

The Role of Performance in Environmental Humanities: The Case of Joan Jonas's *Moving Off the Land II*

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Abstract This article explores the role of performance in Environmental Humanities by discussing Joan Jonas's staging of *Moving Off The Land II* at Ocean Space in Venice as a case study. More specifically, the article shows that *Moving Off The Land II* and Ocean Space have created a space in which to practice environmental art illustrating how co-habiting ecosystems that we regularly fail to acknowledge should form part of how we construct our own presence.

Keywords Joan Jonas. Performance. Environment. Ecology. Nature. Presence. Ocean Space. Venice.



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In 2019 one of the best-known contemporary artists, the performer Joan Jonas (b. New York, 1936), returned to Venice to install her piece *Moving Off the Land II* at Ocean Space. The event was held to mark the inauguration of Ocean Space, a collaborative platform located in the Church of San Lorenzo, fostering interdisciplinary research and co-creation, which, in the words of Markus Reymann, co-founder and director of TBA21-Academy, aims to “imagine a radically different future for the Earth and our oceans” (“Ocean Space” 2019). Ocean Space builds on the work of the TBA21-Academy, which has, since its foundation in 2011, engaged artists, scientists, technologists and policy makers in residencies, expeditions, and research worldwide. Ocean Space, which is run by the Academy, has already produced several memorable events including, in recent times, *Oceans in Transformation: Territorial Agency* (2021), a work curated by Daniela Zyman, which intended to raise awareness of the consequences of overfishing, deep-sea mining, and oil exploration on our oceans. It is not a coincidence that Ocean Space was opened in Venice, a city that has always been ahead of others in living by, sometimes in, and always through the sea. It is in this context, in which art and interdisciplinary research are brought together to make a public statement about local and global challenges caused by climate change, that Jonas’s staging of *Moving Off the Land II* in Venice at Ocean Space must be read. What the work shows is the remarkable role played by performance within an environmental and ecological context, not only in raising awareness about climate change or environmental matters, but also in helping audiences to understand *how* they can perceive the world in a different, more inclusive way [fig. 1].

Moving Off the Land II, which was first staged under the titles *Ocean Sketches and Notes* and *Moving Off the Land* in 2016, was exhibited in 2016 for the Kochi - Muziris Biennale in India, in 2018 for the Tate, in 2019 at Fort Mason Center for Arts and Culture, San Francisco, and in 2019 at Ocean Space in Venice. The result of three years of research by Jonas into the spiritual and cultural role played by the ocean, *Moving Off the Land II* includes performance, sculpture, drawings, sound and video, combining elements from previous artworks with poems by Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), Rachel Carlson’s *The Edge of the Sea* (1955) and Sy Montgomery’s *The Soul of an Octopus* (2015) with footage from aquaria filmed around the world, as well films shot in Jamaica where the boom of algae and overfishing have been causing a direct threat to the environment. A complex, summative and powerful work, *Moving Off the Land II* was curated by Stefanie Hessler, commissioned by the TBA21-Academy and coproduced with the Luma Foundation. The work was installed across 500 square meters of the desecrated church of San Lorenzo, which, dating back to the 9th century, was originally part of a Benedictine monastery and, possibly, according to local mythol-

ogy, the burial place of Marco Polo. The work had a soundtrack by Ikue Mori, played by musicians María Huld Markan Sigfusdottir and Ánde Somby and the performer Francesco Migliaccio. The opening programme also included a conversation between Jonas and Dr Sylvia Earle, a marine biologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, moderated by Hessler [fig. 2].

