Joan Jonas
Moving Off the Land II
Mar 24 – Sep 29, 2019
Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Venezia
Foreword

The first few breaths of a new space are crucial. When the doors of Ocean Space open to the public for the first time this spring, we invite you to plunge into an immersive experience of the oceans. Revitalized over the past two years, the former Church of San Lorenzo now becomes a home dedicated to the seas, the myths surrounding them; explorations past, present, and future; and the creatures living in their depths. I could not think of a more unique voice than that of Joan Jonas to inaugurate Ocean Space. Her work weaves an intricate web of the histories of the oceans and their abundance of life. I hope that her remarkable exhibition “Moving Off the Land II” moves you just like her work has touched me ever since I first saw it.

The process of working with Jonas is indicative of the way TBA21–Academy connects disciplines, people, geographies, and formats. The Academy’s journeys at sea and on land catalyze processes that involve traveling, wandering, researching, and allowing art to happen in a processual way. Jonas’s methodology is related: she visited numerous aquariums around the world, experienced and filmed in the ocean, joined the Academy on a residency in Jamaica, spent time with local communities, gave a workshop to art students, and engaged in conversations with the scientific community, specifically David Gruber, who has been a close collaborator on this journey.

Participating in the way Jonas recognizes what art can achieve, how art senses the world, and how art motivates different knowledges about the ocean, opened our program up to forms, narratives, questions, limits, and futures we never saw before. At Ocean Space, “Moving Off the Land II” is a reminder that the subject of this program is a living, sentient entity: the ocean.

Markus Reymann,
director TBA21–Academy
Joan Jonas  
Moving Off the Land II

Joan Jonas’s exhibition “Moving Off the Land II” is the inaugural public project at the Ocean Space. The installation is the culmination of three years of intensive research in aquariums around the world as well as in the waters off the coast of Jamaica, commissioned by TBA21–Academy, an itinerant platform that forms part of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21). Comprising new video, sculpture, drawing, and sound works, as well as a performance on May 7, 2019, the show centers on the role the oceans have played for cultures throughout history as a totemic, spiritual, and ecological touchstone.

Joan Jonas is one of the most renowned artists of her generation. She is celebrated for her groundbreaking work in performance, installation, and video since the 1960s. At a time when art started leaving the confines of the gallery space, Jonas created work that converged with dance, music, and theater. Ever since, her work has tackled complex questions regarding humans’ relationship with the environment. Jonas represented the United States at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015. With this new work, she returns to Venice and revisits some of the themes touched upon in her US Pavilion exhibition “They Come to Us Without a Word”: the natural world and the animals inhabiting it—from bees to fish—as well as the present danger of climate change and extinction.

The oceans are a recurring motif in Jonas’s work. For the video Waltz (2003), she visited a beach near the woods in Nova Scotia, where she spent most of her summers since the early 1970s. With a group of friends and accompanied by her dog, Jonas performed a series of imagined, abstract rituals involving objects such as masks, a staff, and mirrors. The work calls to mind ancient fairy tales and myths surrounding the oceans as well their raw and fragile beauty. Beach Piece (1970) was performed at Jones Beach in Long Island, New York, where the audience was invited to stand on the muddy ground as performers appeared from and disappeared into sand dunes. Jonas, wearing a white sports mask, stood on a ladder with a mirror and reflected the sun back at the audience. In the installation Reanimation (2012), Jonas focused on Icelandic and Norwegian landscapes and their representations in age-old sagas as well as in the writing of the poet Halldór Laxness, resulting in an evocative merging of air, land, glaciers, and sea.

In “Moving Off the Land II,” Jonas pays tribute to the oceans and their creatures, biodiversity, and delicate ecology. Her new works dive deep into the ocean water, swim with the fish inhabiting it, and weave in literature and poetry by writers who have homed in on the liquid masses that cover two thirds of the planet. Following the methodology that has gained her lauded reputation, Jonas combines poetry and prose by writers like Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville with texts by Rachel Carson and Sy Montgomery, and with moving images filmed in aquariums and in Jamaica, where algae bloom and overfishing pose urgent threats to the environment.

