

## SITES OF DESIRE

Nicholas Birns

*The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*, a performance based on the writings of Aby Warburg, conceived and directed by Joan Jonas, with an original piano score composed and performed by Jason Moran. Dia: Beacon Riggio Galleries, Beacon, New York, October 2005 and October 2006.

The distinct contribution of Joan Jonas to postmodern performance has been the introduction of a defined narrative and a complicated relationship with anterior source material into tableaux, without yielding to conventional storytelling. In works such as *The Juniper Tree*, inspired by the Brothers Grimm, and the more recent *Lines In The Sand* based on the poet H. D.'s modernist-feminist epic *Helen In Egypt* (whose enactment of modernity's critical quest for primal, archaic nurturing is a clear precursor to *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*), Jonas has been inspired by literary sources without simply adapting them. She performs in her own pieces with other actors, theatrical props, and a complicated series of video presentations. Furthermore, Jonas's films, drawings, and sound effects are part of these presentations and provide multiple conduits for her response to the source material.

The central subject of *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* is Aby Warburg (1866–1929), the scholar of images who founded the Warburg Institute, an interdisciplinary research center located for many years in London. Warburg is pictured near the end of his life, when he is undergoing psychoanalysis by Ludwig Binswanger, himself a distinguished figure in the history of psychiatry. Within the frame of the analysis, Warburg (played by José Luis Blondel with an intellectual, slightly fish-out-of-water air) lies on a wooden couch, and recalls a pivotal trip to the American Southwest nearly 30 years before. Both Binswanger and the nurses who take care of Warburg are performed by women: Ragani Haas and Jonas herself. Jonas dances in various roles played towards the recesses of the performance space, and provides the narrative voiceover, inevitably lending it an air of framing and “authority” in both senses of the word.

Warburg was drawn to the desert of the Southwest out of a sense that its natural beauty and Native American heritage possessed a reinvigorating wonder. This sacral authenticity could inject new spiritual vitality into the bloodstream of Western man. Jonas herself has researched Hopi artistic production for many years, including once observing the Hopi Snake Dance. Jonas, like Warburg, is interested in intercultural communication and a desire to expand the repertory of images available to our perception. In both cases, there is a search both for artistic beauty and anthropological knowledge. The otherness of the Southwest reveals an arena where the European quest for meaning can be carried out in exotic guise. It is also a space in which the self-conscious Warburg, who says at one point that “my intellectual training will not permit me to do so,” can feel himself a real man. In the Southwest, he is in touch with the ground (as figured by the seismograph that he holds from time to time). Thus Jonas’s probing look into the stitching of Warburg’s psyche provides a sense of critique as a counterweight to any suggestion of engrossing spectacle.

Jonas is spectacularly resourceful in evoking Warburg’s dreams. While the actors representing individuals are near the audience, providing both the initial focus of our attention and the prism through which we see the live and recorded action in the interior of the cavernous space, Jonas, when not playing the nurse, is always in motion, gesturing toward and evoking the total effect of the performance. Whereas Haas and Blondel are tentatively formal in their movements, Jonas is kaleidoscopic, gyrating between patterned and spontaneous motion. Yet

there is acknowledgment and gestural dialogue between the three actors. Jonas’s own drawing, video, dancing, and spoken words are all employed to create a hallucinatory atmosphere in which live action and film interact. A braid of inspiration and wonder is paramount in *The Shape, The Feel, The Scent of Things*. Jonas as performer is inside the action; though she certainly does not appear to us as framing what goes on, yet in performing, she knits together the live and recorded action and objects in the sensory manifestations embodied in the work’s title.

Dia has produced a handsome catalogue containing the full text (most of it Warburg’s) spoken in the performance. It also offers photographs of the images, live and onscreen, deployed during the performance as well as drawings not actually shown live. The catalogue serves as documentation and also as a corollary to Warburg’s own attempts to archive and inventory images. Edited by Karen Kelly and Lynne Cooke, it contains an insightful essay by Cooke as well as a dialogue between Jonas and the composer for the piece, Jason Moran. The effect of both performance and catalogue is to conjure visceral emotions about artmaking and the eye’s relation to the image, and then to contemplate those emotions. The catalogue doubles the experience of watching the performance, with its layered representation, as both first-hand *and* second-hand: the afterimage, yet the live image as well.

The image was Warburg’s intellectual stock in trade. In fact, the contemporary idea of “visual culture” as something resembling art history but including a broader range of reference and analysis



Joan Jonas's *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*. Photos: Courtesy Paula Court.





is inconceivable without Warburg, as is literacy with images and words. Warburg collected a multiplicity of images, converging towards the lofty goal of a Mnemosyne Atlas that would contain all images and braid together the past, the present, and the imagining of the future. His goal was a mapping of memes that would have been an imaginative equivalent of what scientists are now doing with the mapping of genes.

As the video pans over a Southwest landscape, the possibility of luxuriating in a sublime panorama presents itself. Yet soon the image shifts, and our absorption stops. What comes next on the scene next is the image of Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia* (personified by a woman). This is a substantive shift in tone. Not only does Dürer's meticulous draftsmanship militate against any Romantic sense of creative totality, but the felt sadness of the image serves to ward off any excessive identification on the part of the audience. Melancholy hovers over Warburg's fantasies as a monitor, a warning, and a grace note.

