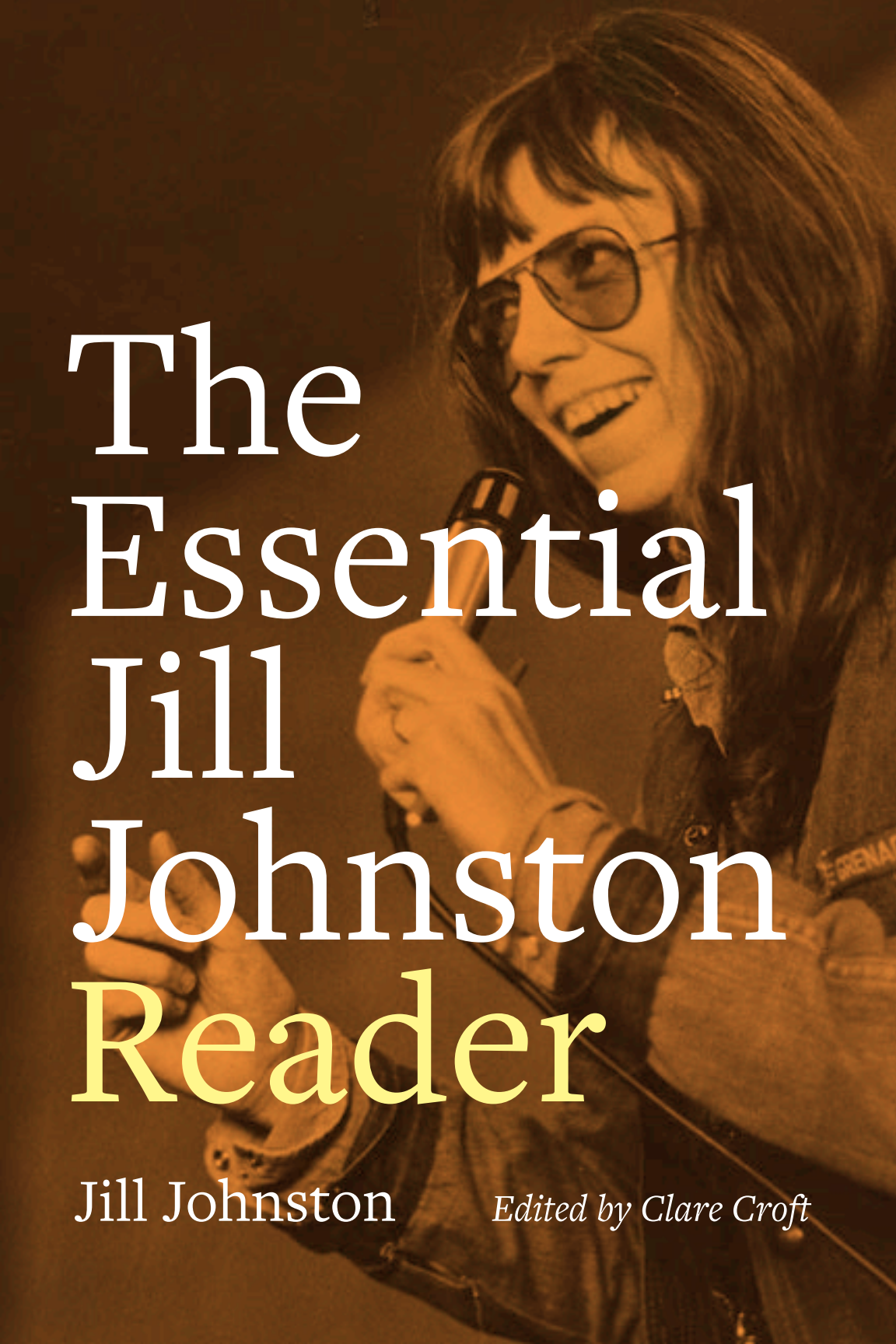

The Essential Jill Johnston Reader

Jill Johnston

Edited by Clare Croft

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Cover art: Jill Johnston, 1970. Photo by Diana Jo Davies. Courtesy the Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

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A Note on Transcription

Jill Johnston's experimental approach to writing makes re-presenting her writing in the format she intended a sometimes complicated task. This is further compounded by the fact that, as Johnston sometimes lamented in public, her main publication platform, the *Village Voice*, had, at best, a sometimes haphazard approach to proofreading and typesetting. At the level of the sentence it is sometimes difficult to discern the difference between a stylistic choice Johnston intended and an errant typographical error.