In the last year and a half, as part of a sustained dialogue about their respective work, the marine biologist and coral reef and photosynthesis expert David Gruber has shared with Jonas his captivating underwater recordings that focus on biofluorescence. In 2018, Gruber visited Jonas at her summer home in Cape Breton, Canada, where he shot footage of her dog, Ozu, playing with the surf on the shoreline. The rich imagery by Gruber and other collaborators is juxtaposed with Jonas’s own voice and that of young people she frequently collaborates with, as well as music by the celebrated composer and drummer Ikue Mori and by the acclaimed musicians María Huld Markan Sigfusdóttir and Ánde Somby. In her unique visual language, Jonas has created a confluence of the poetic and the observational, of mythological folklore, contemporary narratives, and scientific studies, inviting viewers to plunge into a spellbinding experience.

Stefanie Hessler, curator

Video durations: 11'27'', 13'04'', 13'27'', 7'09'', 4'06''

Dimensions of the theater boxes: 211 × 354 × 387 cm, 242 × 596 × 289 cm, 242 × 394 × 380 cm, 194 × 110 × 237 cm, 175 × 150 × 211 cm

**Moving Off the Land II, 2019**

Jonas's practice unsettles the linearity of time as much as it transcends the confines of physical space. The installations *My New Theater*, which she has been making in different sizes and varying shapes since 1997, are conceived as viewing devices for moving images. The installations are reminiscent of theater stages, a space in which illusions and fantastical stories captivate the audience. Jonas has referred to magic shows she saw as a child as influential on her work, as well as shadow puppetry and Japanese Noh theater.

At Ocean Space, there are five new iterations of *My New Theater*. Two small-scale wooden looking boxes each built around a monitor, channel Jonas's fascination with looking, manifested in the viewfinder-like shapes of the sculptures, which create a heightened sense of focused attention. In addition, three large-scale installations can be entered like portals as if transporting viewers into the projected videos themselves, analogous to how Jonas layers her films to produce a sense of spatial depth and temporal concurrence. Throughout her career, Jonas approached the space created by video as something to be altered, climbed into, and reflected onto itself like a mirror. Indeed, the artist has referred to video as “an illusion of boxed space.”

On the monitors and screens, footage from Jonas’s performance *Moving off the Land* (2016–ongoing) is interwoven with a range of materials. Among these are videos filmed in aquariums and in the waters off the coast of Jamaica, shots of biofluorescent creatures provided by Gruber, and sequences of quasi-ritualistic movements and spoken word filmed in a studio in New York with a young cast of people who also featured in her Venice Biennale installation. In Jonas’s signature style, the superimposed imagery juxtaposes diverse geographies, indoor and outdoor spaces, and scenes that coexist in different—if conflated—environments.

Jonas’s own voice is heard as she narrates an anecdote about an octopus in the New England Aquarium in Boston, who every night lifted the lid of his enclosure, climbed out and into another tank to catch fish, then returned unnoticed. In another sequence, she focuses on the mythology of mermaids. The earliest of these fantastical creatures, half woman and half fish, was likely the Syrian fertility goddess Atargatis, depicted on an ancient coin shown in the performance. The representation of women as goddesses, orators, and shamans throughout history is a recurring subject in Jonas’s work. Threading through myth, folklore, literary sources by writers like T.S. Eliot and Emily Dickinson, the science writing of Peter Godfrey-Smith, as well as scientific findings, the *My New Theater* looking boxes and installations issue an elegiac caution of environmental threats and simultaneously offer a polyphonic praise of the world’s hydrosphere.
Jonas once said that “to draw [is] one of the most important things for me,” highlighting the tactility of the process and likening the choreography in her videos and performances to drawing in space. During her performance Moving Off the Land, which will be presented at Ocean Space on May 7, she creates drawings with a brush on a ninety-centimeters-long stick with Japanese ink on pre-cut pieces of paper laid out on the floor. The sketches are made in fast and decisive movements, often in less than thirty seconds, and remain on stage where they are held up for the audience to see. Jonas commonly chooses images related to the content of the work and draws them from memory. At other times, as in the recent multi-media installation including twenty-six framed drawings, Stream or River, Flight or Pattern (2016–17), the images are drawn from pictures in books, in this case a publication on birds from Thailand. Jonas often transfers images between different media. For instance, drawings made during performances later become part of an installation or a video, patterns of walking in circles are traced with chalk during the performance Lines in the Sand (2004), or the artist watches the image of the drawing she is making on a monitor as it is being filmed in a closed circuit.

