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# Joan Jonas THEY COME TO US WITHOUT A WORD

With contributions by  
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# How the Box Contains Us

Ann Reynolds

In addition to creating space, a mirror also disturbs space, suggesting another reality through the looking glass. To see the reflection of Narcissus; to be a voyeur. To see one's self as the other. . . . to see oneself also among, as one with, the others.

Joan Jonas<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly an experience of disinterested observation opens in its centre and gives birth to a happiness which is instantly recognizable as your own.

The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life.

John Berger<sup>2</sup>

Standing on the ground floor of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, looking at Jacopo Tintoretto's *Massacre of the Innocents* of 1582–87 (fig. 1). It is a large painting, one in a cycle of eight depicting the life of the Virgin. As in most of the other paintings in the series, Tintoretto used linear perspective against itself to create a space without a stable internal illusionistic logic. A vertical rectangular shape—perhaps a doorway or a view into a colonnaded atrium—that technically occupies the painting's vanishing point refuses to remain in the deep background.



Figure 1. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Massacre of the Innocents*, 1582–87. Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice. Photograph, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 2. Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2012, performance at Roulette, Brooklyn, NY, as part of Performa 13, 2013. Photograph © Paula Court

Brilliantly lit by a world located outside the primary interior space depicted in the painting, this rectangle competes for attention with other, equally well-lit portions of the foreground and middle ground and seems to suggest not only another space within the painting, or alternate interpretations of the internal logic of the painting's space, but also, perhaps, opportunities to consider Tintoretto's painting *in* space. One might imagine Tintoretto's bright rectangle as a discrete picture of an alternate event, time, or place, hovering like an apparition in an ambiguous relation to the space occupied by the biblical story of the Massacre of the Innocents. Or it could be a mirror reflecting a space beyond the physical confines of the painting. In any sense, Tintoretto's painting may be experienced as a more open, fluctuating palimpsest of spaces that don't always coalesce even as they coexist within a shared set of physical limit terms: the length and width of the canvas and the three dimensions of the room in the Scuola Grande.

It is quite a simple gesture, one that Joan Jonas often makes in her performances. She stands in front of a large, prerecorded video pro-



Figure 3. Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, performance at the Kaskade, Kassel, Germany, as part of dOCUMENTA (13), 2012. Photograph by Rosa Maria Rühling

jected onto a wall or screen and holds up a piece of white paper or cloth, sometimes shifting it from side to side, tipping it slightly left to right, then right to left, shaking it, or using it to track or momentarily frame the movements of something in the projection behind her (fig. 2). Sometimes she makes drawings on the paper or holds it close to her body and traces her body's contours onto it with a marker or crayon. The visual effects are subtle. Just a slight change in the distance or angle between the projector and the surface of the projection brings the portion of the video image Jonas is capturing a bit closer and isolates, frames, and magnifies it slightly, in or out of focus, transforming the rest of the projected image into background. If the paper she holds up is black, Jonas's gesture produces the opposite effect; it almost obliterates part of the projected image and substitutes a black void or a white-on-black drawing for this temporarily "lost" portion (fig. 3).

During these actions, Jonas wears simple white or light-colored clothing, across which the projected video image also visibly extends, simultaneously absorbing her into it as she extends parts of it, her



Figure 4. Joan Jonas, *Mirror Piece II*, performance at 14th Street Emanu-El YMHA, New York, 1970. Photograph by Peter Moore © Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

drawings, and herself outward. Through her gestures and these visual transformations, she subtly disrupts the internal logic of the prerecorded, projected image's space and its figure/ground relationships by weaving them into her space and into the present, a space and time she also shares with her audience. These spatial effects are quite fleeting, as eventually Jonas drops the paper or cloth to the floor and moves on to something else, but during those moments, she is self-consciously challenging the viewer's reflexive relation to viewing images of space in a manner that is similar to the potential experiences that Tintoretto's paintings allow.

A few days after visiting the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Jonas asks: "Why do we make these spaces?" This is a question of central importance, as Jonas has been making such spaces her entire career.<sup>3</sup> Considering why she makes them is a corollary to considering how.

