

Stories Project. ACC 54.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

Joan Jonas (b. 1936) has innovated video and performance art throughout her more than five-decade creative career. She shared a friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, the two artists mutually supportive of and involved in boundary-pushing performance art during the 1960s and 1970s.

Transcription of phone interview with Jonas conducted by David White, Senior Curator, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, on October 19, 2023. Reviewed and edited by the speakers.

David White [DW]: Hi, Joan. How are you?

Joan Jonas [JJ]: Hi, David. How are you?

DW: Well, and yourself?

JJ: Good. I have to say, I didn't have a chance to prepare for this, and I only have a few very simple things to say.

DW: I don't know how familiar you are with the oral history project. It was something the Foundation did in conjunction with Columbia, and there were large scale oral histories, and a book was published [Sara Sinclair, *Robert Rauschenberg: an oral history*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019]. But then the notion was to continue just talking to people who knew and worked with Bob [Robert Rauschenberg]. And even if they have a single thing, "Oh, let me just tell you about this one day . . ." So, there's no need to have prepared in any way.

JJ: One of the things I remember is that Bob came to my performance of a piece called *Organic Honey* in L.A. (1972), when I did it at Ace Gallery. The director of the gallery was Douglas Christmas. The space was previously Robert Irwin's studio, who had used scrim to create a beautiful, soft daylight. I gave a performance in Los Angeles and Venice. It was a special performance of *Organic Honey*, one of the early ones. And Bob came to that. And he really liked it.



Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972), Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, 1972. Performers: Joan Jonas, Anne Thornycroft, Margaret Wilson. Camera: Roberta Neiman. Photo: Roberta Neiman, courtesy Joan Jonas Studio

I knew him, of course, before that. But he was so supportive and enthusiastic. And he was an amazing member of the community, more than almost anyone of his generation. Opening his house to young artists, and having parties, and always warm and loving. That's the way I remember Bob. I mean, not to mention his work, which is genius. He was an incredible artist as well. So that's what I now remember. Then, I remember we invited him to see a piece in New York at The Wooster Group, the Performing Garage [Joan Jonas, *Double Lunar Dogs* (1981), performed at The Performing Garage, New York, December 1981]. and he came with John [Cage], and it was not my best performance. But he did come because we invited him. So, he made a major effort too.

DW: When you say he came with John, is that John Cage?

JJ: John Cage. He came with John Cage. And that's what I mainly remember at the moment. But I'll keep looking.

DW: Well, let me ask you one thing. When you were talking about how open and welcoming he [Rauschenberg] was at parties at his place [Rauschenberg's home and studio at 381 Lafayette Street], Kathy Halbreich [Executive Director of the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, from September 2017 to May 2023] mentioned several times that she heard of you dancing on the kitchen table. I don't know if that's something . . . Where she heard that from, and if that's true or not, but I thought it was such a . . .

JJ: It's the kind of thing I may have done if I drank too much, but of course there was a lot of drinking and such playfulness was encouraged. I'm not going to dispute it. It must have been seen. And then, of course, he was really close to . . . What was his friend's name? The young Japanese.

DW: Hisachika Takahashi. [Takahashi is a Tokyo-born artist and Rauschenberg's former studio assistant; he managed Rauschenberg's Lafayette Street home and studio in New York from the 1970s to the early 2000s.]

JJ: Yeah. So, they were just the center of activity at that time. In the early seventies, late sixties. And then, oh, another memory I have, which was seeing him, I don't know, it's one of these things where you get photographs and experiences mixed up. I'm pretty sure I went to 9 Evenings [Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering, 69th Regiment Armory, New York, Oct. 13–23, 1966, organized by Rauschenberg and Bell Lab engineer Billy Klüver] where he performed—and is that when he performed on roller skates with . . . ?

DW: That was not 9 Evenings, it was another time. [Rauschenberg performed on roller skates in his first performance he choreographed *Pelican* (1963).]

JJ: Well, I saw that [*Pelican* (1963), Judson Dance Theater, Dance Concert III, First New York Theater Rally, former CBS Studio, Broadway and Eighty-first Street, New York, May 24–26, 1965. Dance performed by Carolyn Brown, Alex Hay, and Rauschenberg]. And then he had a kind of flag, or parachute, or something that he held. Anyway, that was a brilliant and wonderful performance, or dance, that he did. So, in every area, he was amazing.



Rauschenberg, Carolyn Brown, and Per Olof Ultvedt rehearsing for the premiere of Rauschenberg's *Pelican* at Pop Festival in Washington, D.C., 1963. Photographs Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives

DW: As I understand it, he was invited to do a performance at that place. And it turned out it had been a roller rink. So, he said, "Well, must be done on roller skates."