Jonas made the drawings shown in this exhibition in her studio, based on her research in aquariums around the world, and during live performances of Moving Off the Land. They were scanned and printed in large formats, except for a large drawing of a whale installed in front of the double altar of the church, which is shown as original. Throughout the nave, the works are hung at different heights, reminiscent of the oceanic layers reaching from the epipelagic surface to the hadalpelagic zone extending from depths of 6000 meters to the deepest bottom plains.
Jonas is known for installations involving carefully selected props, some of which were given to her by friends, and some of which she collected over the years in places such as Cape Breton, the American southwest, or Jamaica. The “aquarium” was manufactured in Venice by local glass makers, based on a design by Jonas that was inspired by a postcard of a nineteenth-century drawing depicting a mountainous underwater landscape inside a glass box. Glass, a material made of sand, brings to mind beaches, the contact zone between land and sea where seafaring cultures meet, sometimes clash, and where their stories merge. The islands of Murano are known for their glass production, ever since the Venetian glass makers were forced to move out of the city due to the risk of fires in 1291. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, the city lost its monopoly, as its production secrets were disclosed to other European countries. However, traditional manufacturing methods are still practiced in Murano and the wider Veneto region to this day. The sculpture also calls to mind cabinets of curiosities, those collections of natural history for scientific study and entertainment, the first record of which stems from the apothecary Ferrante Imperato’s engraving in the book Dell’Historia Naturale, published in Naples in 1599. Similarly, aquariums bring us closer to subaquatic environments, they are created for study, enjoyment, and increasingly also as sanctuaries for endangered marine species.
Mirrors are a recurring material in Jonas’s practice, and constitute key elements in the exhibition. Jonas has used reflective surfaces in her performances since the late 1960s and onward, for instance in *Mirror Piece I* (1969), in which performers carry rectangular looking glasses that alternately reflect their own bodies and those of the audience, offering them a view of themselves and integrating their position as onlookers into the work. Similarly to the way Jonas collapses disparate spatial and temporal dimensions in her videos by superimposing footage, as well as through methods of layering moving image and material like paper, cloth, and the performers’ bodies in her performances, the mirrors flatten the distance between the work and the viewers, questioning the perception of vision. Interrogating the psychology of seeing, they deny any position of stability. Jonas cites her work with mirrors as a reference to Jorge Luis Borges’s collection of short stories *Labyrinths* (1962). In an earlier poem, *Mirrors* (1960), Borges likens mirrors to water, describing them as “impossible space of reflections” and as prolongations of “this hollow, unstable world.” Mirrors throw us back onto ourselves—for Borges, this caused a feeling of horror. Today, as human actions have left their indelible mark on the environment, mirrored reflections showing us as part of our surroundings also allude to our implicated co-dependence with other creatures, and, in a wider sense, to the unsteady boundaries of culture and “nature.”

