

Jill ou Face^[1]

Pauline L. Boulba and Aminata Labor

Who was Jill Johnston? Neither a wrestler turned senator nor a barkeeper, although she fought a lot with words and ideas, with an extremely cheeky sense of humour and no less charisma. An American, Jill Johnston lived for the majority of her life in New York, from 1929 to 2010. As she always sought to shatter the barriers between categories and genres, presenting her requires a few detours and hairpin bends.

As a dancer and writer, her gestures and texts were part of a period in which dance and performance were being redefined, as they shifted away from concert halls and virtuosity towards the street, the everyday, the repetitive and the inframince in the 1960s and 1970s. A mother, she became a feminist and lesbian activist at a time when countercultures and struggles for women's and civil rights were in full force.

From that point onwards, her artistic and activist commitments merged together in her writing, which constantly moved back and forth between art and her private life. Like the slogan of the period, she never ceased to assert that "the personal is political," that works are inseparable from those who create them, and that puns, punchlines and digressions say as much as a manifesto. Increasingly experimental, her texts sought to deconstruct their relationship to the authority of discourse and art at the time. She advocated the "disintegration of criticism,"^[2] to the extent of eliminating punctuation, narration and linearity. She often signed her texts with her initials, JJ or jj, two little scratches that became drawings.

Jill Johnston was a "nice, well-behaved fucked-up person,"^[3] a clown and troublemaker with a profound spirit of subversion, for whom the word "no" was rarely an answer. Despite being initially recognised and celebrated, she never became a household name: very few people are familiar with her in the United States these days, and even fewer in France. Her books are all out of print and have never been republished, let alone translated. This omission marks several layers of erasure in the dominant discourse: dance and performance within fine art, women in the history of art and lesbians in the history of feminism.

This was the conclusion reached by Pauline L. Boulba when she discovered Jill Johnston's work in 2017. At the time, she was preparing a thesis in dance studies at the University of Paris 8, working on the ways in which the audience transforms and continues to bring performances to life through their memories and analyses. She already had an accomplice in Aminata Labor, who performed, danced and drew, and collected the stories of the women in the processions at the front of the demonstrations. Together, they took part in protests and general assemblies, then went on to rap, radio, fanzines, performances, texts, drawings and translations. A multitude of things in motion, always funny and spontaneous, never completely finished forms, rather deliberately "not sure, not reliable and not solid, not easy, not visible, not expressible."^[4]

In 2020, they began a research project based around Jill Johnston that would continue for several years, taking the form of a show, a film, this exhibition and soon a book combining translations, texts and drawings.^[5] For them, this figure is not a closed and external subject of study; it is a moving and living material that they take over, affirming "the need to allow oneself to invent the

works in order to invent oneself.”^[6] The aim is not to sanctify and freeze the works of the past, but to activate them in the present through a multiplicity of possibilities: “talking with the work/walking through the work/tasting the work/eating the work/travelling with/in the work/raving about the work/regressing the work/hacking the work/fictionalising the work/overflowing the work.”

When they are confronted with missing archives, images and films for which the rights of use are too expensive, Pauline L. Boulba and Aminata Labor shoot the scenes themselves, continue the stories, create fake archives of testimonies, flyers and photo sequences, inserted indiscriminately amongst the real ones. This relationship with fan fiction in the research process lightly prods at the rigour, seriousness and ethical standards usually attributed to artist-researchers, who in this case should perhaps be renamed fan girl-elaborators or detective-conjurers.

For their exhibition at Les Capucins, Pauline L Boulba and Aminata Labor have created a space somewhere between a teenager's bedroom, an archive, a protest and a notebook. The space is filled with film extracts, drawings by Aminata Labor, objects and areas for consultation, reading and rest. The screens alternate between interviews with people close to Jill Johnston, appearances by fictitious activists and staged archives. Together, they form a collective portrait of jill et une vies.^[7] The faces of the protagonists can be seen on the “Dykini” hanging next to the film: a hijacked deck of Panini cards, where the football players are replaced by the personalities encountered in this investigation.