First, before paper or cloth, it was mirrors that Jonas held up or directed others to hold up, reflecting fragmentary views of the space in front of the performers and, often, portions of the audience (fig. 4). Some have described the effect of these gestures in her performances as sculptural, because they generate views of all three dimensions of the performance space, or because they seem to resemble the works of Jonas's contemporaries (erstwhile sculptors such as Robert Morris and Robert Smithson, who also worked with mirrors), or because Jonas herself began as a sculptor. Although Jonas has described the sets for her early performances as sculpture, the term seems imprecise in relation to the experiences produced by her early mirror performances, since the simultaneous, side-by-side views of different portions of the space, some of them images reflected in individual mirrors, some of them direct views of the space between the mirrors, served to weave discrete aspects of the overall space into a constantly shifting and unstable *surface* of contradictory images as well as to provide a cumulative description of the physical, three-dimensional limit terms of a particular space.

Jonas herself has described how she developed her early mirror performances: by sitting in and carefully looking at the space in which she was to perform, as if it were a painting. This process was, in part, a continuation of her early art-history training, a tracing of the history of painting in relation to the depiction of space. But now this training offered her a template for slipping performance into a particular space without losing sight of how her presence disrupted and transformed the experience of the space and its own ambiguities and illusions as a picture as well as a space: "When I began this work I thought of stepping into the space of a painting; the mirror pieces were abstract in the sense that they broke up the surface space and altered perception for the viewer. That is what interested me."<sup>4</sup>

Jonas's first public performance, *Oad Lau*, took place in a conventional rectangular space, a basketball gymnasium in New York City in 1968 (fig. 5). Few photographs of this performance exist, and there is no film or video record of it, but Jonas has offered the following description:



Figure 5. Joan Jonas, *Oad Lau*, performance at Choreoconcerts Experimental Workshops, Saint Peter's Gymnasium, New York, 1968. Photograph by Peter Campus

Two figures, a man and a woman, wear costumes to which small mirrors are glued. They walk stiffly, shoulder to shoulder, swaying back and forth in straight lines parallel and perpendicular to the spectators. Large electric fans appear to blow them, and five other performers, to and fro as their costumes reflect the surroundings. The other performers meanwhile build a structure of string, strung at the spectators' eye level, on which sheets of plastic are laid, creating a waterlike surface. This structure also sways to the breeze from the fans. Finally it is pulled down, and the performance ends.<sup>5</sup>

Together, these props and actions produced transitory, fragmentary images and sensations suggestive of a windy and watery outdoor landscape while concurrently reiterating the physical terms of the gymnasium as both a box and a rectangular picture. The choreography, or at least Jonas's description of it, reiterated the space's parallel and per-

pendicular walls; the sheets of plastic and the mirrors attached to two of the performers' costumes echoed its rectangular shape. The mirrors also reflected the position and quality of the light sources in the space and, at moments, random members of the audience. The wind, generated by the large electric fans, created another visible, audible, and unifying environmental condition in the space that affected the movements of the performers, their costumes, the sheets of plastic, and, indirectly, the audience. The resulting experience of being present in the gymnasium and simultaneously, if momentarily, released from it through glimpses and sensations of a watery landscape located somewhere else was generated by illusionism and literalism operating at once within the performance.

Throughout her career, Jonas has continuously adapted her performances and their component parts—drawings, props, videos, sounds, and gestures—to new and different types of spaces. Jonas initiated this

practice by following *Oad Lau* with a short, black-and-white, silent 16mm film entitled *Wind*, which was shot by Peter Campus on the North Shore of Long Island, New York, in 1968 (fig. 6). Many of the performers, props, and effects were the same as those in the earlier performance, except that now Jonas used long shots with a stationary movie camera to frame a sequence of rectangular spaces within a seemingly limitless outdoor landscape. The camera captured the effects of a strong wind, now silently blowing the performers, their coats, and sheets of thin plastic across the space and sometimes in and out of the camera's frame. At other times, the performers approached the camera so closely that their clothing served as an effective cinematic wipe between shots. All these actions, made in relation to the position of the camera, underscored the presence of the framing edge of a picture self-consciously set aside as a space of performance.



