

considered new territory – mixing performance with props and mediated images, situated outdoors in natural or industrial environments. In her early works, such as *Wind* (1968), Jonas filmed performers stiffly passing through the field of view against a wind that lent the choreography a psychological mystique. *Songdelay* (1973), filmed with telephoto and wide-angle lenses, drew on Jonas' recent travel in Japan where she saw groups of Noh performers clapping wood blocks and making angular movements. Her video performances between 1972 and 1976 pared the cast to one actor, the artist herself performing in her New York loft as Organic Honey, her seminal alter-ego invented as an "electronic erotic seductress," whose doll-like visage seen reflected bits on camera explored the fragmented female image and women's shifting roles. Drawings, costumes, masks, and interactions with the recorded image were effects that optically related to a doubling of perception and meaning.

In 1976 with *The Juniper Tree*, Jonas arrived at a narrative structure from diverse literary sources, such as fairy tales, mythology, poetry, and folk songs, formalizing a highly complex, nonlinear method of presentation. In the 1990s, *My New Theater* series moved away from a dependence on her physical presence. In *Lines in the Sand* (2002), Jonas investigates themes of the self and the body in a performance installation based on the writer H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) epic poem "Helen in Egypt" (1951-55), which reworks the myth of Helen of Troy.

Jonas' works were first performed in the 1960s and '70s for some of the most influential artists of her generation, including Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham and Laurie Anderson. Her projects and experiments have provided the foundation on which much video performance art would be based. Her influences have also extended to conceptual art, theatre performance and other visual media. In 1994, Jonas was honored with a major retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Her work has been exhibited in various museums and art spaces in Europe and the United States as well as Rosamund Felsen in Los Angeles and the Pat Hearn Gallery in New York City.

Jonas has been awarded numerous fellowships and grants for choreography, video, and visual arts from institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the CAT Fund, the Artist TV Lab at WNET/13 (New York City), the Television Workshop at WXX1 (Rochester), and the Deutsche Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) in Germany. She has received the Hyogo Prefecture Museum of Modern Art Prize at the Tokyo International Video Art Festival, the Polaroid Award for Video, and the American Film Institute Maya Deren Award for Video, among others. She is currently a professor of visual arts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

Additional works include: *Wind* (1968), *Funnel* (1972), *Vertical Roll* (1972), *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), *Songdelay* (1973), *I Want to Live in the Country (And Other Romances)* (1974), *Disturbances* (1974), *The Juniper Tree* (1976), *Upside Down and Backwards* (1980), *Double Lunar Dogs* (1984), *Volcano Saga* (1985), *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... 'c9* (1992), *Woman in the Well* (1996/2000), her portable *My New Theater* series (1997-1999) and *Lines in the Sand* (2002).

The Jack H. Skirball Screening Series is curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud

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## JOAN JONAS

### READING CULTURE THROUGH DANTE AND ABY WARBURG

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December 8, 2008

8:30 pm

presented by

REDCAT

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater

California Institute of the Arts

# JOAN JONAS

## READING CULTURE THROUGH DANTE AND ABY WARBURG

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*Los Angeles theatrical premieres*

Monday, Dec. 8 | 8:30 pm  
Jack H. Skirball Series

Showing theatrical versions of her two most recent multimedia works, legendary video and performance artist Joan Jonas offers a deeply lyrical reading of two literary sources: the epic poetry of Dante Alighieri and the poetic cultural commentary of turn-of-the-century German historian and theorist Aby Warburg. **Reading Dante** (shown here as a single-channel video) is inspired by fragments of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* that produces the experience of a sensual, diffracted “infernal paradise” through footage collected from all over the world: Northern Canadian woods, a performance in Italy, a modernist ruin in a Mexican lava field, New York’s deserted business district at night. This piece is followed by a single-channel version of **The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things**—a staging of Aby Warburg’s famous 1923 lecture on the Pueblo Indian snake ritual. One of the most important female artists to emerge in the late 1960s and early ’70s, Jonas has collaborated with figures ranging from Dan Graham and Richard Serra to Laurie Anderson and The Wooster Group. Her work has been exhibited extensively across the globe.

