

G L A D S T O N E

Alex Greenberger, "Joan Jonas, a Performance Art Pioneer, Gets the Super-Sized MoMA Retrospective She Deserves,"
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Joan Jonas, a Performance Art Pioneer, Gets the Super-Sized MoMA Retrospective She Deserves

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**

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Installation view of "Joan Jonas: Good Night Good Morning," 2024, at Museum of Modern Art, New York.
PHOTO JONATHAN DORADO



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In 1972, Joan Jonas became both a sorceress and a dog. The metamorphosis happened while she was performing as her mask-wearing alter ego, Organic Honey. She drew cryptic symbols, plunked pennies into a bowl of water, and threw her image across multiple monitors using video technology.

Then she transformed. She looked into one of the monitors displaying Organic Honey’s reflection, and began to yowl at it like a canine.

Descriptions of the event make it sound less like performance art than a conjuring. “She was present, but not present,” the curator Joan Simon has said, noting that Jonas “was revealing something.” Jonas, for her part, said she was trying to channel “magic and witches, those women who were outside of the culture and who were knowledgeable.”

Now, Jonas remains present, but not present, in a different form: a super-sized Museum of Modern Art retrospective that includes a reworked version of this performance, titled Organic Honey’s Visual Telepathy (1972). Here, the work appears as an installation that includes video documentation of the piece, along with others involving Organic Honey, plus objects that are related to this body of work: a projector screen, a camera pointed at drawings of dogs, a shot glass submerged in a water-filled container. Set within a darkened room, the reworked piece today feels haunted by unseen beings and forces that exist beyond reason.

Much of Jonas's MoMA show is a succession of installations such as this one that retool past performances into complex arrays of props, projections, and paraphernalia. Ambling about, one is likely to find themselves ensnared in their webs of allusions and self-allusions.

Jellyfish, rabbits, dogs, Icelandic lore, Noh theatre, Grimm fairy tales, mediumistic communion with other realms, and remixed representations of women recur throughout. Hours and hours of video appear in the show, which is soundtracked by the harsh, repeating noises that many of Jonas's videotapes make.

The show is very big—perhaps too big—but this compelling exhibition succeeds primarily because of its scale. At a certain point, one is forced to surrender to all this art and soak in the rich experience it offers. My usual method for preparing a review—assiduous note-taking—faltered as the exhibition slowly wore me down, forcing me to admit to myself that Jonas's art really does work best when it isn't rationalized.

Today, Jonas specializes in a kind of woozy, blissed-out installation art that takes up the vastness of the natural world. One of the new works in the show, *To Touch Sound* (2024), is a three-screen video sculpture that pays homage to David Gruber, a marine biologist who has collaborated with Jonas on many recent works. The piece features dreamy shots of sperm whales emerging from the watery depths, images of dancers writhing before projected images of the ocean, and footage of Jonas herself as she attempts to draw outdoors while rain falls down around her. Meanwhile, whale songs play. *To Touch Sound* is about multiple realms calling out to one another: text seen on one screen informs viewers about the biological processes that enable whales to transmit their clicking beyond the seas, toward the land.

Curator Ana Janevski places *To Touch Sound* at the end of Jonas's retrospective, effectively pulling the show back down to earth. But nearby, there are other grand installations that seem unbound from the rules of our world.

There's *Reanimation*, an installation begun in 2010 that features four screens arranged around a cryptic sculpture composed of hanging crystals. A video projector is placed behind the crystals, causing them to fling light around the space while a glittering piano score by Jason Moran plays.

And there's *Lines in the Sand* (2002), an installation about the poet H.D. that features wavy chalk lines, a box with sand swept via a method more typically seen in Japanese gardens, and videos that feature images of Egypt and the Luxor casino in Las Vegas. The work is about the past calling out to the present, perhaps, or the enduring (and problematic) fixation on Africa by white Westerners, but on the whole, the piece is ambiguous. It's on the viewer to figure out what all these disparate things have to do with one another.