At the heart of *Moving Off the Land II* was the ocean and the creatures that live in it. For Jonas the ocean is the origin of everything. Thus, she states: “The mind evolved in the sea. Water made it possible. All the early stages took place in the water” (2020b). So, this is a work about both past and new origins, in which audiences are given strategies through which to experience and define life in the ocean. For this, Jonas used a wide range of visual and performative practices stemming from her own past work so that her audiences could experience the ocean from the point of view of the animals who live in it. Visually, hung high up in the naves, were Jonas’s drawings, made on paper and sailcloth reproduced as inkjet prints, showing fishes and other sea animals, including a huge whale. Performatively, the work comprised five videos, each located in a wooden structure or ‘theatre’ based on her previous work *My New Theater* (1997-). The theatres were meant to “portray a sense of live performance to audiences, even when [Jonas] wasn’t present” (“Five Things To Know”), showing footage of other performances, and featuring Jonas playing a mermaid dressed in nets and shells making her way down to the sea, or, wearing a white outfit, drawing an octopus onto it, literally showing herself in the act of becoming an animal. Each video ‘theatre’ had its own sound and showed images of sea creatures projected onto several children (the future) dressed in white who stood in front of the screens in an intermediary position, to suggest that they could still effect change in the world. Sat in front of the theatres (or theatres within the theatre), audiences became spectators for others to look at, a reminder that they were all *inside* the work [fig. 3].

A sense of immersion was created by the overall sound installation placed in the front room that had been created by Jonas in collaboration with marine biologist David Gruber and that broadcast the sounds of a sperm whale throughout the environment. Mirrors made in Murano reflected the audience and brought it into the work, so that people would realise, in Jonas’s words, that “the piece is about us, also” (2020a). Here, by using the term ‘also’ Jonas implied that the protagonists of the piece are the various sea creatures that feature in it and the children who represent the future. The mirror, a recurrent feature in her work, added an element of discomfort. For Jonas, the mirror was in fact meant to have “a visual impact, altering space by fracturing it and changing the audience’s perception of that space” (Jonas 2018). In the performance, Jonas therefore acted as a mediator, bringing the fragmented world of the image into the performance



Figures 1-3 Joan Jonas, *Moving Off the Land II*, at Ocean Space, Chiesa di San Lorenzo, 2019. *Moving Off the Land II* is commissioned by TBA21-Academy and co-produced with Luma Foundation. © Enrico Fiorese

space, for example by gently touching the projections of the underwater animals from the acquaria (Fabijanska 2019). A believer that fish “think and feel” (2020b), Jonas shows through this piece that to save our oceans, as well as ourselves, we must leave the land, enter the world of water, both physically and metaphorically.

I mentioned that Jonas used a series of key performative strategies, including drawing, mirrors, video, children, animals, performance, myth, masks, time and presence. To understand the specific roles of these strategies it is important to understand that Jonas’s works have grown organically over the years. By using the term ‘organically’, I suggest that practices and strategies adopted in her work evolved over time, so that to understand the performance vocabulary of *Moving Off the Land II* we need to trace its points of origin in previous works. However, before I start with my analysis of Jonas’s wider opus, I must devote a few words to this term, ‘nature’, and explain why it matters so much in the context of Jonas’s work. We know that nature must be interpreted within the parameters of culture and that nature forms part of culture (Featherstone, Burrows 1995, 3). We also know that nature is an “independent domain of intrinsic value, truth or authenticity” (Robertson et al. 1996, 22) and that we should look at nature as process, leading to “co-produced nature-cultures” (Szerzynski, Waterton, Heim 2003, 4). Elsewhere, dancer and choreographer Nigel Stewart and I have been claiming that nature is “appropriated by means of performance” (2005, 20) and encounters with nature need to be looked at in terms of performativity. This suggests that nature can imply a “materiality” (i.e. “rock, ocean, biota, atmosphere”), a “process” (“causality, evolution or ‘life itself’”), signification (e.g. “Eden”) (Szerzynski, Waterton, Heim 2003, 2), as well as a performative experience. Anthropologist Tim Ingold captures nature’s paradoxical position in a diagram published in his seminal text *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, showing nature twice, as part of culture (what he calls “culturally perceived” nature) and as part of nature (what he calls “really natural” nature), visualising that culture and nature “presuppose each other” (2000, 41). Jonas’s work makes visible this dual presence of ‘nature’ in nature and in culture, and challenges canonical ways of interpreting the former through the latter. Thus, in her work, nature is often present as a materiality or object; as a process, usually captured through video documentation; as signification, rendered through narrative, including myth; and as embodied performance, by which I mean not only Jonas’s own performance but also that of the audience that often finds itself, unwittingly, reflected, usually by mirrors, to occupy various positions within the work. Thus, a number of active elements in *Moving Off the Land II*, including mirrors, video, drawing, performance, myth, masks, animals, time and presence, continuously re-orient the work’s audiences, herewith rewriting their experience not only of but also, literally, off the land.

