be all the more lasting with additional editing.

—Caroline Koebel