

# Talk of the Nation

by Liz Kotz

**Marmalade Me**, by Jill Johnston. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998, 315 pp., \$19.95 paper.

**Admission Accomplished: The Lesbian Nation Years**, by Jill Johnston. London: Serpent's Tail, 1998, 350 pp., \$18.99 paper.

SOMEDAY, WHENEVER THE tangled histories of the interdisciplinary sixties art scene, of new journalism and experimental female/feminist autobiographical writing, or of lesbians and the avant-garde, get written, Jill Johnston's life and work will receive key billing. She was at the center of a lot of messy, boundary-breaking and hard-to-categorize activities that have been tremendously influential, yet still remain "marginal." Especially for anyone trying to sort through the historic shift from the aesthetic radicality of 1960s New York to the overt political radicalism and identity politics of the post-Stonewall 1970s, Johnston's essays, criticism, personal rantings and recounts published from 1959 to 1975 in the *Village Voice* and elsewhere are key texts.

Subtly collected in the classic anthologies *Marmalade Me* (1971) and *Lesbian Nation* (1974), these writings trace Johnston's own movement through a major sea-change in American postwar culture, a change she participated in, helped disseminate and propel. Both volumes are long out of print, so it is a real pleasure to see updated versions recently reissued: Wesleyan University Press has just brought out a modestly expanded and revised edition of *Marmalade Me*, while edgy trade publisher Serpent's Tail has brought out *Admission Accomplished*, a much wider selection of Johnston's work from the early seventies that includes many of the *Lesbian Nation* essays plus many more published in less easily accessible places.

Johnston started out in the more established dance world (she trained with American modernist masters José Limón and Martha Graham) but quickly found her place among the semi-underground artistic bohemia of the 1960s, among the artists affiliated with the highly influential dance and performance scene that sprung up around Judson Church in Greenwich Village—and those affiliated with Fluxus, Pop Art, the post-New York School poetry and emerging downtown music worlds, and what would eventually take shape as minimalist and postminimalist art. More than any other critic writing at the time, she immediately grasped the radical significance of the work generated around avant-garde composer John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham, and gravitated toward the dizzying array of intermedia art practices that sprang up in their wake.

During the first half of the decade, Johnston's weekly column "Dance Journal" became a forum for discussing a range of emerging performance-based practices, from Allan Kaprow's happenings at the Reuben Gallery and Jackson MacLow's chance-based and improvisational poetry to the proto-minimal "drone" music of composer LaMonte Young. Johnston is still best known, though, in the art world, for her writings on the individuals associated with Cunningham and with Judson Church in their efforts to develop what has come to be seen as "postmodern" American dance: Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Lucinda Childs among many others.

Midway through the decade, however, Johnston sort of dropped off the edge, at least as far as many in the art world were concerned: she underwent a series of

highly public "breakdowns" and hospitalizations (public on her terms—she drafted one column from a psychiatric institution) before re-emerging, toward the end of the decade, as a newly radicalized champion of what would become gay rights, lesbian feminism and lesbian separatism. With her increasing autobiographical emphasis and Gertrude Stein-inflected forays into experimental prose—long, unpunctuated sentences, collaged fragments and semi-elliptical non sequiturs became a signature—Johnston was also a key formulator of the subjectively oriented writing that came to be termed "new journalism." The endless "self-indulgence" this style has wrought has earned it a bad rap in recent years, but Johnston was an originator. Her constant experimentation with language emerged from a genuine effort to record and communicate new and disruptive art forms, social realities, and states of consciousness.

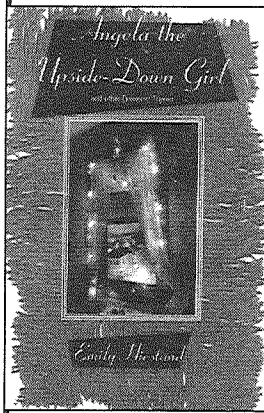
It's hard to quote Johnston without making her sound a little silly—the effect is in the extension and flow of words, not the sound bite. She's often refreshingly direct and down to earth, as when she discusses the electronic score for German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Originale*, noting: "Considering the hodgepodge of properties, animals, and assorted activities in the piece, the time structure was not a unifying factor but a method of insuring a change of pace throughout a lengthy composition." Or, in trying to find names for the new intermedia practitioners, she writes: "If you asked me what George Brecht is today I couldn't tell you. If you say art people think painter, etc. The last time somebody asked me what I did I said I was an archeologist." Her language is committed to the vernacular, with all its repetition and digression:

Someone told me I like nonart. It sounds good but I don't know what it is. I'd probably like it. I'd have to see it first. If we prefixed all our indications of things with "non" we'd always be looking elsewhere for these things. The confusion would be terrific. Probably the world is too sure about its things. I like things that are certain about not being very sure about what they are.