Figure 6. Joan Jonas, film still from *Wind*, 1968, filmed by Peter Campus on the North Shore of Long Island, NY. Photograph courtesy of the artist

In creating *Wind*, Jonas considered the open landscape in terms of several different media and histories of spatial representation, including her own, earlier approach in *Oad Lau*, which then intermittently coexist together on the screen "among, as one with, the others."<sup>6</sup> The artifice of the camera's stationary framing edge and the performers' movements in relation to it transformed portions of the North Shore beach into a "moving picture." In the resulting film, the stationary camera, the grainy black-and-white image, the lack of a soundtrack, and the jerky, often humorous, gestures and actions of the performers suggest some of the fundamental qualities of early silent film; Victor Sjöström's *The Wind* (1928) or the early comedies of Charlie Chaplin or Harold Lloyd come to mind.<sup>7</sup> The frontal, mostly side-to-side and symmetrical choreography often divides the space into horizontal bands and regularizes its perspectival depth, as if it were an animated painting. Viewers can parse out these medium-specific formal, technical, and historical attributes, but it is the way they coexist that shapes one's experience—so much so that in *Wind*'s final shot, when the landscape appears as a simple pattern of horizontal, almost monochromatic bands suggestive of an abstract painting or photograph, it is difficult not to experience the space as completely empty and still, defined by the specter of what is now absent or temporarily overridden: the performers and the movement inherent to the medium of motion pictures.

Jonas acknowledges that, over the years, she has developed her work "in relation to the mediums that transform space and image: the mirror, deep landscape space that has no boundaries and is not a cube, and the closed circuit video system."<sup>8</sup> Deep or open-ended landscapes, both rural and urban, provided the settings for several of her early outdoor performances, but soon the landscape migrated indoors.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as in her earliest attempts, with *Oad Lau* and *Wind*, to bring the landscape indoors through performance or film, few of these landscapes slip into their designated space—the video monitor, projection screen, or gallery or performance space—without subtly disrupting and transforming the experience of that space. And, analogously, these "boxes" also contain Jonas's landscapes in different ways.



Figure 7. Joan Jonas, video still from *Disturbances*, 1974. Photograph courtesy of the artist

*Disturbances*, a 1974 black-and-white, single-channel video with sound, consists of ten sequences in which one to four performers are seen either reflected on the surface of the water in a pool, walking in the pool's water, or swimming beneath its surface. Glimpses of thin slivers of the space outside the pool appear only briefly, at the upper edge of the image early in the video. In the opening sequence, the upper body of a woman walking along the pool's edge, dressed in a flowing white costume suggestive of an earlier time, possibly the turn of the twentieth century, is reflected in the water (fig. 7). The woman stops, sits and then leans over the edge of the pool like a Caravaggesque Narcissus until her hair touches and spreads out across the surface of the water. She retreats and then repeats these actions, her reflection slightly oscillating on the surface of the water throughout. In all the other sequences,



Figure 8. Joan Jonas, video still from *Disturbances*, 1974. Photograph courtesy of the artist

the performers more actively disturb the water's surface and its reflected images by throwing rocks into the pool, swimming or walking in it, or jumping up and down on the pool's diving board. In one sequence, two underwater swimmers move toward, and then deliberately circle within, the reflected image of a performer who stands at the pool's edge and stretches out a white, fringed shawl, sways from side to side and then contracts the shawl (fig. 8). Occasionally, she allows the fringe to touch the surface of the water, reiterating the earlier performer's gestures with her hair.

At times, particularly in the intentionally overexposed shots, distinctions between surface and depth and figures and reflections become almost impossible to sustain. The water's reflective surface and the images reflected in it would also have been eventually overlaid with



reflections on the glass surface of the video monitor of the people and other aspects of the larger environment surrounding it in the exhibition space. As a result, figures and other elements occupying both spaces and times would appear simultaneously, wavering, mingling, dissolving, and reappearing. All these images and specters of figures and spaces, some constituted in the past and suggestive of an even deeper past through costume or mythological or art-historical references, some created in the present by the spectator in the act of viewing the video, constitute a picture of a place as a series of interrelated events: now surface, now depth, now reflection, now figure in space, now all of these at once.

*Disturbances* is a technical tour de force primarily because Jonas created it with a single video camera and no special effects. She just positioned the camera and her performers and directed their actions so as to frame or enhance the complex spatial illusions already embedded in her chosen location. The rather quotidian actions and ambient sounds made by the performers and by other creatures and things sharing the video's setting—blue jays calling, cicadas singing, water lapping against the sides of the pool, rocks hitting the water or being knocked against each other by the performers, the heavy breathing of the swimmers after completing their underwater swims, the soft roar of an airplane passing overhead—call attention to unseen agents, reminding the viewer of all that a self-consciously observed environment can contain and simultaneously obscure. Set within an exhibition or performance space, the images and sounds in *Disturbances* also suggest how such a space can be experienced as an environment, akin to other environments elsewhere, not because it resembles them but because of what it, too, can simultaneously reveal and obscure.