To fully understand the origin of these active elements, I need to retrace the history of some of Jonas's key works. Trained as a sculptor in the 1960s, Jonas studied with the choreographer Trisha Brown and, influenced by the work of John Cage and Claes Oldenburg, started, after the 1970s, to use video, personal objects and images in her work, turning also to fairy tales, sculpture, dance, and performance to develop highly personal complex visual landscapes, scattered with objects, often out of size, and her own drawings, to create environments combining physical and subliminal elements. For her, video, which she called a "layering device", was an inspiration "to perform for the camera, working with masks, costumes and objects so as to create alternative personas" and "to transmit a live video image - a close-up of objects, a figure, performed actions - to a monitor or a projection" in that "the audience simultaneously saw the live action with a close-up or a detail of the poetic narrative" (Jonas 2018).

Describing her own presence as that of another material, "or an object that moved very stiffly, like a puppet or a figure in a medieval painting", Jonas claimed: "I gave up making sculpture and I walked into the space" (in Rush 1999, 42). This action of 'walking in' is as an act of self-representation (an act of presence) *and* a conscious positioning of her work as environmental and ecological.

In *Archaeologies of Presence* (2012) I made a distinction between the two terms 'environment' and 'ecology' in relation to presence by suggesting that, while the term 'environment' indicates the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates, the term 'ecology' indicates a branch of biology that is concerned with the relations of organisms to each other and to their surroundings. This distinction made it possible for me to claim that an environmental interpretation of presence foregrounds the set of circumstances that surround the occurrence of presence, while an ecological reading of presence foregrounds how presence may operate as a relational tool between organisms (Giannachi in Giannachi, Kaye, Shanks 2012, 50). Whereas presence is about the continuous unfolding of the subject into what is other to it (presence, etymologically, is what is *prae esse*, before being), the term 'environment' defines its surroundings, that is, what remains other to being, to the subject, which is, however, necessary for presence to occur (51). Jonas, who uses layering to bring together the various meanings of the term 'nature', constructs her presence environmentally, by constantly drawing attention to what is other to her, and ecologically, by re-performing this presence, constructed environmentally, so as to include other ecosystems and the nonhuman beings that define them as key presences in her work.

Jonas has often made clear how her work is concerned with her life and the re-presentation or even re-cycling of environments that have been familiar to her audiences within the work. Thus, the use

of the mirror stems from early works such as *Mirror Piece I and II* (1969-70), where Jonas explored gaze, reflection and representation by using mirrors to bring, in her own words, “the audience into the picture” (Jonas 2020a), flattening the physical environment into the world of the image (arguably, turning nature into culture). In the original staging of *Mirror Piece I* at New York University’s Loeb Student Center, the piece was interpreted by a group of mostly women performers who moved in “slow choreographed patterns while holding oblong mirrors in front of their bodies” that reflected the audience as well as the environment in which they were sat. Two men periodically lifted and carried the women horizontally, by feet and neck, towards different places (Mount Holyoke College Art Museum 2019).¹ In the original staging of *Mirror Piece II* at New York’s Emanuel-El YMHA the performers carried heavier mirrors and glass that slowed “the pace of their movements”, thus “creating a sense of risk and vulnerability to their bodies”. While in *Mirror Piece I and II* the mirror integrated the audience into the work, though always partially and only sporadically, in *Mirror Check* (1970) the performer, Jonas, was seen inspecting her own naked body with a hand mirror. Here the spectator became a voyeur since only the performer could see what was in the mirror. In both cases, the mirror, like the video, operated as a medium for self-reflection (self-portraiture even) that, however, only returned a partial and ephemeral fragment of the subject and the environment it reflected, drawing attention to the limitations of technology and so also of culture in capturing what we commonly call ‘nature’.

