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Barry Schwabsky, "Joan Jonas: Moving Off The Land II," *The Brooklyn Rail*, September 29, 2019

BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

Joan Jonas: *Moving Off The Land II*

By [Barry Schwabsky](#)



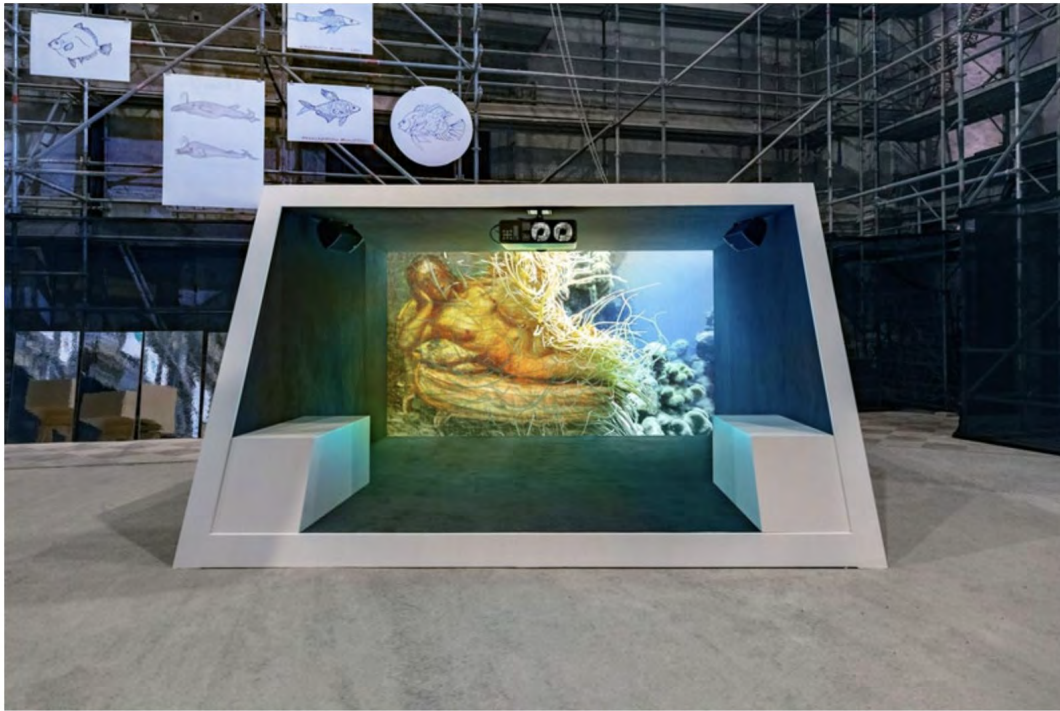
Installation view: Joan Jonas: *Moving Off the Land II*, Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome. Photo: Enrico Fiorese.

Four years ago, Joan Jonas's installation at the American Pavilion, *They Come to Us Without a Word*, towered over the 2015 Venice Biennale while also seeming an unsurpassable synthesis of some five decades of her multivalent work with performance, video, objects, and installation. Jonas became a pioneer of video installation as a genre, not necessarily intending it, but by responding to changes in technology and the circumstances of exhibition-marking as they've shifted over the decades—and to her own developing sense of space. As she told me in 2017, "When I first started working on video...they were always to do with space. Three-dimensional space. To me that's what performance is too...working in a three-dimensional space. The video itself is a three-dimensional space, and you have to go into it."

Jonas has hardly been resting on her laurels since 2015, mounting many exhibitions and performances worldwide, among them a retrospective at the Tate Modern in London in 2018 and a large-scale gallery show at *Gavin Brown's Enterprise* in New York in 2017. This year, Jonas was not part of the Biennale, and her exhibition *Moving Off the Land II* at Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, sponsored by TBA21–Academy (an initiative of Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary devoted to interdisciplinary research and cultural production concerning the oceans) was not even listed as a collateral event. And yet, once again, Jonas seemed to set the tone for what was best in the Biennale. It's not just that no one better embodied Biennale curator Ralph Rugoff's call for "a practice entertaining multiple perspectives: of holding in mind seemingly contradictory notions, and juggling diverse ways of making sense of the word," though that's certainly the case.

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Not overtly articulated was the urgent interest of many of the artists in this year's Biennale in the predicament of our faulty relationship with the earth—with its land, seas, and air—and the threat that hangs over so many species, our own included. On this topic, few artistic endeavors are more illuminating than Jonas's—and while this was already true of *They Come to Us Without a Word*, her view has become sharper and clearer since then.



Installation view: Joan Jonas: *Moving Off the Land II*, Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, Venice. Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome. Photo: Enrico Fiorese.

Moving Off the Land II comprised five videos (totaling about 50 minutes in duration) each housed in its own wooden “theater” constructed within the vast space of the former church, along with a multitude of drawings reproduced as inkjet prints (hung too high up for the distinction between an original and a reproduction to be evident) showing fish and other sea creatures, as well as a huge painted banner of a whale and a sound installation of the noises made by sperm whales—among other elements. Jonas has collaborated with marine biologist David Gruber, and the work incorporates some of his underwater video footage concerning the phenomenon of bioluminescence, that is, light produced by living organisms, as well as his sound recordings of the sperm whale. More watery imagery was captured by the artist herself in aquaria across the U.S. as well as in Italy, Japan, and Norway. This elision between natural and artificial habitats is undoubtedly part of Jonas's theme. Even as humans become more adept at technically simulating natural conditions, nature itself is submitted to our technical modifications, deliberate or otherwise. The philosopher Yuk Hui recently put it in dramatic terms: “Nature as such may have ceased to exist since the Industrial Revolution.”

Perhaps that's too dramatic; but we surely have to revise our notion of “nature” to encompass our awareness that it is not external to technology and culture. They are all layered together. Jonas's method of constructing her imagery with multiple layers seems to evoke the multiple articulations of artificiality and naturalness in the world we inhabit: performers on a sound stage might be seen as mere interruptions of a video-within-the-video being projected behind them (and onto their costumes); they might be drawing roughly onto sheets held in front of them—drawings, that is, which they can't see while making them—and these drawings (or rather their digital reproductions) can be glimpsed elsewhere in the space in which the video is being screened. Multiple levels of reality or unreality intersect; the result is not confusion but a lively stimulus to the viewer's faculty of perceiving the differences. The performers are young people, inhabitants of the future; one of them is my daughter, and I worry for the world she will inhabit when she is my age.

Moving Off the Land II is not so much a call to action as a call to awareness. For Jonas, entering the three-dimensional space of the video, and of the video installation, means learning to move, think, and feel more fluidly, and to cultivate an awareness of how little we know of the world of which we are part.