With these factors in mind, all transcription for this volume was first done from, whenever possible, the original publication of the piece and then cross-referenced against later publications of the writing that Johnston oversaw. Through these comparisons, it usually became clear when Johnston made intentional creative or structural choices for stylistic reasons versus when errors beyond her control were introduced. This comparative process also revealed the instances in which Johnston allowed changes to be made to reprints of her original pieces of writing, usually in the case of adding diacritics to names (something the *Voice* rarely did) or correcting the spellings of names and/or titles. In compiling this volume, the only intentional changes made were in the vein of those Johnston made for earlier collections of her writing. I would like to thank Sophie Allen for her tireless, detail-oriented work to render Johnston's writing as accurately as possible. That said, the final responsibility for the transcription rests with me, and any errors in the published volume are my own.

Introduction

Jill Johnston (1929–2010) was a writer.[1] She was a writer who understood writing as an action that could create a world of sensation and possibility for both writer and reader. As she once described it, riffing on her lesbian writing predecessor Gertrude Stein, "... by written I mean made. And by made I mean felt."[2] Reading work by Johnston is a combination of the visual, kinesthetic, and sonic, an experience so full that the reader can imagine they are—or even actually can be—transformed.

Johnston is best known as a dance critic and lesbian feminist provocateur, yet her writing from these two locations actually sends readers tumbling among a wide array of topics. Her writing shows that both dance and lesbian feminism—sites often seen as marginal—bring important insights and frames to social questions more broadly. In the column that Johnston wrote for the New York alternative weekly newspaper the *Village Voice* from 1960 to 1980, she wielded the tools and tactics of performance analysis and gender analysis in a manner that simultaneously educated, challenged, and confounded her readers. The boundary crossings Johnston relished in New York's avant-garde art scene of the 1950s and 1960s materialized anew in her writing, leading readers into unexpected arenas or giving them fresh ways of encountering already well-worn paths. By the 1970s, Johnston had developed a signature writing style that she used to chart another set of boundary crossings, bringing readers with her as she moved among the overlaps and frictions of the women's and gay liberation movements.

No matter the topic, Jill Johnston's writing is a performance itself. She drops a reader into a moment, an event at an art gallery or a protest for women's rights or gay rights, and then floods the scene with vivid details. She has little interest in explaining context, but intense interest in presence—an interest she often invoked through attending to what French theater director and theorist Antonin Artaud referred to (and Johnston often quoted): how

live performance can present people "signaling through the flames." In Johnston's engagement with Artaud, to "signal through the flames" meant borrowing from theatrical means to elaborate how being alive is an experience of rhythm and cadence, action and heat. In later writing, Johnston used the Artaud-ian frame of fire and flame even more specifically—to invoke the iterative, sometimes frightening, sometimes enthralling experience of coming out as a lesbian.

Johnston's emphasis on presence and its sensorial dimensions upends any notion of reading as a passive act of consumption. Reading Johnston's writing involves far more than just scanning eyes across words on a page. As one reader put it in a "letter to the editor" published in the *Village Voice* in 1974, the best way to read Johnston's column was to "listen" to it.[3] Johnston went further, describing language as an "ongoing battleground" where meaning is simultaneously made and contested, never settled.[4] Writing is not merely a practice meant to make an idea legible, but rather a site to convey multiplicity and contradiction. To read Johnston's writing is to navigate a flood of words and ideas that demands an activated, even turned-on body. Johnston brought the practices that so shaped her, writing and dancing, close enough to touch.

WHO SHE WAS

Jill Johnston was a writer and woman created by the American white, middle-class, post-WWII suburbs of the East Coast; the New York modernist and postmodernist art scenes; and pre-Stonewall and pre–women's liberation New York City. Born in London in 1929, to an American mother, Olive Johnston, and British father, Cyril F. Johnston, who met on a transatlantic voyage, Johnston spent her first two years of life in a London suburb before moving, with her mother, to live with her grandmother, Pauline, in Little Neck, Queens. Upon returning to the United States, Jill was largely raised by Pauline, with Olive, who worked as a nurse in nearby New York City, joining Jill and Pauline on weekends. To shield Jill from her status as "illegitimate," Olive took Johnston's name and gave it to Jill as well, but told her daughter that her father had died before her birth.

When Jill reached adolescence, Olive took a nursing position in Europe and sent Jill to boarding school in Peekskill, New York. In the first of her four autobiographies, *Mother Bound* (1983), Johnston describes her time at the all-girls Episcopal school as something of a lab for experimenting with ways to be a girl, even as all the experiments were limited by the constricting codes of 1950s white, middle-class girlhood, including the necessity of acquiring

a boyfriend from the nearby boys' school. An avid athlete in high school, Johnston turned her attention to dance as she entered college at Tufts University in Boston. There, two events (that eventually became intertwined) shaped Johnston's college years: discovering the truth about her father and having her first female lover. Johnston's father actually died while she was in school, and her mother—afraid Jill would learn the truth from his *New York Times* obituary—sent college-aged Jill a copy of the newspaper and a letter explaining the realities of her conception "outside of marriage." Shocked by her newly revealed origin story, Johnston turned to her mentor and dance professor, who eventually became her first female lover—and the person who would introduce Johnston to the New York dance scene that Johnston moved into as an adult.