At Ocean Space, two different kinds of Muranese mirrors produced for the exhibition after Jonas’s visit to several factories reflect the works on view and create a sense of spatial depth. Some of the mirrors are more clear, while others have a rippled structure, reminiscent of the surface of the ocean.
For the front room of Ocean Space, Jonas and her studio have created a sound work consisting of hydrophone recordings given to her by Gruber. The sounds heard throughout the space are the audible frequencies of noises emitted by sperm whales. These large whales are the deepest diving marine mammals, and their clicking vocalizations, emitted as pulses from their heads, are the loudest sounds produced by any animal. Sperm whales communicate with each other, and researchers imagine that their sounds transmit information related to mating, concerning their social status, and whether they are swimming downward or toward the surface. Whale sounds have been detected with the development of sonar technologies during World War II, and sound pollution caused by such technologies, seismic testing, and explosions from undetonated dynamite affect sensitive ocean ecosystems.

Jonas considers how sound is indicative of spatial distance, how it is delayed, or, in the case of water, travels four times faster than through air. At San Lorenzo, the sound envelops viewers, conjuring a sonic image of the oceans as ambiguous, fluid, illusionistic space.

Reproduction of a drawing made in 2019, UV pigmented inkjet print on Fabriano paper, 104 × 140 cm; Courtesy of the artist

Moving Off the Land II, 2019, video still, Courtesy of the artist
Performance

This exhibition originated with Jonas’s lauded performance *Moving Off the Land*. Drawing on a wellspring of materials including literature, mythology, and Jonas’s collections of sketches and notes on the sea, the performance explores the ocean as, in the words of the artist, “a life source and home to a universe of beings.” Video footage of underwater scenes—from Jean Painlevé’s black-and-white reels of sea creatures to shots of aquariums—intersect poetically and associatively with voice-over excerpts from Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, Montgomery’s *Soul of an Octopus*, and Carson’s *Undersea*. Jonas herself, in collaboration with Ikue Mori and one performer, takes viewers on a magical journey underwater, using live drawing and props to conjure a myriad of aquatic creatures.


Originally commissioned by TBA21–Academy in 2016 as a lecture-demonstration, *Moving Off the Land* was presented in parallel to the 2016 Kochi-Muziris Biennale during the Academy’s three-day interdisciplinary Convening #2. The initial version has evolved to a full-fledged performance that was presented at TBA21–Augarten in Vienna and during Sequences VIII in Reykjavik in 2017; at Danspace New York and the Tate Modern Turbine Hall in London in 2018; and at Fort Mason in San Francisco in 2019. On May 7, for one night only, the performance will be presented at Ocean Space, in the exhibition it inspired.
Joan Jonas
Biography

Joan Jonas (b. 1936, New York, USA) is a world-renowned visual artist whose work encompasses a wide range of mediums including video, performance, installation, sound, text, and sculpture. Jonas’s experiments and productions in the late 1960s and early 70s continue to be crucial to the development of many contemporary art genres, from performance and video to conceptual art and theater. Since 1968, her practice has explored ways of seeing, the rhythms of rituals, and the authority of objects and gestures. Jonas has exhibited, screened, and performed her work at museums, galleries, and large-scale group exhibitions throughout the world, including the Taipei Biennial; Documenta 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 13; the 2008 Sydney Biennial; the 2008 Yokohama Triennial; and the 28th São Paulo Biennial. She has recently presented solo exhibitions at Jeu de Paume, Paris; Museum of Modern Art, New York; CCA Kitakyushu, Japan; Contemporary Art Museum, Houston; HangarBicocca, Milan; NTU Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore; the United States Pavilion for the 56th Venice Biennial; and the Tate Modern, London. In 2018, she was awarded the prestigious Kyoto Prize, presented to those who have contributed significantly to the scientific, cultural, and spiritual betterment of mankind.

