



Art in America

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Jill Johnston,
1970. Photo Diana
Davies. Courtesy
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THE BODY THAT JILL BUILT

Jill Johnston created a powerful critical oeuvre that was inseparable from her compelling personal narrative.

by Jennifer Krasinski

WHEN JILL JOHNSTON began writing for *Art in America* in the mid-1980s, it marked her return to criticism after a hiatus that had lasted nearly two decades. Born in London in 1929, Johnston moved to New York in the mid-1950s, studying dance with Jose Limón until a broken foot rechanneled her passion for dance into writing. She first made a name for herself as the dance critic for the *Village Voice* in 1959, just as the New York art world Pop-ped. Genres were collapsing, Happenings were happening and Johnston captured all with the clear-eyed aim of a sharpshooter in a weekly column titled simply "Dance Journal." By 1961 she was enmeshed in the community of "postmodern" choreographers that erupted in and around the Judson Memorial Church. She fervently championed this new guard, which included the likes of Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, Alex Hay and Lucinda Childs. She idolized John Cage and was one of the first critics to praise the work of

Merce Cunningham. Written inside these spinning circles, Johnston's texts began to perform their own leaps, twirls and pratfalls. "Fluxus Fuxus" (1964) is her witty spit-take on artists George Maciunas, Nam June Paik and others for whom the value of art, she argued, "resides in the performance." In the essay, Johnston called forth the spirit of their work with a performance of her own:

Fluxus composers are not pro-art or anti-art. How could they be for or against anything when the thing to do on the program is to eat the hot dogs distributed by the conductor who caught them as they flew down to the stage on a rope from the balcony? . . . Next time I might stay home, or contemplate a hot dog at Coney Island. Meanwhile, I salute you and fux Fluxus from the forty-two keys of my typewriter.¹

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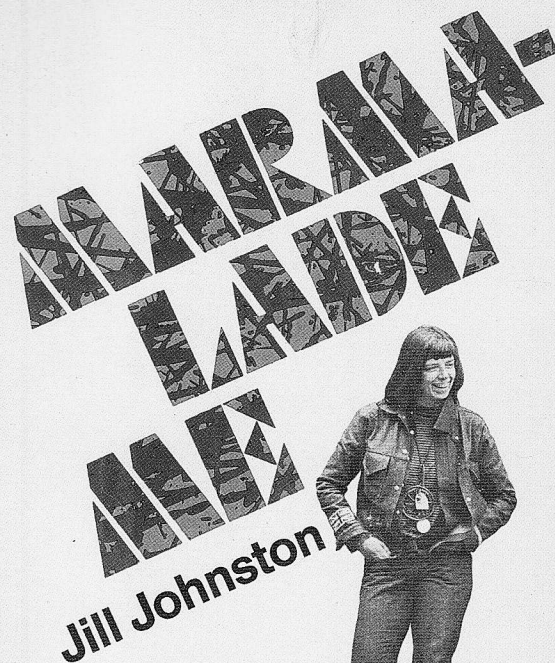
LESBIAN NATION

The Feminist Solution



JILL JOHNSTON

Covers of
Johnston's books
Lesbian Nation
(1973), *Marmalade*
Me (1971) and
Gullibles Travels
(1974).