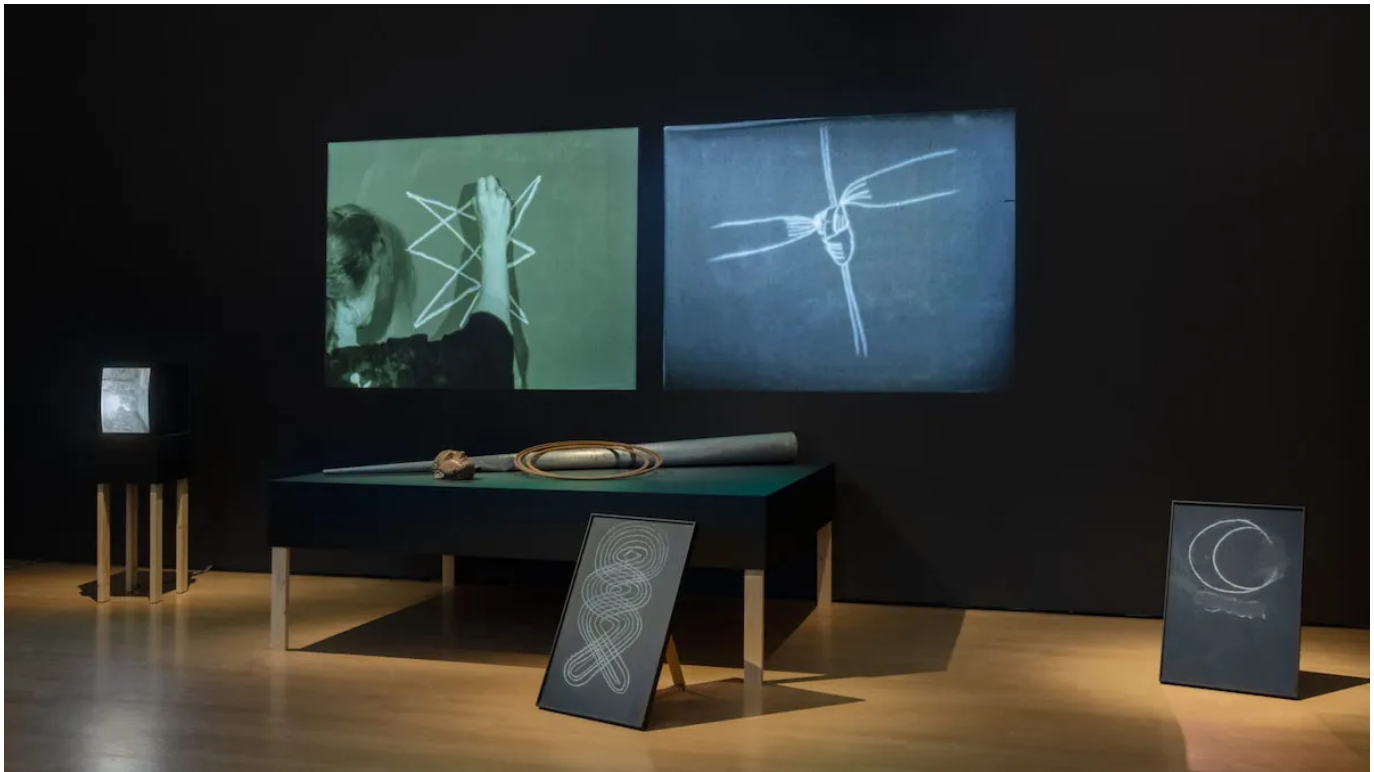
Joan Jonas, *Mirror Piece I*, 1969.

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Both installations, like many in the second half of the Jonas retrospective, are far-reaching in their interests and grand in scope. In that way, they are a bit of a shock after viewing Jonas's earlier works, which are a lot less extravagant and much more conceptual.

Jonas earned her stripes as a performance artist in 1970s New York, a milieu in which the spareness of Minimalism reigned dominant. *Mirrors* (2024), a new work in the show that dialogues with Jonas's art of the '60s and '70s, seems to reinforce the comparison, offering a row of glass sheets leaned against a wall. Similar objects appeared in public spaces back then for works in which performers would hold these mirrors to their bodies, reflecting back their viewers and warping their sense of space in the process.