TBA21–Academy
About

TBA21–Academy leads artists, scientists, and thought-leaders on expeditions of collaborative discovery. Founded by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza and led by Director Markus Reymann, the Academy is dedicated to fostering a deeper understanding of the ocean through the lens of art and to engendering creative solutions to its most pressing issues. TBA21–Academy commissions interdisciplinary research that catalyzes engagement, stimulates new knowledge, and inspires artistic production. Established in 2011, the nonprofit’s program is informed by a belief in the power of exchange between disciplines and in the ability of the arts to serve as a vessel for communication, change, and action.

Ocean Space, a new global center for catalyzing ocean literacy, research, and advocacy through the arts, will open to the public this spring in the newly revitalized Church of San Lorenzo in Venice. Spearheaded by TBA21–Academy and building on its expansive work over the past eight years, this new embassy for the oceans will foster greater engagement and collective action on the most pressing issues facing the oceans today. Conceived as a platform for collaboration and exchange, Ocean Space will provide flexible facilities for installations, performances, workshops, archives, and research, overseen by TBA21–Academy and its network of partners, including universities, NGOs, museums, government agencies, and research institutes from around the world. The project will open in phases, reintegrating the historic building back into the cultural fabric of the city after two years of extensive revitalization works and more than 100 years of being largely inaccessible to the public.
Credits

Joan Jonas  
Moving Off the Land II  
March 24–September 29, 2019

Curator: Stefanie Hessler  
Curatorial Assistant: Eleni Tsopotou

Exhibition design: Joan Jonas
Video: Joan Jonas
Video editing: David Sherman and Joan Jonas
Sound design: Joan Jonas and David Sherman
Sound mixing: Neil Benezra
Joan Jonas Studio: Sekeena Gavagan, Jin Jung, David Sherman
Assistant to Joan Jonas in Venice: Elena Mazzi

Light design: Jan Kroeze
Performance space architecture: Andrés Jaque / Office for Political Innovation
Exhibition project architect: Philipp Krummel
Project management: DH Office; M+B studio srl

Graphic design: Ana Domínguez Studio with Judit Musachs
Media relations: Resnicow and Associates; Casadorofungher

TBA21  
TBA21 Chairwoman: Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza
Thyssen-Bornemisza
Director TBA21-Academy: Markus Reymann
CEO TBA21: David Hrankovic
TBA21-Academy: Tristan Acutt, Kat Davis, Maria Montero Sierra, James White
Ocean Space Venice team: Fanny Liotto, Sara Mattiazz, Alice Sartori

Video performers
Zora Casebere, Noah Delorme, Lila Gavagan, Joan Jonas, Francesco Migliaccio, Jonas Moran, Malcolm Moran, Willa Schwabsky

Video
Footage recorded by Jonas in the following aquariums: the Lofoten Aquarium in Norway; the New England Aquarium in Boston, MA; the New York Aquarium in Coney Island, NY; the National Aquarium in Baltimore, MD; the Aquarium in Genoa, Italy; the Mystic Aquarium in Mystic, CT; and various Aquariums in Tokyo, Japan
Biofluorescent sea animals and Cape Breton footage recorded by David Gruber
Underwater swimming footage recorded in Jamaica by Cynthia Beatt
Footage accompanying George Williams, the Jamaican fisherman, recorded by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza

Music
Ikue Mori, Maria Huld Markan Sigfúsdóttir, Ande Somby

Additional audio credits
Original sperm whale recordings by David Gruber

Literary sources
Anna Akhmatova, Jonathan Balcombe, John Berger, Rachel Carson, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Peter Godfrey-Smith, Herman Melville, Sy Montgomery, Neil Shubin

Texts
Curatorial text by Stefanie Hessler
Additional wall text in the exhibition based on writing by David Gruber

Translation & Copy-editing
Maria Nadotti, Orit Gat

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Studio camera footage and performance in New York recorded by Greenhouse Media

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Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo  
Castello 5069  
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Tuesday–Sunday: 11.00–19.00
Closed Mondays
Free entry

For more information:
www.tba21.org/academy
www.ocean-space.org

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B A Art Contemporary  
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