### In person: Joan Jonas

“True to her form of translating the language of video (editing, montage) into performance and passing performance through the lens of video, Jonas’s newest work is a sophisticated, layered, and at times exhaustingly complex reflection on diverse cultural source material.”  
– *Artforum*

“In my mind, Dante and Aby Warburg are connected. Both had an overarching worldview. Dante thought epically during the medieval era when people were very isolated, and Warburg attempted to synthesize widely disparate cultures through the lens of art history. They were both on a journey through life that involves thinking about the world as a whole. The medieval era of Dante and the first half of the twentieth century of Warburg were both periods of extraordinary change, and I think the same can be said of today.”— Joan Jonas

**Reading Dante** (2007–08, 30 min.)  
Theatrical version – single channel projection

Inspired by the poetry of Dante Alighieri, the piece is based on fragments from *The Inferno* and *Paradiso*. The text is meant to be experienced on a track parallel to the visual and sonic tracks that developed as Jonas travelled and collected images. While not illustrative, these sounds and images represent her experience of ploughing through the multilayered complexity of *The Divine Comedy*.

“The portions of the *Inferno* I’m particularly attracted to are the most abstract, or philosophical; I quote a fraction of the text and have been helped greatly by a wonderful book, *The Poets’ Dante: Twentieth-Century Responses*. I think Hilda Doolittle, who wrote the poem “Helen in Egypt” (which I’ve also used recently), thought similarly, although she incorporated much more quotidian

experience. The everyday is how I relate to these broader issues; I try to translate these visions according to my vantage point on the present moment. *Reading Dante* is composed of footage shot in four locations, although two are intercut so there are three “scenes.” One of the sites is in Canada, where I go in the summer. There, in a wooded setting, I perform as different characters, and I work with children. Another location is New York. I redeploy nighttime footage shot in the 1970s in the city streets with Pat Steir. We had a cameraman, and we improvised with my long metal cones and a hoop. A strange man joined us, and you can see him, too. This footage in particular, with steam billowing from pipes, steps everywhere, and dark vistas up canyonlike avenues, seems appropriate to the *Inferno*. The third location, a kind of circular modernist ruin surrounding a lava field, is in Mexico City, near the university. The artist Carlos Amorales told me about the location, and I filmed his wife, Galia, performing there. This footage is intercut with a shadow play I conducted in a church during a workshop in Italy. Obviously I’m translating Dante into my own eccentric, very personal visual language; I’m not attempting to illustrate the text.”  
– Joan Jonas

**The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things** (2004–06, 70 min.)  
Theatrical version, single channel projection

Performance meets iconology: Jonas stages Aby Warburg’s famous lecture on the Pueblo Indian snake ritual. The piece is set in a mental sanatorium – where Warburg actually read his paper in 1923 Jonas draws on Aby Warburg’s study of Hopi imagery. Drawing on sources ranging from Noh to Nordic theater, from the Brothers Grimm to Homer, Jonas extrapolates the magic of universal narratives from the most quotidian of circumstances so that she, as well as we, may become the heroes and heroines, victims and villains of the myth of self and origin.

“This project goes back to a journey I made forty years ago to the Southwest, where I had the opportunity to see several Hopi rituals, including a performance of the Hopi Snake Dance. This was a very special experience that has inspired my work ever since. About ten years ago, I came across a reference to the dance in an essay by the German art historian Aby Warburg, in *Images from the religion of the Pueblo Indians of North America* (translated and with an interpretive essay by Michael T. Steinberg, Cornell University Press, 1995). Though his trip to the Southwest (which profoundly altered his view of art history) took place at the end of the nineteenth century, he did not produce his famous text about his experience there until thirty years later, as he was recovering from a mental breakdown at a sanatorium in Switzerland. He wrote it as a cure, or proof of one, to himself as much as to his physicians.

I made another trip to the Southwest in January 2004; I stayed on the Hopi reservation in Arizona, and began a dialogue with people in the community, but I did not wish to impose on, or take away from, the Native American people. For instance, I found myself focused on Dürer’s *Melancholia*, reproduced in Steinberg’s essay in the Warburg volume. To me, *Melancholia* evokes memories of history as it impacted the American landscape. In a sense, I am approaching an old experience, as Warburg did, decades later through new work, for which the words are not yet completely present.” – Joan Jonas

### ABOUT JOAN JONAS

An internationally acclaimed pioneer of video/performance art, **Joan Jonas** (b. 1936) is one of the most important women artists to emerge from the late 1960s and 1970s. She studied sculpture and art history at Columbia University and Mount Holyoke College, and danced with Trisha Brown at the Boston Museum School.

She started to work in New York as a sculptor, but by 1968 she moved into what was then