Jonas subsequently used both mirrors and videos to bring the audience into the work (Jonas 2000). Thus, she claims:

video is a device extending the boundaries of my interior dialogue to include the audience. The perception is of a double reality: me as an image and me as a performer. (in Martin 2006, 62)

This doubling of reality makes it possible for Jonas to be both an image *and* the performer, located both within *and* outside of the parameters of the representation, in both nature and culture. Jonas’s subsequent piece *Volcano Saga* (1985-89), originally performed live by Jonas, and then developed, in 1994, into an installation with the same title, was based on a 13th Century Icelandic poem in which a woman marries four times. The protagonist, Gudrun, interpreted by Tilda Swinton, tells the seer, Gest, interpreted by Ron Vawter, about four dreams which Gest thinks are about each of Gudrun’s husbands and

¹ <https://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/event/mirror-piece-i-ii-reconfigured-19692018-2019-joan-jonas-58>.

her lives with them. The performers looked like “paper dolls pasted on the scenery – similar to what Jonas achieved with a projection backdrop in the original performances” (MoMA).² The video backdrop showed a river flowing through a black volcanic landscape intercut with images of mountains, plains and desert-like landscapes, sheep, seals and other animals, accompanied by a soundtrack by the US composer Alvin Lucier. Juxtaposed against the video projection was a desk, and on top of that was a map of Iceland. While most of the work consisted in the narration of the saga itself, Jonas can be seen at the beginning of the video, wearing a raincoat and measuring the backdrop created by the video projection in relation to the map, comparing scale and distance, while she narrates how in researching the work she went on a drive near a glacier, lost control of the car and was left hanging upside down. The images were intercut with the hands of a woman seen wringing a cloth in a bowl and scenes of the dialogue between Gudrun and Gest. In recalling the accident in the performance, Jonas noted: “the wind whistled and blew. Everything was moving” (Jonas in Kaye 1996, 95). This image conveyed the shifting territory and subsequent displacement (from dream to reality to image to map to performance to myth) that characterises this work. Here the foundations of knowledge, our own presence, become, like rivers, fluid, and in perpetual motion. Setting the parameters for *Moving Off the Land II*, Jonas exposes the fragility of an epistemology that is bound to fail as it is entirely grounded in human perception.

In an interview with Stefanie Hessler, the curator of *Moving Off the Land II*, Jonas recounts how she grew up spending a lot of time “in nature”, both in the woods and at the beach, so that, over time, nature became part of her life and of her “imagery” (Jonas 2020a). In fact, Jonas had been using environmental images in her work since the 1960s, including in *Mirror Piece I and II* and in *Volcano Saga*. Even her first public performance *Oad Lau* (1968), whose title refers to the name of a village in Morocco and translates as “watering-place” (Jonas in Rush 1999, 43), embraced wind and water as elements of the work. Inspired by Halldór Laxness’s *Under the Glacier* (1968), which tells the story of a man sent to investigate paranormal activity around a glacier, her more recent work *Reanimation* (2012) first shown in Kassel at DOCUMENTA 13, then, the same year, in New York at the Performa Biennial, is an immersive installation with footage shot on Norway’s Lofoten Islands, comprising four videos showing glaciers, roads and dark tunnels. Projected on four shoji screens, the images evoke the aesthetic of traditional Japanese dwellings, while the music by Jason Moran was not only an accompaniment but formed part of, in Jonas’s words, “my body and my space” (in Marranca 2019). In-

² <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/118324>.

cluding also both live and recorded performance by Jonas, the piece saw her drawing live against a video backdrop, with which she occasionally appears to merge, as if she was following the characters in the piece (Marranca 2019). Here, we see her become a fox, through a mask and a gesture, merging with the Icelandic landscape projected onto her body. For Performance Studies theorist Bonnie Marranca, Jonas in this work literally “draws her way into the world” in so far as

Reanimation is not a performance *about* a particular subject, but rather one that demonstrates its *process* of being made through various technologies of performance. (2019; original emphases)

Thus, Jonas’s performance unfolded by the act of drawing, within which the audience witnessed an environment being created, with Jonas “both narrating and embodying the narrative”. Additionally, for Marranca the piece entailed a complex engagement with time, including “cosmic time, performance time, and documentary time”. These intertwine in the work, creating a multifaceted layering that variously evokes the ‘nature’ of time, questioning what we commonly call ‘present’ or ‘now’. Thus, Jonas concludes the piece by saying:

Time is the one thing we can all agree to call supernatural. It is at least neither energy nor matter; not dimension either; let alone function: and yet it is the beginning and the end of the world.