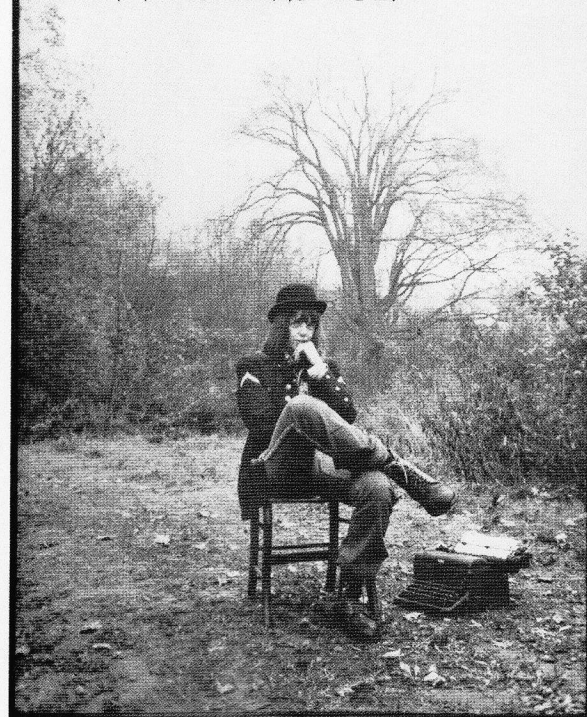
Introduction by Gregory Battcock

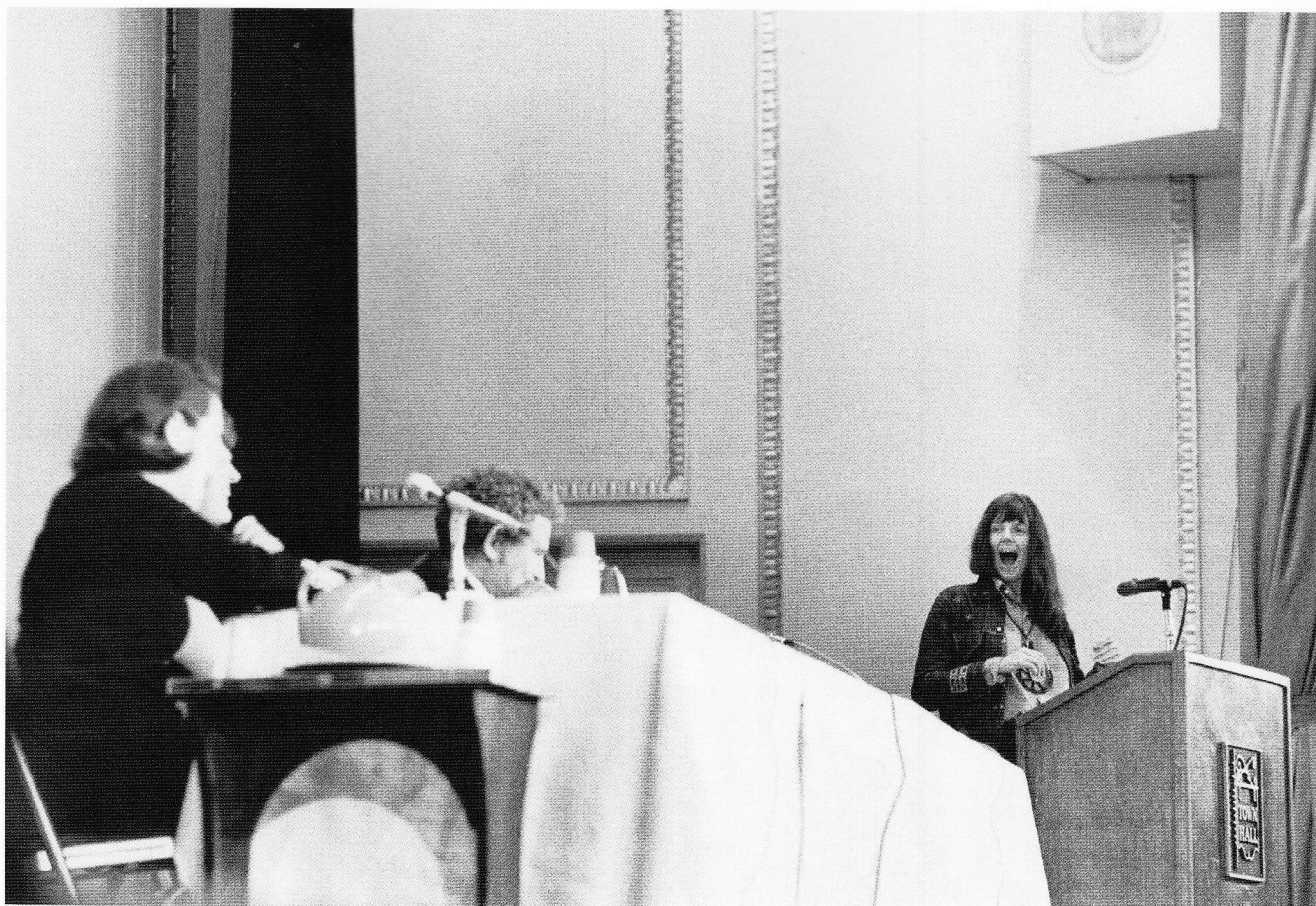
In 1965, Johnston quite suddenly *unbecame* a critic. Rather than the usual performance roundup, her "Dance Journal" column on Sept. 16, titled "Critics' Critics," took aim at those who accused criticism of being parasitic, and argued that it was, in fact, a largely untapped art form. With ferocity and grace, she laid out the new path her writing would follow:

I'll take a plot of level territory and stake out a claim to lie down on it and criticize the constellations if that's what I happen to be looking at. I also stake out a claim to be an artist, a writer, if that's what I'm doing when I get to the typewriter and decide that I liked something well enough to say what I think it's all about.²