(*Marmalade Me*, p. 127)

UNDEENED BY SOCIAL and personal cataclysms, intimately involved with major art figures of her day, Johnston would make an ideal subject for anyone working on the entanglements of language, sexuality, madness and subjectivity. Yet for all the scholarly attention given to more academic practitioners of feminist experimental writing—Monique Wittig, Hélène Cixous, Nicole Brossard et al.—Johnston's more homegrown experiments have received curiously little official notice. Ironically, despite the recent gay studies boom, Johnston's failure to conform to conventional genre boundaries still leaves her somewhat stranded, her work still considered as "criticism" rather than serious "writing." But when I look at present-day writers like Dodie Bellamy, Eileen Myles, Ann Rower, or Lynne Tillman who work with hybrid forms of reportage, autobiography and linguistic collage, Johnston seems the obvious prece-

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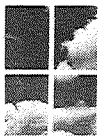
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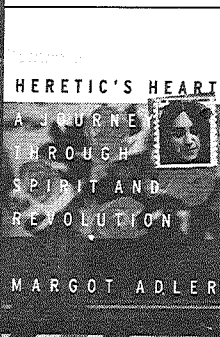
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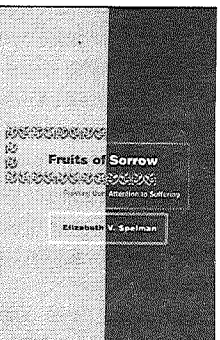
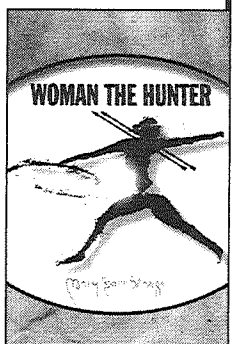
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dent. For many female artists and writers I know, Johnston's sixties and seventies texts remain landmarks of experimental writing, an important and highly influential poetic model—"70s Stein," poet Joan Larkin once termed it.

By the early 1970s, Johnston's style became much looser, paratactic and meandering, the prose actively in revolt against conventional syntax, grammar, punctuation or capitalization. In "The Comingest Womanifesto" (1972) she reflects:

first or second off i'm into thinking  
weird all in these difference places in  
fact in as many places as we are  
women and so i ask myself when i  
meet this one or that one i ask where  
is them politically sexually & where  
is one in relation to this one or me or  
where am i now sexually politically  
since i'm not the me i was yesterday  
or last year and where are we going  
or am i already ahead of myself or  
behind and is somebody else slightly  
behind or ahead of that and if not  
then what or anything...

(*Admission Accomplished*, p. 211)

It is prose to get lost in, but its fracturing of subjectivity and identity is not without purpose; repetition and accumulation become strategies to envision gradual shifts in social realities. By the end, Johnston is concluding that

...we have to remind ourselves that in 1972 in amerika we are a fugitive band who can't afford to isolate ourselves from the woman in the middle who in any case remains a potentially total ally or the woman we are gradually becoming as we become more of ourselves as we leave more of our straight selves of ourselves behind ourselves we gradually become



Jill Johnston.

ourselves all the women we ever were we are ourselves still the woman in the middle it doesn't make any sense to be our own enemy and if we don't see common cause with feminists feminists are not likely to see it with us either... (p. 214)

IF HER GENRE-BENDING and semi-scandalous personal hijinks cooled some segments of the art world to her work—"why doesn't she write about dance anymore?" became a constant refrain—by the early seventies Johnston's newly insistent political concerns apparently took her even further beyond the pale. Despite the tradition of tolerance toward closeted or at least discreet gay male artists—Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Ellsworth Kelly, John Cage and his partner Cunningham, none of whom made an overt "issue" of their personal relationships—the art world was perhaps less than willing to deal with an openly gay artist, especially a lesbian one, who was now taking questions of sexuality and gender as overtly political issues.

Like other major female art world figures who courted, and obtained, wider public recognition and political impact—Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, even Kate Millett—Johnston became a sort of an outcast, perhaps even a joke, someone to watch with fascination, be amazed by, but not take seriously, at least in many sectors of the visual arts. It was a way, after all, to defuse the threat such openly revolutionary women posed to a still deeply entrenched gender hierarchy—and to a visual art world which, by the mid-1970s, was rapidly reconventionalizing around traditional disciplinary boundaries, object production and commercial structures.

And Johnston herself at this point was less interested in following the doings of avant-garde art culture than in taking on mainstream American culture and its institutions, including the homophobia of the emerging feminist movement, with no holds barred. This is the woman who, having been the subject of a 1969 panel titled "The Disintegration of a Critic" that included Andy Warhol and Ultra Violet, went on to challenge straight feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, duel on television with Norman Mailer, and rebut Ti-Grace Atkinson in her own classic essay "The Myth of the Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm."