Interestingly, *Reanimation* had at its centre a metal cube structure from which crystals were hung that reflected the light from the video projections and so also multiplied the space of the performance within the set time of the work. Hence, *Reanimation* was about process, reflection, and spatio-temporal expansion to consider what falls outside of canonic definitions of human nature. Here, the present is extended and expanded, reaching into the past and towards the future. Interestingly, it was while working for *Reanimation* that Jonas started filming in aquaria in Norway and it was this work, alongside Laxness’s text, which had a section on bees, that inspired Jonas’s first work in Venice, setting the terrain for *Moving Off the Land II* in which the trope of the acquarius seems to merge with the space of the work itself.

In 2015 Jonas represented the United States at the 56th Venice Biennale with the exhibition *They Come To Us Without a Word*. The installation was commissioned by the MIT List Visual Arts Centre to portray natural environments and the animals inhabiting it - from bees to fish - as well as exhibiting the present danger caused by climate change and extinction. The work occupied all of the US pavilion’s galleries and entailed video, drawings, sculptural and performative elements. The rooms that did not have animals were defined through objects (mirrors), forces (wind) or by place (the homeroom).

The rooms were linked to each other through a narrative about ghost stories sourced from the oral tradition of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where Jonas often resides. The piece was performed by a group of children aged 5-16 wearing white paper hats or papier-mâché masks, who could be seen in the video performing in front of video backdrops, often showing extracts from films from Jonas's past work as well as images from Nova Scotia and New York. The rooms also contained some of the objects that could be seen in the video, creating a link between the physical space and the space of the video projection. In the rotunda from which the other rooms could be accessed there was a big crystal-beaded chandelier as well as a number of rippled mirrors that had been handcrafted in Murano and that reflected images from both the installations and the passers-by. It is worth noting that the presence of animals, especially dogs, even her own dog, in Jonas's work is often seen as "symbolic of the animal helper common in ancient mythology and ritual" ("Five Things To Know"). For Jonas the presence of the animal is important for its ability to open the minds of humans to *their* world:

The relationship between animals and humans is very mysterious, and I think it's very important, especially in this world right now, the planet we're living on.

The animal's appearance in her work is usually spontaneous, such as *Moving in Place (Dog Dance)* (2002-05), where her dog Zina ran onto the scene of her performance and began nudging her to play with her. Thus, she comments: "My dog is a character. She is a comedian and a natural performer. I never ask her; she just gravitates towards the action. It's very strange; she somehow knows what to do". Hence, the presence of the animal adds another layer to the work, that of non representability, of the 'real' or Ingold's "really natural" nature - through which audiences perceive an immediacy that would be otherwise absent from the work. In *Moving Off the Land II* it is the presence of the animal in culture that asks of audiences to re-present themselves in the work. By re-presence, on this occasion, I mean that they abandon the logic of a 'narrow present' (the now) and instead embrace that of a 'long and wide present' including different moments in time (the past and the future) and different species. In this 'long and wide present' past languages created to capture the environment through drawings, mirrors, video, myth, masks, and the presence of the animal actively inform the present, the audience's presence, and their place within that. The long and wide present is what we need to focus on to understand the implications of climate change.

To further comprehend the relationship between nature in nature and culture in Jonas's work it is useful to look further into the presence of animals in her work, which tends to be mediated, either

though video or drawings. While the animal in the video is almost always the animal in its 'natural' state, even when in an aquarium, the animal in the drawings, however, is the stylised animal in culture. Just as the video and the mirror attempt to reflect or capture nature, the act of drawing intends to make way into the cultural dimension of the work. For the Art Historian Ann Reynolds, the act of drawing is therefore crucial in relation to what happens in the video. Thus, in Jonas's work we often see Jonas stand in front of a pre-recorded video backdrop holding up a piece of white paper or cloth,

sometimes shifting it from side to side, tipping it slightly left to right, then right to left, shaking it, or using it to track or momentarily frame the movements of something in the projection behind her. (2015, 21)