In his short essay *Why Look at Animals?*, the critic and novelist John Berger describes a grassy field located along one of two routes he can take walking home from the city center to the smaller, satellite city where he lives. The field is bordered by trees on two sides, by a road and a railway on the other two, and is filled with tall grass. Initially, Berger refers to the field as “a space awaiting events” but realizes in the end

that it is “an event in itself.”<sup>20</sup> His description of what he means by this is suggestive of the way space is experienced in Jonas's work:

You relate the events which you have seen and are still seeing to the field. It is not only that the field frames them, it also *contains* them. The existence of the field is the precondition for their occurring in the way that they have done and for the way in which others are still occurring. All events exist as definable events by virtue of their relation to other events. You have defined the events you have seen primarily (but not necessarily exclusively) by relating them to the event of the field, which at the same time is literally and symbolically the *ground* of the events which are taking place within it.<sup>21</sup>

In describing the field as an event, Berger ceases to distinguish between experience and ground; one constitutes the other reciprocally, at every instant and over time, as the memory of this constituting also becomes the ground for experiencing events in the present. His field becomes a frame *and* a container, a picture *and* a space, a figure or figures *and* a ground, but all these terms are open, relative to one another and to previous experiences.

Jonas's work depends on a similar openness. By denying viewers a stable point of reference in relation to her chosen grounds—particular spaces and media—she precipitates their awareness of ground as experience. Some viewers bring with them memories of her earlier works; they can identify specific props, images, sounds, texts, and even individual performers she reuses in her work. But neither these elements, nor the recognition of them, constitutes her works as an event. Instead, it is how Jonas continuously assembles and mobilizes these elements, some old, some new, to shape experiences of space over time that makes all of her work, her single-channel videos and installations as well as her performances, an event.

In 2012, Jonas returned to *Disturbances*, as she often returns to earlier work, using selected sequences from it as a backdrop to additional



Figure 9. Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2012, performance at HangarBicocca, Milan, 2014. Photograph by Moira Ricci

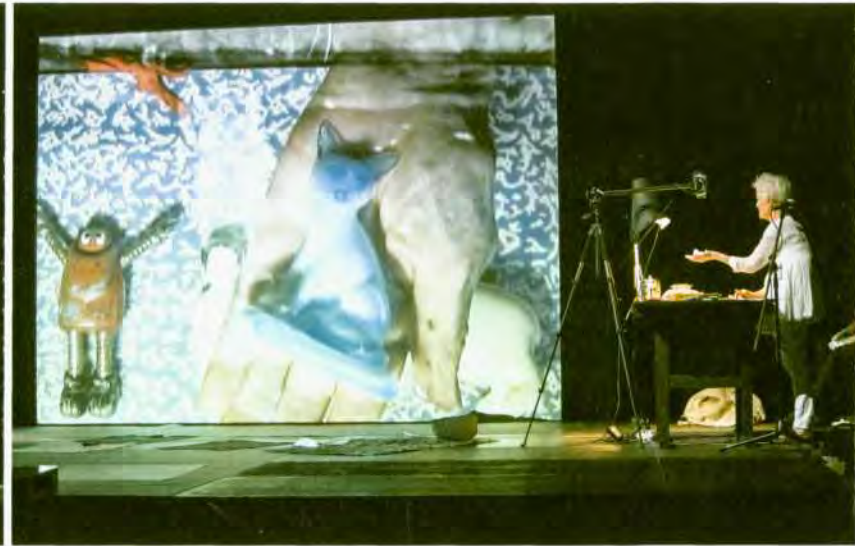


Figure 10. Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2012, performance at HangarBicocca, Milan, 2014. Photograph by Moira Ricci

actions, images, and sounds in *Reanimation*, her most recent installation and performance and the one most closely related to *They Come to Us without a Word*, her multimedia installation for the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The video appears twice in the performance, both times as a large projection in the center background of the stage. In the first instance, Jonas manipulated a sheet of plastic under a live video camera on the right side of the stage, and its undulating reflections appear superimposed onto the projected video sequence of swimmers in the pool from *Disturbances*, doubling these reflections in real time (fig. 9). In the second instance, Jonas placed a rectangular blue-and-white-patterned portfolio under the live camera so that it appeared as a colorful, watery background for the swimmers and the phantom-like reflection of the performer with the shawl from *Disturbances*. She then slowly brought four different objects onto the portfolio's surface and simultaneously into the watery realm with the video per-

