

Farah Nayeri, "Preserving the Ethereal," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2018JOAN JONAS
PRESERVING
THE ETHEREAL

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At 81, a performance artist gets her biggest museum show yet at Tate Modern

BY FARAH NAYERI

The American artist Joan Jonas stood before an enthusiastic audience in London late one recent day and re-enacted excerpts from some of her performances. Accompanied by the jazz pianist Jason Moran, she ran around with a bucket, painting a giant snake on the floor, tooted a horn and sounded a succession of bells, as video images scrolled across a large screen. It was a strange and entrancing ritual.

Four months shy of her 82nd birthday, Ms. Jonas has her biggest museum show yet: a career survey at Tate Modern in the British capital. As museums increasingly branch out into performance and film, the artist is finally reaching mainstream audiences — and perplexing one or two critics along the way.

In an interview before the exhibition's opening, Ms. Jonas was timid and sometimes self-critical — performance was "a way of masking shyness," she explained — despite a lifetime of achievements, including representing the United States at the 2015 Venice Biennale. Her 8-year-old poodle, Ozu, named after the Japanese filmmaker, snoozed beside her. One of Ms. Jonas's films, "Beautiful Dog" (2014), was made with a camera mounted on his collar.

"It's a process of putting together," Ms. Jonas said of her immersive works. "I collect images and ideas, and then I try to put them together into a relationship." She added that she "would not want to explain in words what I do," because her art meant different things to different people. "So it's not about turning it into a sentence that you can understand."

Tate Modern is showing every strand of her work: film and live performance, and installations that are carry-overs from her ephemeral performances and that allow them to endure.

Ms. Jonas often bases her pieces on myths, rituals, poems, folk songs, and texts from around the world — a 13th-century Icelandic folk epic, a 1961 American poem about Helen of Troy. In performance, she recites lines from those texts but also draws and paints shapes, holds up objects, makes strange sounds, and wears accessories such as papier-mâché hats and animal masks.

Once a performance has taken place, video images, drawings, props, costumes and sets from it are transformed into an installation. The reverse can also happen: An installation can become a performance.

"She never considers a work closed," said Andrea Lissoni, the curator of the Tate exhibition. "She will get back to it, and sample or take out something that should be presented somewhere else."

After pursuing art history and sculpture as a university student, Ms. Jonas combined making art with part-time work. "Being a woman, I just never thought I could be an artist," she said. "I didn't have confidence until later."

Sculpture was a struggle, and Ms. Jonas found herself drawn, instead, to per-



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formance — an overlap of visual arts and dance. "The minute I started performing, I was totally attracted by it," she said. It allowed her to "make things right away," and "bring music and movement and object and drawing into it."

The Tate exhibition contains photographs and filmed excerpts from Ms. Jonas's feminist-themed early performances, such as when she stood in a gallery holding a small mirror up to parts of her naked body, and when she posed seductively for a camera wearing a belly-dancer's outfit and a feathered headdress.

Those works grew out of "a pent-up anger which gave energy to women to speak out," Ms. Jonas said. She described the current #MeToo movement as "a further development — because these problems were not solved then," and said she viewed it as "the dam bursting."

Ms. Jonas is popular with art students, and not just those who studied with her at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where she taught from 1998 to 2014. (She is now a professor emerita at the university.) Her pieces retain "a perpetual potential for re-arrangement and remaking," said Cath-

erine Wood, who curated the Tate show's live performances. "This is part of what makes her work so appealing for a contemporary generation."

The 31-year-old American artist Sondra Perry, who was in London to present a multiscreen digital installation at the Serpentine Galleries, said Ms. Jonas set an example both as a female artist and as someone who made the medium of video a subject of her art. "Her installations are sensual: They make me feel things," Ms. Perry said. "I want to go back to my studio and draw. They're highly active and contagious."

Since 2005, Ms. Jonas has performed

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Left, Joan Jonas, who is finally reaching mainstream audiences as museums increasingly branch out into performance and film. Above, two installation views of her career retrospective at Tate Modern in London. It will run through Aug. 5.

After a performance, video images, drawings, props, costumes and sets from it are transformed into an installation.

to evocative music composed by Mr. Moran. The 43-year-old pianist described Ms. Jonas as having “a real percussion language,” and said the two of them were “some kind of odd couple”; his son Jonas is named after her.

Their collaboration started right after Ms. Jonas saw Mr. Moran in a jazz concert at Lincoln Center in New York, which featured some unusual staging. Ms. Jonas looked him up in the phone book and asked him to compose music for her next performance. “I never worked that hard in my entire life: I thought touring as a jazz musician was difficult,” Mr. Moran said. “The process is rigorous in figuring out what combinations can work between text, image, movement, sound, and props.”

The Tate show has drawn praise from *The Financial Times* and *The Times* of London, yet it has left a few critics cold. “Jonas aims for a kind of poetry that she doesn’t always achieve. There is always so much stuff getting in the way,” Adrian

Searle wrote in *The Guardian*. “Somewhere, a conversation is going on, but I don’t quite catch it. I hear wailing, and I think it might be me.”

Speaking before the reviews came out, Ms. Jonas acknowledged that her work was “still difficult for some people” and that she herself was sometimes angered, initially, by art she did not understand. “I think it’s important to give yourself up to a work and not try to make sense of it right away,” she said.

In recent years, Ms. Jonas has made it somewhat easier for audiences by focusing less on obscure texts and more on her awe of nature and concern for the environment. Two captivating installations in the Tate show — “Reanimation” (2010/2012/2013), which features a crystal sculpture, and “Stream or River, Flight or Pattern” (2016-17), which incorporates Vietnamese kites — evoke glaciers and birds.

How will she be remembered in 50 years? “I think it’ll be a miracle if I’m remembered,” Ms. Jonas said. “The medium of video is fragile. Will we still be showing work in the same way? Who knows?”

“I’ll be happy if I’m remembered 10 years from now, if my work is seen,” she added. “I hope so.”