After more schooling, first in Minnesota and then in an MFA program for writing at University of North Carolina at Greensboro, at the time, another all-women's school where Johnston had a first glimpse of nascent lesbian community, Johnston landed in New York City in the early 1950s. The move was one meant to provide Johnston a place to study philosophy and dance, the former at Columbia University and the latter at the school of foundational modern dance figure José Limón. Obviously aware of Johnston's attractions to women, her Tufts dance professor suggested that the normative femininity of the modern dance world would help Johnston find a path toward heterosexuality. Johnston came into her adult life in New York as a dancer and as a woman who had experiences with a lot of secret-keeping: one that she felt had exploded on her (the news of her father) and one that she was trying to keep (her attraction to women).

Johnston danced professionally in the city and continued to train at the Limón school, until a broken foot halted her dance career. She then got a job at the New York Public Library's Dance Collection, where she worked briefly, and, more importantly, where she met modern dance impresario Louis Horst, who offered Johnston her first opportunity to write professionally. Johnston published her first piece, an essay about the state of concert dance, in 1955 in Horst's *Dance Observer*. The piece grapples with the state of the modern dance field and what Johnston called the *new dance*, a sea change in choreography for the stage that would eventually become known as *postmodern dance*, a movement based in downtown New York City and usually associated with Merce Cunningham and the Judson Dance Theater. Johnston loved the emerging postmodern scene's commitment to reimagining definitions and categories. She tracked these developments across galleries and stages uptown and down, even as she still sought to abide by more conservative and

expected categories in her personal life. In 1956, Johnston married a man, with whom she had two children, Richard and Winnie. In her autobiographies, she records those years as ones full of abuse and frustration, leading her to eventually move with her two young children to Manhattan's East Broadway community in 1961 (and officially divorce her husband in 1963). By 1963, Johnston was emerging into the roles for which she first became best known: a visual arts and dance critic—or "cricket" as she was fond of describing the profession.[5]

The pun, critic as "cricket," is one of many examples of Johnston's play with the visual and sonic in her writing, and it also produces a metaphor suitable for understanding the writer that she became: a woman accomplished at creating a buzz. As a *Voice* writer covering the avant-garde performance scene, including the beginning of postmodern dance and Happenings, she chronicled an artistic revolution-in-process. In the late 1960s, as she moved away from reviewing staged performance and brought her critical eye to life more generally, the *Voice* retitled her column from "Dance" to "Dance Journal," finally retitling it again in 1971 simply as "Jill Johnston." By the time of this last shift, Johnston had moved fully into examining her life as a lesbian and her life as someone who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia, experiences she wrote about by using the sensory-rich prose for which she had become known as a dance critic. As Johnston attended now full-time to gender and sexuality, she was just as likely to write about her often provocative takes on women's and gay liberation as she was the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Jung. Her 1970s writings, along with a series of stand-offs with figures like the onetime *Voice* owner and writer Norman Mailer and liberal feminist Betty Friedan, launched Johnston into public view. A 1971 *LIFE* magazine story about gay liberation described her as "a full-time polemicist for sexual liberation."[6]

Johnston's prolific production as a writer made her a public intellectual for the arts, for feminism, and for lesbians. In addition to her column for the *Voice* and writing for other periodicals, including *Art in America* and the *New York Times Book Review*, Johnston also published ten books. Most notable among these are *Marmalade Me* (1971), a collection of her writing about performance in the 1960s; *Lesbian Nation* (1973), a collection of slightly revised versions of the *Voice* columns, press coverage of Johnston's writing and public appearances, excerpts from her personal journals, and correspondence with readers; and *Jasper Johns: Privileged Information* (1996), an example of the psychobiographic approach she took to her writing about artists later in life. In these examinations of artists, Johnston was often supported and as-

sisted by her wife, Ingrid Nyeboe, her partner from the late 1970s until Johnston's death in 2010.