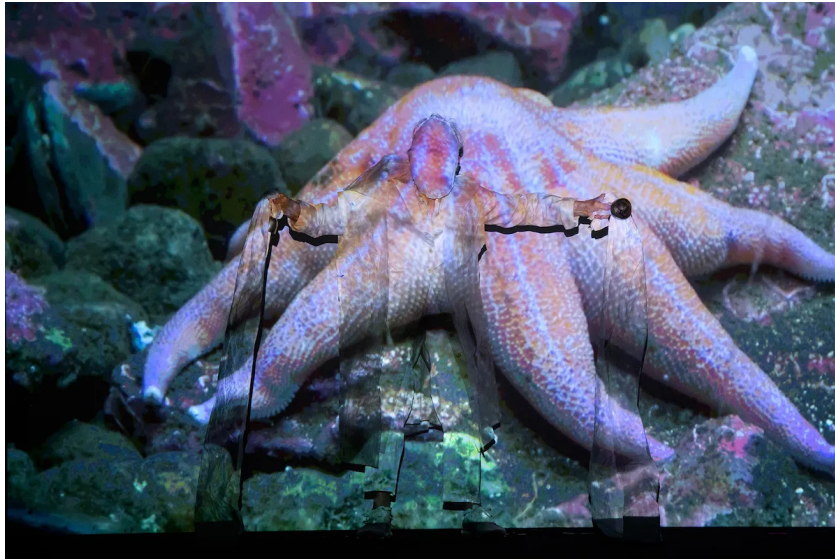
It became obvious that Jonas was interested in something most Minimalists were not: bodies, and in particular female bodies. She relied upon her own for her performance *Mirror Check* (1970), in which she holds a glass to her own body, hunching over to examine the backside of her legs at one point. While Jonas's face wasn't always visible, one gets the sense that she had fallen into a trance, lured by the possibility of stealing away the viewer's leery gaze and harnessing it to her own ends for once.



Installation view of “Joan Jonas: Good Night Good Morning,” 2024, at Museum of Modern Art, New York.
PHOTO JONATHAN DORADO

Video, a relatively new technology at the time, became particularly useful to Jonas as she sought new ways of keeping viewers on their toes. Suddenly, she could film herself and play it back live while an audience watched both the screens and her. Those performances with live feeds stoked the voyeuristic tendencies of Jonas’s viewers while also subverting them: ogling eyes faced a difficult decision between focusing on the artist’s body and absorbing the images she created of it.

Still today, these early pieces short-circuit complacent viewing habits. The best of them, *Vertical Roll* (1972), remains a video-art classic for a reason. In it, Jonas, performing as Organic Honey, dances around, but the footage stutters constantly, making it impossible to get a good look at her. A rolling bar, typically a sign that had a television had gone kaput, constantly moves up the screen while a plonking is rhythmically played. If you think there’s a latent violence in all this—a sense that Jonas’s body has been chopped into moving pieces via a Portapak camera—you will want to stick around for the ending, where the artist finds an uncanny way of returning the viewer’s gaze. The video lasts nearly 20 minutes; do not miss a second of them.



Joan Jonas, *Moving Off the Land*, 2016–18.
©JOAN JONAS/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/PHOTO IAN
DOUGLAS/COURTESY DANSPACE PROJECT, NEW YORK

Her 1976 performance *Mirage* took her art in a very different direction. Shown in Jonas's MoMA retrospective as an installation composed of metal poles, chalk boards, and footage of the artist making and unmaking a lunar form on one of them, the work is a reference to the New Guinean funerary rite of "endless drawing." But even without prior knowledge of that tradition, most will walk away from *Mirage* feeling as though they've witnessed a summoning of some kind, so haunted is the installation's atmosphere.

I'll admit I'm partial to the austere conceptualism of works like *Vertical Roll*—the post-*Mirage* works, with their braided mythologies and their hippy-dippy sensibility, feel overly diffuse to me. Take *Double Lunar Rabbits* (2010), an installation featuring two convex paper screens onto which videos are played. At times, there are images of a person wearing a rabbit mask and hopping around Japanese city streets. This is all, apparently, a reference to the moon rabbit, a self-sacrificing bunny that figures in both Aztec and Japanese mythology. But none of that really seems borne out by Jonas's footage, which seems to function according to a set of rules that are imperceptible to the viewer.

Which is why it's best not to think too hard about much of it. One of the finest of Jonas's more recent works, a performance called *Moving Off the Land* (2019), features here as a grouping of video installations in which Jonas stands before projections of oceanic oddities and moves about. At one point, an image of a blue jellyfish just barely illuminates Jonas standing in front of it. At another, Jonas's arms trace the fluid motions of a sea lion gliding about. It's unclear if she's guiding this creature supernaturally, or if it's the other way around.

Works like these are about when the forms of knowledge accepted in the West—in particular science, seemingly the most rational of all kinds of inquiry—break down. New understandings of the world germinate within Jonas’s mind, and entering installations like that one, many visitors will likely come out altered as well.

Perhaps that explains the gleeful absurdity of some of Jonas’s work, most notably *Good My New Theater VI: Good Night Good Morning ’06* (2006), the video sculpture that lends the MoMA show its subtitle.

In it, Jonas can be seen walking around her Nova Scotia home, repeating the phrases that mark the beginning and ending of a day. At one point, she points the camera at her curled-up dog, who has fallen into a light sleep. “Good night,” she softly tells her companion. Her pet scoffs in response, failing to even open its eyes. Human language is of no use to doggy brains.