Sometimes we see Jonas drawing on the paper or holding it very close to her body, like a shield. For Reynolds

The visual effects are subtle. Just a slight change in the distance or angle between the projector and the surface of the projection brings the portion of the video image Jonas is capturing a bit closer and isolates, frames, and magnifies it slightly, in or out of focus, transforming the rest of the projected image into background. If the paper she holds up is black, Jonas's gesture produces the opposite effect; it almost obliterates part of the projected image and substitutes a black void or a white-on-black drawing for this temporarily 'lost' portion. (21)

Just as in the early mirror pieces the reflective surface was used to illustrate the inability of the medium to reflect the totality of the environment in which Jonas performed, and so also its inability to document the audience's presence in the work, here the body is seen appearing and disappearing into the medium, swallowed up by its own cultural referents.

The reason I had to trace the history of Jonas's work so as to talk about *Moving Off the Land II* is because, as I have shown, Jonas's work evolves organically. What we see in *Moving Off the Land II* originated elsewhere. As curators Julienne Lorz and Andrea Lissoni suggest, it is important to note that Jonas's work "does not necessarily remain fixed in its first exhibited or staged iteration" but rather "it is open for further transformations and variations", concluding that the "apparent instability" of the work "is one of the great strengths of the artists' oeuvre" (2018, 10). I have shown that Jonas's work is formed by the intersection of the different media, video, painting, narration, drawing, music, performance, objects, and sound that form it. These, interlocked with each other, create strata that entail a palimpsestic

depth, from which reworked remains from previous works created at different points in time and through different media emerge like archaeological artefacts at a dig. For Lorz and Lissoni, the layers that form Jonas's work are both on and off stage (23) and, in *Moving Off the Land II*, they specifically occur

as depth of field (that is the movement towards the camera, or fading in and out), while in the installations, spatial transparency and shadow become layering aspects through the use of projections screens. (24)

Here, different strata formed by the wide range of media employed penetrate each other and ultimately, literally, form each other, both culturally and materially. The strata capture the passing of time, and our presence not so much in the now but again over time, in a "long and wide present". Ultimately Jonas's work, as Art Historian Douglas Crimp put it, exists in a state of "desynchronisation" (1999, 8). Her aesthetic is porous, fluid, changing constantly, like life itself. This is what the "long and wide present" asks of us, that we stop obsessing about the 'now', that we desynchronise from our perceived present, and refocus, restart, represence to include the future into the present. It is timely that Jonas's attention has once again be caught in *Moving Off the Land II* by the ocean itself, for, as Gender and Cultural Studies Scholar Astrida Neimanis suggests, thinking with and about water might help us to find a way to "imagine and cultivate a much-needed epistemology of unknowability" (2017, 58). *Moving Off the Land II* does just that, it moves us away from the ground we walk on every day, away from our cultural references and body of knowledge, away from our obsession with the now, to immerse us into a world that is at once ancient and always new to us, our past and hopefully our future, at once forgotten and unknown.

Ultimately, the experience of *Moving Off the Land II* in Ocean Space, an innovative cultural space in which culture is for once used to promote societal change, is in stark contrast to life in Venice, plagued by rising waters, 'over-tourism', Disneyfication. *Moving Off the Land II*, instead, and Ocean Space more broadly, constitute a step towards a turn marking the re-invention of Venice as an international environmental laboratory in which to create new cultural, socio-political and economic practices. These would escape the logic of capitalism and instead promote a new and much more complex cultural and economic eco-systems that would be fully aware of the fact that at the root of the terms economy and ecology is *oikos*, our house, our planet. Thinking of our presence over time, rather than purely in the now, and including in our presence our co-habitation with other species, would help us to inhabit the earth more consciously, aware of the need to create new equilibria and respect other ecosystems.

Within this process, performance, as Jonas's work shows, is key for it makes it possible for us to experience and so also realise that a different world order is indeed not only possible but also at hand. In this context, looking after the ocean, its space, from Venice, a city built on the rising sea, must be our first priority.

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