WHAT SHE WROTE

Johnston made fantastic use of the episodic nature of her (mostly) weekly newspaper column, where she covered dance, lesbian life, and what she eventually termed the "theatre of life."[7] Drawing on the kinetic force she learned to infuse her writing with through her focus on dance, Johnston bravely demonstrated what it looked like and felt like to be a woman and a lesbian during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a perspective much debated at the time but one almost never narrated by a lesbian herself. Through Johnston's writing, readers got to experience what it meant to live as both a woman and a homosexual, to be seen as a lesbian and to see as a lesbian.

The Essential Jill Johnston Reader displays Johnston's panoramic intensity as both an arts critic and a foundational voice in struggles for women's rights and gay rights. The larger contexts in which Johnston wrote are explored in greater detail in this book's complementary volume, *Jill Johnston in Motion: Dance, Writing, and Lesbian Life*. This anthology lets Johnston speak for herself. It is organized around the wide array of writing genres Johnston contributed to (and often reimagined): theory, performance reviews, "embedded writing," travel writing, coming-out stories, personal essays, and reflections on writing. For the first time, Johnston's writings about art, women's and gay liberation movements, and lesbian life appear side-by-side in one book.

The volume begins with works of theory, pieces in which Johnston makes generalizable claims about larger questions of art and gender. It begins with theory because that's where Johnston began: writing broad treatises for the *Dance Observer*, including offering rationales for arts criticism and questioning what constituted abstraction in the field of dance. History has best remembered Johnston for how her writing always attends to specificity and detail. Recognizing theory as the site through which Johnston-the-writer entered public view highlights another of her abiding interests: how larger ideas delivered via art and protest bring people together (or don't). Reading Johnston's theoretical writing, both pieces focused on art and those focused on gender, also emphasizes that there is one thing that always held Johnston's attention: the body. In the six pieces of theory featured here, Johnston grapples with what it means to communicate with the body, how bodies are understood and misunderstood, and how the body can be a platform for moving theory into practice. Starting with Johnston's theoretical writing and its labor toward generalized claims also clarifies some of her writing's limits, specifi-

cally how thinking about "the body," rather than about bodies in particular contexts and histories, risks the very homogenization of society Johnston critiqued later in life.

From these broader theoretical perspectives, the anthology turns to the most specific of Johnston's writing, the genre for which she is best known and the genre sometimes imagined as theory's opposite: performance reviews. The twenty-plus examples of Johnston's reviews are but a tiny sliver of the hundreds she wrote, yet even this relatively small selection is stunning in its range. The featured reviews cover multiple disciplines, genres, and mediums, among them sculpture, painting, ballet, and modern/postmodern dance. Regardless of discipline, Johnston approaches art as an event, considering the works' formal characteristics, how works index the process by which they were made, and the audience's experience of encountering each work. Johnston weaves these layers to a variety of ends, which this anthology elaborates through six subcategories. The "on criticism/on watching" category includes reviews that question the role of the critic, what it means to be an audience member, and what it means to watch. The next group focuses on description, a category that might seem self-evident but that Johnston renders as a vast expanse, demonstrating just how many kinds of actions could be described in any one event. Next among the reviews come Johnston's wildest experiments in writing, where she pushes the limits of what words can do on a page. In the final subcategories of reviews, Johnston focuses on one event but then contextualizes that event within three different areas: historical legacy, patterns in contemporary art, or the state of the dance field.

Across all these many types of reviews, Johnston undoes what the word "review" can mean, posing myriad ways that both the writer and her readers "re-view" art through and with language. With incredibly fleshy details, Johnston attends to what happened at any given performance, but she never—even in her most descriptive reviews—merely travels back through the event in order to evaluate it. Instead she takes up the act of reviewing much as she does all her writing: an opportunity to make something. Johnston's writings about art and performance confirm that encountering others' art can propel audiences toward new thoughts, modes of expression, and perspectives. In Johnston's writing, writing about others' artistic creations becomes its own act of creation. She displays how criticism might itself be an art form, as her fellow critic and close friend Gregory Battcock credited her with doing in his introduction to the best-known collection of her writing, *Marmalade Me*.

This volume's third category, termed "embedded writing," highlights Johnston's refusal of clear distinctions between being inside or outside an event. In these pieces, even when she is technically an outsider, Johnston always writes from within and elaborates how being "inside" is still an experience of multiplicity. Readers gain a sense of what it was like to be present at an event or a scene—a feature that often draws comparisons between Johnston and New Journalists, like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson, who borrowed techniques from fiction to enhance their long-form journalism. Yet, unlike those associated with New Journalism, Johnston refuses to equate a sense of "being there" with notions of legibility or full comprehension. She does not seek status as superior expert, but rather proves herself to be an intense observer from within the milieu—an approach to watching shaped by performance that later anchored her lesbian feminist politics. Three lengthy accountings of events—some explicitly performances, others better understood as what Johnston called "theatre of life"—represent her "embedded writing." In the first, Johnston describes performing in a 1964 performance/Happening, cast as a "free agent" by director Allan Kaprow. In the next piece, set at an Avant Garde Festival organized by performer and musician Charlotte Moorman, Johnston moves from her more usual mode commenting on the audience at a theatrical event into being part of an audience that refuses to remain an audience. In the third and final piece of "embedded writing," she disrupts a feminist fundraiser, going for a partially nude swim to interrupt a scene of elitism and respectability.