formers: first, a white leather toy polar bear; then, a battered red robot; then, a small antique porcelain doll; and finally, a blue ceramic fox (fig. 10). Through her slow and graceful movements, each creature appeared to float or swim to the bottom edge of the portfolio or, by default, to the bottom of the pool. The objects'—Jonas's—movements also, at times, deliberately echoed or traced the movements of the performers in *Disturbances*. Once all four objects were in place, Jonas reversed her actions with each one, slowly emptying the space until only the images of the swimmers and the reflections of the woman with the shawl remained. Then, the *Disturbances* video switched to the sequence of the reflected image of a woman jumping up and down on the diving board, which juts diagonally across the image. Jonas filled the space under the live camera, which was now occupied by a slate tablet, with colorful marbles, and she began to move them around with a piece of chalk, making quick, long, diagonal marks on the tablet

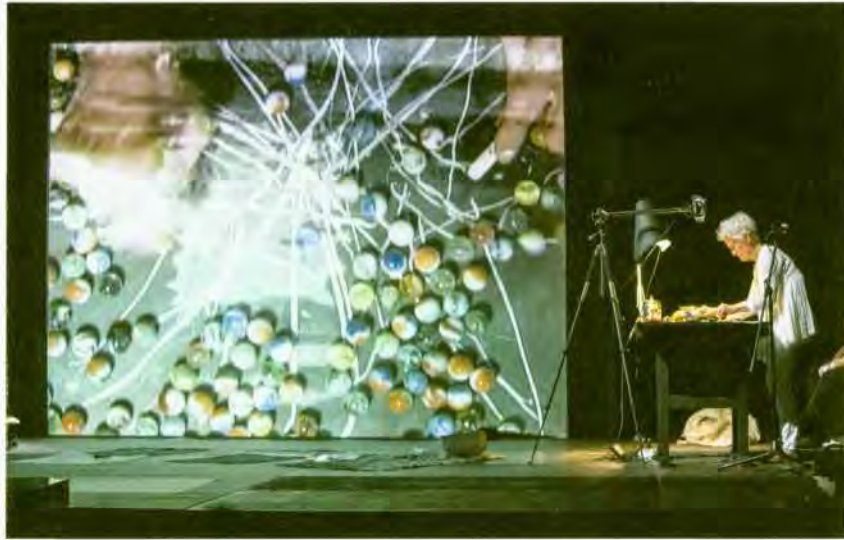


Figure 11. Joan Jonas, *Reanimation*, 2012, performance at HangarBicocca, Milan, 2014. Photograph by Moira Ricci

(fig. 11). When this sequence from *Disturbances* ended, Jonas stopped drawing and turned off the live camera, and the video projection cut to a tightly framed color shot of a seal floating in an aquarium pool looking up at the camera—another swimmer in a watery landscape.

According to Jonas, “The prop generates movement and one such object, or group of objects, partly represents the content of the work.”<sup>12</sup> As with her depictions of space, the content of Jonas’s work eludes neat description; neither is equivalent to the sum of its discrete parts. The collective presence of the animals, doll, and robot in the doubled pool in *Reanimation*, for example, together with the sounds of the performers, birds, and insects on the soundtrack of *Disturbances*, could be understood as representing an ecosystem or environment; what makes the experience of this portion of the performance an *experience* rather than a representation of an environment, or, to use Berger’s term, a “field,” is how the three- and two-dimensional props, both animal and human, move and are made to move in relation to a shared space and time.

Here, as in almost all her performances, Jonas’s live actions reanimate familiar props or old or prerecorded images. The resulting palimpsest never coalesces into a single, stable, or convincing illusion of space, even though all its elements coexist within the same physical limit terms. It sustains an experience of space that requires the spectator to acknowledge that she is a part of it, part of the event, even as she and the artist bring other, previous experiences along with them.