JJ: On roller skates. Didn't he have roller skates?

DW: He either had some or got some.

JJ: That's what I remember. That he was on roller skates.

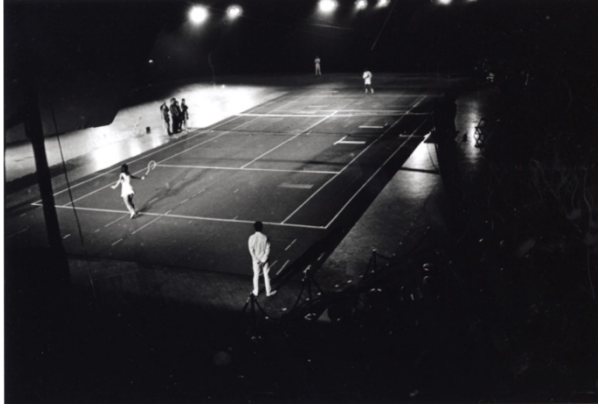
DW: And those big parachutes.

JJ: Yes, and he had . . . I'd have to look back and look at the pictures. Yeah, he was holding something, right? A parachute, or—

DW: They twirled around, and Carolyn Brown did not have a parachute on her back. We had some videos.

JJ: But I really tried to see things and know what was going on. What did he do at 9 Evenings? Do you know?

DW: His piece was called *Open Score* (1966). It started with a tennis game between Frank Stella and Mimi Kanarek. And with each hit of the ball, one of the lights went out. So it ended up being in darkness. But there were 500 people on the floor of the armory. And then there were some instructions of "all move to the left," or "all raise your arms," or whatever it was. I was working some flashlights in the balcony. The instructions were: two lights meant this, three lights meant that, et cetera. It was beautiful.



Mimi Kanarek and Frank Stella in Rauschenberg's *Open Score* (1966), presented as part of 9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering at the 69th Regiment Armory, New York, 1966. Photo: Unattributed. Photographs Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives

JJ: I saw that piece. I remember it also. I don't remember all the details that you just described, but I remember the tennis game and the choreography. I remember that. That was amazing. I mean, if you think about it, the description now, it's really brilliant. What can we say? Somebody should redo it.

DW: Well, one thing Bob has said about the performances that he choreographed [was] that he did not want them re-staged. He didn't mind if there was an exhibition about them. In fact, we've just done an installation here at Lafayette Street [*Robert Rauschenberg: Disparate Visual Facts*, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, Oct. 16, 2023–Jan. 5, 2024]. Last night was the first presentation of it. And again, tonight, if you're free, we would love that you come by. And Branden Joseph [the Frank Gallipoli Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art at Columbia University] installed props from the piece called *Map Room II* (1965) [premiered at the New Cinema Festival I, Film-Makers' Cinematheque, Forty-first Street Theater, New York, Dec. 3, 1965. Performed by Rauschenberg, Trisha Brown, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, and Steve Paxton]. It's not a reconstruction of the performance, but it's information about the performance.



Installation view of *Robert Rauschenberg: Disparate Visual Facts*, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, New York, 2023. Pictured: archival rehearsal footage and performance props from Rauschenberg's *Map Room II* (1965).

JJ: Great. And also, I saw his show at the . . . Was it at the Whitney? Yeah. I saw his show either at the Whitney or MoMA. Where was it?

DW: The last one, the retrospective, was at MoMA [*Robert Rauschenberg: Among Friends*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 21–Sept. 17, 2017].

JJ: Yeah, I saw that, and it was wonderful. I particularly liked the projections in the different rooms.

DW: Yeah.

JJ: He was a major figure. I mean, he was a friend. A friend. Well, maybe I can come tonight. Can I bring my dog?

DW: Oh, sure.

JJ: Yeah.

DW: So long as he doesn't lift a leg on anything.

JJ: Yes, okay. He won't. That's one thing he doesn't do. He does other things, but he doesn't lift his leg on people.

DW: Well, you know how much Bob loved dogs.

JJ: I know, I remember that. Laika.

DW: Exactly.

JJ: Amazing. His dog was named Laika, for the Russian dog sent into space. So, I'll remember more things.



Robert Rauschenberg with his dog Laika on the roof of his home and studio at 381 Lafayette Street, New York, 1968. Photo: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust. Photographs Collection, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives

DW: And what you said is wonderful. Well, I hope I see you tonight.

JJ: I'll try to come by. Yeah, because I'm free. I will come by. I'll walk over there. Thank you, David.

DW: Thank you, Joan. Very nice to speak with you.

JJ: Okay.

DW: Bye.

JJ: Bye.