The fourth section of the anthology features Johnston's profiles of individuals, usually artists. This section might prove to be the volume's most surprising. Johnston's interest in writing as an opportunity to create a phenomenological scene often elevates her experiences over those of others. Yet these profiles reveal her intense interest in other people and how they use their bodies to build worlds and communities at the intersection of arts, politics, and society. This profiles portion gathers Johnston's sensitive, often humorous portraits of artists, including James Lee Byars, Mark di Suvero, Gertrude Stein, and Agnes Martin. The outlier among the profiles is Johnston's writing about feminist icon and New York congresswoman Bella Abzug. The Abzug piece, which charts Johnston's encounters with the congresswoman in both Washington and New York, provides a rare glimpse into a meeting of feminists from decidedly different wings of the movement, liberal and radical, with neither shying away from their differences nor using those differences to refuse to see the other's contributions.

Whether she was visiting subjects she wrote about or exploring for both research and pleasure, Jill Johnston was often on the road. Her chronicles of traveling form the subject of the anthology's fifth section. Reading Johnston's column, one could wonder if she was ever at home—she's often reporting from cars, speeding along in them or, as is the case with "Three American Pennies," one of the best pieces in this section, trying to get a broken-down car to start. What is notable in reading these travel pieces is not so much that Johnston should be equally known for this genre as much as she is for arts criticism or feminist critique, but rather that her travel writing highlights another lifetime fascination for Johnston: motion. An emphasis on motion is what her writings about dance, travel, and her developing lesbian and feminist identities all share.

While "coming out," the subject of the anthology's next section, might be more easily understood as a topic than a writing genre, it is absolutely a writing genre for Johnston. Indeed, she made an art form of the coming-out narrative. Her iterative announcements to the world about her gender and sexuality return again and again in the *Voice* as she toys with just how much to share about herself and other lesbians and with whom she wants to share. While coming out was something Johnston arguably did over the course of decades, this anthology focuses on her most intense moments of doing so, which are also among some of her most experimental columns: a series of versions of coming out that she published in 1970 and 1971, culminating in her infamous March 1971 triptych, "Lois Lane is a Lesbian."

Johnston's coming-out narratives are followed by a section titled "Personal Essay," a perhaps misleading title. Given Johnston's propensity (and skill) in describing her presence in her writing, everything in this volume could be termed "personal essay." Yet the pieces collected explicitly within this category are ones where Johnston is at her most musing. These columns exemplify her kaleidoscopic approach to any idea of an "I"—a perspective perhaps informed by her lifelong study of psychoanalytic theory, from Freud and Jung to R. D. Laing's more experimental ideas. In these most personal essays, Johnston reflects on her relationships with women and her childhood love of sports, among other topics. The section concludes with what is perhaps Johnston's opus, "On the Death of a Mother/Twelve-Part Variation on the Death of a Mother," a column about her mother's death that is even more so a meditation on how loss lives in the body. The 1979 piece is the most frequently anthologized piece of Johnston's writing . . . as it should be. Finally, as seems fitting for such a prolific writer, the volume ends by giving Johnston the last word on her writing, closing with an essay she wrote re-

flecting on her writing, "Fictions of the Self in the Making," published in the *New York Times* in 1993.

Enjoy the writing that Jill Johnston made.

Notes

1. All writing by Jill Johnston reprinted in this volume appears courtesy of Ingrid Nyeboe, who owns all rights to writing by Johnston.
2. Jill Johnston, "Stein: Affectionately Obscene Poetry," *Village Voice*, May 4, 1972.
3. Adrienne Vashon, "Letter to the Editor: Case Study," *Village Voice*, August 1, 1974.
4. Jill Johnston, "Making of a Lesbian Chauvinist," *Village Voice*, June 17, 1971.
5. Jill Johnston, "You Got Me," *Village Voice*, February 20, 1969, 28.
6. Michael Durham (text) and Grey Villet (photographs), "A Direct Assault on Laws and Customs," *LIFE*, December 31, 1971, 64–69.
7. Jill Johnston, "Of This Pure But Irregular Passion," *Village Voice*, July 2, 1971.