She would later reflect that her frustrations with criticism as it stood were prompted by other factors too: that artists only ever responded to her opinions, but never engaged with the craft of her prose; that the weight of her critical voice wasn't grounded by an equally strong personal mettle. "My position was authoritative," she later wrote in the second volume of her autobiography, "but I had no inner authority."³ Ever the open book, Johnston also revealed that "Critics' Critics" was written while she was at Bellevue Hospital, where she was being treated for "chronic undifferentiated schizophrenia."⁴ Losing her mind, Johnston steeled her ego. She held on to her column in the *Village Voice* and began to use the space

GULLIBLES TRAVELS WRITING BY JILL JOHNSTON





Johnston (at podium) and Norman Mailer (center) at Town Hall in 1971, from Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker's documentary film *Town Bloody Hall* (1979). Courtesy Pennebaker Hegedus Films, New York.

to write her own creation story—recording the world around her as it happened to her, or as she happened to it—becoming the “I” of her own storm.

In her 1967 essay “Slouching Towards Bethlehem,” Joan Didion famously observed from California that America’s center was not holding. On the other side of the country, Johnston embodied this untethering, and placed herself at its center. Johnston threw herself into events as though to become the person she wished to write about, moving away from writing strictly about culture to writing her life: “I was the performance; the writing was an extension of it, a running account and commentary.”⁵ Her breathless prose picked up velocity. Her narratives included ambling thoughts and observations on the parties she attended, the trips she took and the people she met. Some essays struck with the unpredictable precision of a lightning bolt; others were more like smokescreens. While many *Voice* readers relished Johnston’s columns, not everyone was a fan of her new approach: “A lady at Jasper Johns’s house last night where a black-tie thing was going on as a benefit for Merce Cunningham . . . told me ‘they’ didn’t understand my writing anymore. I used to be so good.”⁶

To sharpen her point, Johnston memorialized the end of her life as a critic, organizing a panel discussion in May 1969 titled “The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston.” Among others, Andy Warhol, superstar Ultra Violet, performance artist Carolee Schneemann, and critics Gregory Battcock and David

Bourdon paid tribute to Johnston before an audience of 300 people in a celebration of the eroding boundaries between artist and critic, presentation and performance. Johnston arrived 40 minutes late, having decided that her absence was key to the conversation at hand, and proceeded to read her *Village Voice* column for the following week. A journalist covering the event for *Variety* described Johnston’s action: “She confirmed the suspicion that she is as confusing in person as she is in print.”⁷

That same year, Johnston came out in print as a lesbian, making her one of the first openly gay journalists in America. (Four years later, she would repeat her coming out on the “Dick Cavett Show,” grinning from ear to ear and mugging a “Hi Mom!” for the camera.) Her politics radicalized as she lived openly; lesbianism was, she believed, not only the key to her autonomy, but the key to every woman’s liberation. “Until all women are lesbians, there will be no true political revolution,” she declared to a roiling audience at Town Hall, the New York performance space, in 1971. The occasion for her speech was “a dialogue on women’s liberation,” in which Johnston presented alongside renowned figures such as feminist writer Germaine Greer, the National Organization for Women’s Jacqueline Ceballos and literary critic Diana Trilling. The panel was, perversely, moderated by Norman Mailer, who had, ironically enough, been Johnston’s ego ideal during her stay at Bellevue: “I was indebted, I believe, to Norman Mailer, whose brief imprisonment at Bellevue in 1960 for stabbing his wife had made a strong impression on me. . . . The message

Jigs, Japes and Joyce

Inspired by *Finnegans Wake*, John Cage and Merce Cunningham's most recent collaboration was a profile in extremes. An iconoclastic approach to composition and choreography was coupled with a traditionalist attachment to hierarchical structures and conventional gender roles.

BY JILL JOHNSTON

The New York premiere in October at BAM of the hour-long work by John Cage and Merce Cunningham, called *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, marked a very special moment for John Cage in his long career. Born in 1912, an avant-garde composer by the mid-1930s, he grew up in a generation of artists who loved the writings of Pound, Stein, Eliot, Cummings and James Joyce. Now he says that he's still devoted to Pound, Stein and Joyce. *Finnegans Wake* in particular was an epochal event for artists like Cage. He thought of it as the most important book of the century. And like so many other enthusiasts, he never read it. His professional involvement with the book began in 1957 when he was asked to write something about it. Typically, Cage set out to colonize the work, turning it into an artifact very much his own. (He had already done this with another great favorite of his: Thoreau's *Walden*.)