In the centre of the space, there is a vast J-shaped bench to sit on with a sinuous back and retro upholstery. Fitted with pockets for booklets, cushions accompanied by audio or embroidered with the titles of Jill Johnston's books, this intriguing seat can be used as a meeting place and as a backdrop for contemplating the different areas of the exhibition.

Once sat on it, we are presented with an unobstructed view of a huge banner presenting a fictional and poetic biography of Jill Johnston, inscribed with bleach onto denim fabric, which mixes homophobic insults with the names of classic ballets from the history of dance. Under the guise of humour, these puns speak of the structural importance of insults in the lives of the people from a minority group who receive them. Regarding this subject, sociologist Didier Eribon speaks of a lifelong journey, from shame through to self-affirmation and the reversal of stigma. He emphasises that we are all products of the insults we receive, and that we “never free ourselves” completely from the insult: “it is not enough to reverse the stigma, or to reappropriate the insult and re-signify it so that its power to wound disappears forever.”^[8]

Scattered throughout the space, several plush droplets and undulating shapes form aquatic motifs, linked to an episode in 1970 when Jill Johnston undressed right in the middle of a society gala and jumped into the pool, ‘splashing’ social conventions as was her habit.^[9] To delve into the life and work of Jill Johnston, to listen to those who knew her, to question the causes of her disappearance from art and dance history studies, is to marvel at the radicalism and audacity of words and gestures that are over fifty years old. It also means working in the present on a broader and more complex task: the slow and necessary clearing of a canonical art history so that women, LGBT people and minorities can take their rightful place. Doing so alongside Pauline L. Boulba and Aminata Labor, is to follow in their joyful and impertinent wake, “serious about their aims but not necessarily solemn.”^[10]

Mathilde Belouali

This exhibition is organised in collaboration with Triangle-Astérides, contemporary art centre of national interest, Marseille, where the group show in resonance "Hymne aux murènes" is on show with Fabienne Audéoud, FSB Press, Cécile Bouffard with Eileen Myles, Pauline L. Boulba, Claude Eigan, Gustave Girardot, Aminata Labor, Natacha Lesueur, Ingrid Lucho, Béatrice Lussol, Bruno Pélassy, between 21 June and 13 October 2024.

Both exhibitions are supported by the DRAC PACA as part of the programme "Mieux Produire Mieux Diffuser".

[1] A reference to *pile ou face*, or in English, heads or tails

[2] "The Disintegration of a Critic: An Analysis of Jill Johnston," performance at New York University, Loeb Student Center, 21 May 1969.

[3] As in the title of one of her texts: *Jill Johnston, A nice well-behaved fucked-up person*, 1973.

[4] A text by Pauline L. Boulba and Aminata Labor sung in their film *JJ*, 2023.

[5] Pauline L. Boulba, Aminata Labor, Rosanna Puyol Boralevi and Nina Kennel, *JJ, Brook*, 2024 [to be published].

[6] Pauline L. Boulba, *Critiquer la danse. Réceptions performées et critiques affectées*, Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2023, p. 21.

[7] A reference to *mille et une vies*, or in English 'a thousand and one lives'

[8] Didier Eribon, *Retour à Reims*, Fayard, 2009, p.227-8.

[9] Researcher Clare Croft, who is currently writing a biography of Jill Johnston, refers to them as "lesbian splashes" across disciplines.

cf. Clare Croft, "Lesbian Echoes in Activism and Writing Jill Johnston's Interventions" in *Futures of Dance Studies* ed. Susan Manning, Janice Ross and Rebecca Schneider, University of Wisconsin Press, 2020, p. 131.

[10] Jill Johnston, "Pète au casque, la fête aux Scull," in Pauline L. Boulba, Aminata Labor, Rosanna Puyol Boralevi and Nina Kennel, *JJ, Brook*, 2024, p. 54.