Warburg's need for the desert is a quest for psychic health. Yet it is also a symptom of European malaise. He dramatically incants: "All humanity is schizophrenic." What can be shattering on the level of the individual soul, though, is sublimated to a more constructive sense of plurality on the methodological level. There is a connection between interdisciplinary study in academia as performed by Warburg and multimedia performance as performed by Jonas. Both harness creative perception as a mode of intellectual investigation. Jonas's use of sound, music, and screen has a synthesizing aspect, bringing together

multiple aspects of perception in an overall experience.

Moran, an experimental jazz pianist, who played the musical score for the piece, and was seated to the audience's right, mirroring the interpretive role his music plays in the performance. Having original music in the piece made its visions of Warburg's psyche less archival, more contemporary—a projection as well as a retrospection.

Warburg's and the voiceover's utterances have a sonic as well as semantic effect; the combination of narration, liturgical chant, and confession generates a response as much aural as intellectual. This is driven home when Jonas emits a harsh and sudden scream that embodies the pain in Warburg's psyche. Jonas juggles image and sound to keep the audience intrigued, yet continually on the alert for new approaches to meaning. Immediate and secondary perception, live action and media, mix in thought-provoking ways during the performance. A white dog appears as a leitmotif in the videos, matched by a stuffed coyote that is passed around by the performers in the performance space. The coyote is stuffed, yet in front of the audience. The dog is alive, yet only on the screen. Active space and screen confirm, contradict, reverberate off each other. The coyote is not used as a totem or a reference to indigenous myth; it is set in a contemporary context. The doubling, in many gestures, of Warburg and the female *Melancholia* figure not only crosses gender lines but parallels a represented person and an abstract concept. Similarly, the green paper hats at one point worn by two women onscreen (and also worn often in performance), and the red paper snakes

tossed around in a dithyrambic indication of the Hopi Snake Dance, are at once disposable costume and archetypal representations. The sense of the sacred conveyed in these images is fortified by Jonas's use of Dia:Beacon's cavernous basement space. The altar-like positioning of the video screens at the back of the space suggests the ambience of a freshly hallowed sanctuary, quickened and catalyzed by the technique of having a large screen (12 by 18 feet) roll on wheels, approaching and receding from the viewer, so the viewer's eye is always responsive. The Dia space is new for performance, in a renovated factory only recently opened as a museum. Jonas's piece (first performed in 2005, and then shown again the following year) is the second work to be performed there. The newness of the space gave Jonas's exploration of it a probing quality, as if what to make of the space was in itself an aspect of the site-specific performance's unfolding.

The video aspect of the piece, live and prerecorded, and visible across the floor of the space from the audience, is played out on both moving and stationary screens. One screen is drawn back and forth, left or right, while others remain in fixed positions. Similarly, within the video, the shots are sometimes close-up and stationary, sometimes moving to convey withdrawal or abstention. At other times they have a photographic stasis that makes the audience's eyes inquire and canvass; as the camera moves in or out, the audience feels it is advancing on or retreating from the image. This shifting sense of the image also plays out in the bodily manifestation of the live performer. The movements are energetic, sometimes dance-like,

sometimes more casual. But they have a sculptural quality throughout. This gives a sense of concrete weight to the performers' actions. What is happening in the performance space appears as an imaginary frieze. Warburg, at one point, says, "Romantic visions arouse hunger of adventure." The characters seem to be looking for something, indicating Jonas's own investigative processes in her art. One of the frequent gestural actions performed both live and prerecorded is that of scooping—mining—just as the wooden seismograph with the ball-bearing pendulum in real space registers the ground's energies. These images suggest a psychic and spiritual quest.

The early twentieth century felt, very keenly, its loss of previous spiritual certainties. There was a sense of deprivation in the modern world that, Warburg believed, could be replenished by the greater spiritual connection felt by the Hopi. But, even as Jonas conveys this yearning to the audience, there is an abrupt jolt. In the only spoken line in the performance not taken from Warburg's texts, the voiceover mentions the 1929 Lateran Treaty, by which Mussolini came to a concordat with the Catholic Church. Is this another kind of rapprochement between religion and modern society? Does it give strength to fascist political theology? It is announced that four years later, in 1933, Warburg's library moved from Hamburg to London. This was a consequence of the rise of the Nazis in Germany. Jonas hints that, while retrieving the sacred is laudable, we have to be careful about what we actually conjure.

Toward the end, an image of an abandoned casino, rusted over and spotted



Top and middle:  
Joan Jonas's *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*.  
Photos: Courtesy Paula Court; Right:  
Still from video  
featured in the  
performance.  
Photo: Courtesy  
Joan Jonas.

with graffiti, appears on screen. In the image, the white dog trots in front of the casino, a mute witness to wreckage, focusing the theme of spiritual thirst amid desolation. A Woody Guthrie song, "Pastures of Plenty," sounds a healing yet still slightly melancholy note as

the casino is shown. Image and sound convey redemption and ruin in counterpoint. History, art, and a sense of awe reanimate Warburg's process of cataloguing visual meaning, helping Jonas define a new model of sacred space.

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