Using a method called *mesostics*—a form of acrostics—which means literally “a row down the middle,” he went through the 636 pages of *Finnegans Wake*, reducing it at first to 120 pages, and later in a final version to 41 pages, by organizing the text around the two words JAMES JOYCE. Beginning on Joyce's first page he selected the first word with a J in it that didn't have an A, because the A would belong to the next line for JAMES, and so on through the entire book, making a path or vertical line down the center of his own text consisting of the 10 letters of Joyce's name, and utilizing his time-honored chance-operations to determine how many of Joyce's words surrounding the mesostic word proper would be included on each line. Not very many. So that Cage's text looks visually like a Minimalist concrete poem, or like a Cummings or an Apollinaire, especially as Cage

Merce Cunningham and company in the Cunningham-John Cage collaboration *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, directed by Mark Lancaster, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Oct. 1986. Photo © Tom Brazil, courtesy BAM.



Opening spread of an article on John Cage and Merce Cunningham, *Art in America*, January 1987.

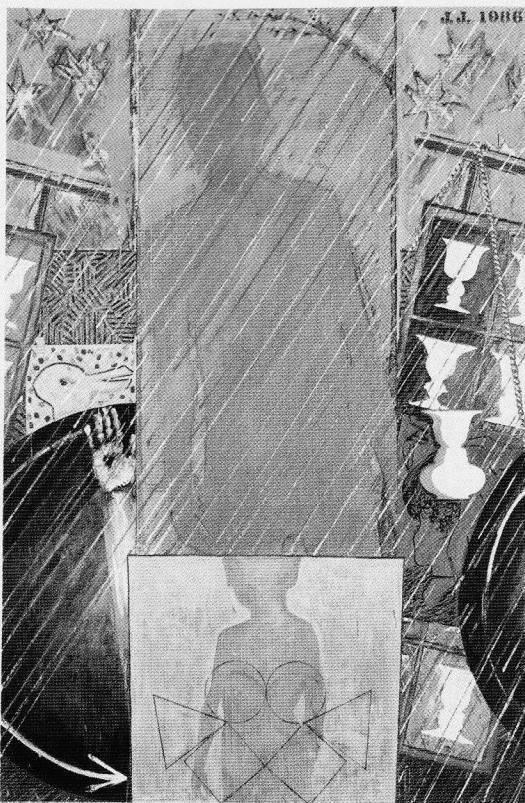
Mailer got across was that his artistry and imagination put him above the law.”⁸ During her speech, which Mailer cut short, she spoke in prose unpunctuated and possessed of a powerful locomotion to proclaim, “This is the body that Jill built.”

In 1973, Johnston published “Slouching Toward Consciousness,” a chapter in her seminal collection, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*. Here she tracked her experience embracing the cultural and sexual revolutions: from being called a man-hater by painter Larry Poons to attending her first meetings, albeit with a certain degree of detachment, of the Gay Liberation Front. Citing Didion in the title of her essay was not a simple joke; it was Johnston's closed parenthesis—the unwritten other half—of the story of a spun-out generation.

By this time, Johnston had mastered a prose style that was Steinian in its deceptively plain speak, its use of repetition and run-ons, and its swerving puns. *Gullibles Travels: Writing* (1974) featured chapters with titles such as “Great Expectorations,” “As Anybody Lay Dying” and “Tender Gluttons.” Punning punctured canonization, as

Johnston playfully hooked her texts to the “great works” of Swift, Dickens, Faulkner, Stein and others. More simply, it betrayed her goofy sense of humor, one that ran throughout her work, perhaps as a Wildean strategy to upend seriousness, to unmask the powers-that-be with a giggle and a wink. Although Johnston had not yet returned to art writing per se, a deeply compelling and original portrait of an artist appears in *Gullibles Travels: “Agnes Martin: Surrender & Solitude”* (1973), which stands as a work of literary art. In it, Johnston describes visiting Martin in New Mexico, bearing witness to the artist's self-imposed isolation as well as the ways in which Martin's unconventional life choices freed her to think and to paint:

she says what she knows for what she knows is what she is and what that is is perfect for her and she is still on the path herself. she says one thing she has a good grip on is remorse. and that suffering is necessary for freedom from suffering. and that the wriggle of a worm is as important as



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Jasper Johns.
Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, 1986.
encaustic on canvas.
75 by 50 inches.
Collection Mr. and Mrs.
S.J. Neuhouser, Jr.

Tracking the Shadow

By dint of industry both art historical and personal, the author here draws the measure of Jasper Johns's increasingly autobiographical work of the '80s. Picking up on hitherto tantalizing but fragmentary references to Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece, she presents an in-depth reading of Johns's recent imagery.