So, to return to Jonas’s question, “Why do we make these spaces?” My answer, based on my own experiences of her work and the works of other artists, such as Tintoretto, to which she responds, would be: to undermine our potential complacency about space and how it connects us, and to point to the myriad ways in which it contains us and we attempt to contain it in response. Jonas is always bringing new elements and concerns to her work, in part because she never views the spaces with and within which she works as awaiting her actions, as if they were a neutral ground. She steps into something that is already layered with previous actions, histories, and uses, a space she shares with others, human and animal, organic and inorganic. Her openness to all these connections is particularly relevant to the spaces she is creating in *They Come to Us without a Word*, because climate change and the state of the global environment in general are among her central concerns. Those who deny humankind’s role in climate change view the natural world as something apart from the human and as a set of material resources whose exploitation has no real consequences. Some have described environmentalism as an equally anthropocentric enterprise, analogous to Berger’s initial sense of his field as a space awaiting events.<sup>13</sup> By viewing the field, the environment, or any space, for that matter, as an event in itself, we acknowledge that its existence depends on what happens in it and on how those events relate to each other over time, not just on what the space physically contains.

Before stepping into the spaces of the United States Pavilion this spring, Jonas spent time looking at them, as she always does, in a number of different ways, acknowledging that they are not blank slates. Then, she brought in many of the images, props, videos, and other types

of objects she has used in her previous work, along with new elements made specifically for this installation, to reanimate the spaces on her own terms. This reanimation, as always, entails the bringing together of different spaces, images, and objects. They share the rooms of the installation, resonating together without coalescing, but this time, for Jonas, the reanimation is a bit more spectral than usual. It is framed by ghost stories, transcriptions of the memories of stories told to elderly inhabitants of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, by their great-grandparents, who lived in a time before electricity. Throughout the installation, visitors will hear different voices, including the artist's, repeating fragments of Cape Bretoners' experiences of the deceased, whom some of them refer to as "the other side of life," moving about in their homes and sharing their spaces: "I used to hear walking. And if you'd be in the kitchen, in the dining room, you'd hear somebody coming downstairs. And you'd be in one room and you'd hear whatever it was walking into the other room. When you'd be in bed upstairs through the night you'd hear the walking down below, pulling dishes and opening the doors."<sup>14</sup>

Jonas has spent part of her summers in Cape Breton since 1970. It is also the setting for a significant amount of the video images she has produced and often used in her work since then. Jonas combines old and recent images made in Cape Breton with others made at different locations throughout the world, including in her New York studio. She also includes portions of video and audio from earlier work; once again, *Disturbances* makes an appearance. Animals, fish, and bees, and environmental elements such as wind and water, appear in these videos and in simple drawings and small objects arranged throughout the pavilion. Because they are never exclusively realistic, rarely static, and never distanced to the point of nostalgia, they function as events and as signals of how we have shared and continue to need to share the box that contains us.

#### NOTES

1. Joan Jonas in Johann-Karl Schmidt, ed., *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation 1968–2000* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2001), 70.
2. John Berger, *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 75.
3. Although I cannot address the specifics of Jonas's installation for the United States Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, which was still in process when I completed this text, my thoughts were shaped by conversations, books, and experiences shared with Jonas in Milan, Venice, and New York over the past nine months, while she was developing the installation.
4. Joan Jonas, "Space Movement Time," in *Joan Jonas* (Milan: Charta, 2007), 48.
5. Joan Jonas, "Oad Lau 1968," in Douglas Crimp, ed., *Joan Jonas: Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982* (Berkeley: University Art Museum, 1983), 13.
6. Jonas, *Joan Jonas: Performance Video Installation 1968–2000*, 70.
7. The performers' jerky motions were produced not by a disparity between shooting and projecting speed, as they often are in silent films, but by the conditions of the environment. The camera seized up because of the cold, slowing the filming speed, and this produced the jerky effects in the footage.
8. Jonas, "Space Movement Time," 50.
9. These early outdoor performances include *Jones Beach Piece* (1970), *Nova Scotia Beach Dance* (1971), and *Delay Delay* (1972). Later, Jonas made one additional outdoor performance: *Variations on a Scene* (1990).
10. Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*, 75.
11. *Ibid.*, 74–75.
12. Jonas, "Space Movement Time," 48.
13. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matters: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 110–16.
14. "John R. and Bessie MacLeod: Stories of Their Old Home," in Ronald Caplan, ed., *Cape Breton Book of the Night: Stories of Tenderness and Terror* (Wreck Cove: Breton Books, 1991), 71.