Retrospectively, *Marmalade Me* and *Lesbian Nation* largely addressed two separate audiences, one art-oriented, the other lesbian. Presumably few straight dance or performance readers followed Johnston into her forays into radical political theory, yet *Marmalade Me* is fre-

quently not seen as a "lesbian" text (not included in the bibliographies of the handful of queer studies sources I consulted), even though, as Johnston would later recall, its later sections were, for "everyone who knew" or could read the clues, a pretty public journal of Johnston's travels with her girlfriend—not to mention an oblique account of the hardships facing a formerly married mother of two as she struggled to "find herself," come out and create a new life, facing dire poverty, psychiatric hospitalizations and the loss of her children.

A lot gets lost, of course, in continuing to see these as two separate stories, two separate histories—not the least of which is any examination of the very real difficulties faced by lesbian and non-normative females in an art world which continues to be massively male-dominated, and, in its publicly projected image at least, overwhelmingly heterosexual. In an interview I did with filmmaker and former choreographer Yvonne Rainer several years ago for *The Advocate*, after her public coming out as gay, Rainer stated that she simply could never have had the career she did in the sixties, seventies and eighties if she had been romantically involved with another woman at the time. However fraught with conflict, her work had been about male-female relationships, and that, she said, at least made it of interest to "the men who ran the art world—and still do."

Johnston's career has continued across many ruptures—leaving the *Voice* in 1975, when new owners proved no longer amenable to her out-there brand of "new journalism"; a subsequent series of psychoanalytically oriented autobiographical memoirs; and, in the 1980s and 1990s, her critical essays for *Art in America* and the *New York Times Book Review*, and the subsequent volumes *Secret Lives in Art* and *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information*. The degree of controversy that has greeted Johnston's most recent work (especially the study of Johns, with its efforts to bring a discussion of the artist's sexuality to bear on an understanding of his work) is initially somewhat surprising, since these texts are greatly toned down from the formal experimentation and political militancy of her seventies writings. It offers an indication of the extreme resistance on the part of more mainstream art world interests, to this day, to any discussion of the sexuality of now established figures like Johns, Rauschenberg, or Cy Twombly.<sup>1</sup> And it belies the fact that Johnston, publishing in relatively mainstream venues, is now recognized as an authority of sorts, and no longer easy to dismiss as some "crazy radical."

THERE'S NO QUESTION that Johnston's radical politics and militancy, her effrontery and intense partisanship, have in part kept her from major recognition. So, too, has her own commitment to keep moving, to continue shifting her own project rather than simply rest on her sixties laurels. These newly published collections should do much to redress that lack, as should the growing surge of interest on the part of lesbians and feminists in their twenties and thirties in rediscovering the texts of a more militant era that they were slightly too young to have participated in firsthand. However different (to some, "dated") the style and tone of these texts, their concerns have hardly disappeared.

Nonetheless, I do have some quibbles. In *Marmalade Me*, the logic of the expansion and revision somewhat escapes me. The new second section, comprising essays not originally published in the book, brings in reviews of dance and happenings from the early sixties, and seems meant to add balance (or ballast) to Johnston's subsequent radicalism and rejection of what she terms her "interpretive, descriptive, analytic" voice. While adding interesting, informative material, these essays complicate the already complex shifts in time and tone of the original—it's always tricky to mess with a classic.

Perhaps more problematically, the added materials could mistakenly give readers the impression that the newly expanded volume now collects all or most of Johnston's work, or important work, from the era. Yet, in fact, Johnston published many more essays on central figures not included or noted here. Considering the academic press treatment given to the reissued text (an introduction by dance critic Deborah Jowitz, an afterword by scholar Sally Banes, as well as a new preface by Johnston), would it be too academic to wish for a bibliography or complete listing of Johnston's reviews, or an index? Now, as then, the book straddles a weird line between art criticism and self-portrait, so for those wishing a fuller account of Johnston's sixties criticism, it's still back to the archive.

With *Admission Accomplished*, I only regret the omission of certain key essays from *Lesbian Nation*: for example, Johnston's rejoinder to Atkinson and fuller description of the Town Hall debacle with Mailer. Reading the introductions, it's clear that Johnston herself is continually re-evaluating these materials and working through her own ambivalences, slowly bringing back more of the descriptive material, or the strident, rageful texts she may once have disavowed. It's a messy lot, completely disruptive and inconsistent, and often embarrassing to contemporary sensibilities—and that's how it should be.

Reading these books, it's hard not to get nostalgic for so much: a free-form, truly experimental, cross-disciplinary art world, a radically insurgent feminism, an adventurous critical press... What the hell happened? Johnston's two collections are critical contributions to rediscovering a past we desperately need to recapture.

<sup>1</sup> In an essay in *Art+Text* 61 (May-June 1998), art historian Jonathan Katz criticizes the recent Rauschenberg retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, noting how one could get through the exhibition and audio guide with no indication that the artist had even divorced Susan Weil, much less been involved in long-term relationships with two other major male artists of the cold war era. According to the editor of *Art+Text*, in an effort to suppress critical dissent and any unauthorized accounts of the artist's production, the Guggenheim had initially refused to release photographic material to accompany the essay.

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