BY JILL JOHNSTON

That we cannot speak about we must pass over (in silence) — Wittgenstein
We understand that what we cannot speak about (by saying it) is necessary to us (by saying it) — Marx Haymer

In the recent show at Castelli of Jasper Johns's latest work—four large paintings titled "The Seasons," with a number of drawings and prints related to them—one detail eventually caught my attention, occluding all others. The most obvious feature in these four paintings is Johns himself, represented by his shadow, cast life-size onto the canvases, worked from a tracing drawn by a friend. The same silhouette, painted in rich grays, appears in each Season—Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter—tilting left to the same degree.

This four-part work is as literal as anything Johns has done. Spring, for instance, is marked by diagonal streaks of white paint crossing the whole canvas and indicating rain: Winter is dotted all over with white snowflakes and even has a stick-figure snowman in it. In Spring, birth is clearly signified by the centered shadow-form of a child (inside a rectangle) directly underneath the looming, tilting shadow figure of Johns. The child's head, cut off just above the ears, slashes across Johns's body right below the crotch, separated only by its variant gray color and the top horizontal of the rectangle containing and cropping the child's head.

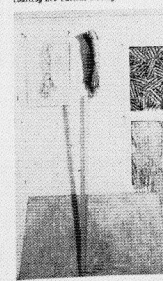
Fall literally depicts a fall. Here Johns has cut his shadow lengthwise in two: a portion of him disappears off the left edge of the canvas and reappears, as it were, on the right, both halves separated by a central vertical "panel" portraying a number of tumbling objects, including the ladder that elsewhere has held them all up and together by means of a rope and that has now broken in two.

The detail that eventually commanded my attention is one of these objects—the section of a painting appearing in each Season and referring to a series of paintings from Johns's 1984 show at Castelli Greene Street. This section, consisting of jigsaw puzzle-like shapes fitted together and made discrete by directionally opposed stripes, is contained by a rectangular frame: it is a section of one of Johns's own paintings, which appears partially obscured by objects in every Season. The catalogue essay to the recent show, by Judith Goldman, and reviews I read identified it as a fragment from Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*. What fragment? I became curious



Above, Periscope (Jasper Johns), 1965.
oil on canvas, 47 by 18 inches.

Below, in the studio, 1982, encaustic on canvas with objects, 72 by 48 by 1 inches. Both works collection the artist. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Leo Castelli Gallery.



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the assassination of a president. and that our work is very important but that we are not important.⁹

When Johnston started writing for *A.i.A.*, she had recently completed her *Autobiography in Search of a Father*. Its two parts, *Mother Bound* (1983) and *Paper Daughter* (1985), are lucid, candid and engrossing for the immediacy with which she writes about her many lives. Although her style had since shifted to transmit her thinking on a more traditional frequency, she remained fiercely dedicated to the idea that the personal—that life in all of its embarrassment and complexity—was inextricable from the writing of criticism. The nearly 30 essays and reviews she wrote for *A.i.A.* about dancers, choreographers and artists such as Robert Wilson, George Brecht, John Cage, Tehching Hsieh, Karole Armitage, David Salle and Robert Rauschenberg are all refined productions of Johnston's compassionate, observant, humorous and (occasionally) prying eye. When, in 1987, *A.i.A.*'s then editor-in-chief Elizabeth C. Baker asked Johnston to write on Jasper Johns, the article evolved

into a book-length meditation on his work. *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information* (1996) posited that Johns was, in Johnston's words, a "secret autobiographer," and that his life could be understood through his work, and vice versa. It seems that Johnston, after all those years, had not lost her ability to rile and infuriate. Johns did not approve of the book and refused to give her permission to reproduce his work. Johnston, ever true to herself, allowed her writing alone to paint the images for the reader—simply more proof of her artful critical powers. ○

1. Jill Johnston, "Fluxus Fuxus," anthologized in *Marmalade Me*, New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1971, p. 75.
2. Jill Johnston, "Critics' Critics," *ibid.*, pp. 100-01.
3. Jill Johnston, *Paper Daughter: Autobiography in Search of a Father*, New York, Alfred P. Knopf, 1985, p. 8.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
5. Jill Johnston, "Dance Quote Unquote," in Sally Banes, ed., *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p. 104.
6. Jill Johnston, "Holly Christometer," in *Marmalade Me*, p. 217.
7. *Variety*, May 28, 1969, p. 23.
8. *Paper Daughter*, p. 64.
9. Jill Johnston, *Gullibles Travels: Writing*, New York, Links books, 1974, p. 280.

Opening spread of an article on Jasper Johns, *Art in America*, October 1987.