

Joan Jonas

Light Time Tales

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Cover page

Joan Jonas, *Waltz* (2003), video still; video, 7'03", color, sound

Fondazione HangarBicocca

Via Chiese, 2
20126 Milano

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Contacts

T. +39 02 66111573

info@hangarbicocca.org

hangarbicocca.org

Joan Jonas
Light Time Tales

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curated by **Andrea Lissoni**



Introduction

Joan Jonas (New York, 1936) is considered a pioneer of performance and video. Beginning in the 1960s, she placed female subjectivity at the centre of her work, employing a complex linguistic repertoire including gestures, storytelling and images in movement.

A tireless experimenter, Jonas explores the possibilities inherent to the interdisciplinary nature of art, a characteristic that has made her a point of reference for a young generation of artists, with whom she has established an intense and generous relationship of exchange.

Continuity among those aspects of daily life and those connected to the production of her works comes to fruition in frequent interaction with friends and artists from different milieu; the most important of these include collaborations with visual artists Peter Campus and Richard Serra, the performer Ragani Haas and the musicians Alvin Curran and Jason Moran.

Jonas's *oeuvre* cannot be traced back to any single, dominant artistic movement, and is distinguished by an entirely singular path, one that eschews any possible categorization. Right from the start the artist began elaborating an individual language aimed at continuous renewal and the translation of diverse media. The transitory nature of her "actions" and the variety of

Joan Jonas, *Organic Honey's Vertical Roll* (1972/1973),
performance, Musée Galleria, Paris, 1973
Photo Beatrice Heiligers

expressive methods she utilizes – including performance, video and installations – create a *fantasticum* that places the artist's figure and the experience at the centre.

Joan Jonas, *Mirror Piece One* (1969), performance, Loeb Student Center, New York, 1969
Photo Wayne Hollingworth



The Artist

Beginning in the second half of the 1960s, Joan Jonas initiated her artistic production through a path connected with the visual arts as much as with cinema, theatre and dance. After studying art history at Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts) from 1954 to 1958, as well as three years spent studying at the school of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, in 1965 Jonas earned a master degree in Fine Arts in Sculpture at Columbia University (New York).

Jonas's *oeuvre* is distinguished by a vast repertoire of themes and expressions which, starting with her first, self-reflective works – in which the artist worked around transformations of her own body – and leading all the way to her recent creations connected with an investigation into texts and the story, examines reality and its representation. Her artistic practice is based on intuitive forms of assembly and superimposition, and utilizes elements taken from epic poetry, fables and short stories which, though drawn from specific cultures and time periods, take on a universal valence.

The artist's repertoire is characterized by overcoming any and all divisions between nature and spirituality, rites and folklore. A series of trips she took during the second half of the 1960s proved fundamental for the formation of her personal poetics. Jonas travelled to Arizona, where she came into contact with the Hopi community, witnessing a "Snake Dance", an intense, magical ritual during which medicine men and snakes move in harmony with the spiritual and natural worlds. She also travelled to Crete (1966), where she watched a wedding ceremony that lasted for three whole days, and familiarized herself with

the vestiges of Minoan civilization. Finally she travelled to Japan (1970), where she bought her first video camera – a Sony Portapak¹ – and discovered Nō theatre.

Right from the early stages of her investigations, the artist explored remote, marginal spaces, paying particular attention to natural environments – like the landscapes of Nova Scotia (Canada) and the beaches of Long Island (USA) where she shot her first film *Wind* (1968) – as well as urban areas, like the lofts and the docks of Manhattan, location selected for *Delay Delay*, which originated from *Jones Beach Piece* (1970). The work has been created in two versions, both in 1972. The first was in New York City, where the audience watched the action from the top of a building; the second was in Rome, on the banks of the Tiber river.

Her production is rooted in a focus on experimentation that characterized the New York art scene during the 1960s, distinguished by the development and affirmation of Minimalism. From this artistic current Jonas absorbed the conception of space, a predilection for the most essential elements, and an attention for the active role viewers can play in the work itself. Starting from her earliest works, the artist used space as a “material” with which to investigate the relationship between audience and its position within the performance, conducting an act of reflection that involves her investigations of representation of the space and the history of painting. «As I developed a piece, the important thing was to sit and stare at a space as if I were looking at a painting.»²

Among the first, most significant works the artist created were the *Mirror Pieces* (1969), a series realized in schools, auditori-

ums and out in the open, built around choreographies based on the use of mirrors of the same size, and the gestures derived from them. Joan Jonas used reflective surfaces to fragment the perception of an event and, in an almost cinematographic montage, selected and combined the flow of images from the performance. «The audience saw themselves in the mirrors and they were brought into the work by this reflection. The performers, the room, the spectators [...] all became part of a cubist-like surface.»³

The mirror is also one of the main elements used by the artist to investigate female subjectivity: a theme that is woven throughout Jonas's artistic production through a vast, complex repertoire of gestures and self-representation. In *Mirror Check* (1970) – a performance originally presented as part of *Mirror Pieces II* (1970) – the artist appears naked, set roughly 6 metres from the audience, as she inspects her own body using a small, circular mirror. The viewers are denied any possibility of seeing the image reflected in the mirror, viewing the performance only through the gestures made by the artist.

Jonas's interventions are often presented in the form of contingent, precarious situations based on something the American critic Douglas Crimp has defined with the term *De-synchronization*⁴, because they are built around the relationship between time and space and the dissonance between the sound generated by an action and its acoustic reception by the spectator. Generally realized outdoors, as was the case with *Jones Beach Piece*, where spectators watched the performance from a hill located roughly 400 metres from where the action was taking place, these works are built around the fragmentation, repetition

and delay of sound signals as perceived by the spectator.

Consideration of the contingencies of the perceptive experience, the fulcrum of the artist's early performances, was further expanded in the experimentation conducted by Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, pioneers of post-modern dance who were active in New York during that period. Jonas shared an interest for the improvisation of movements connected with gestures in daily life together with their choreographies.

Jonas's artistic path wound its way through an initial phase distinguished by the strong presence of aspects connected with the female universe, characterized by an investigation into a woman's identity in relationship with new media – now part of daily life with the advent and spread of the television – as well as the complex cultural implications inherent to that relationship. During this period, which extended from 1972 to 1976, the artist used performance to explore relationships between body, camera and monitor. With *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), a key work in her artistic evolution, Jonas introduced a new element into the interrelationship between action and the viewer: video. Using a mask she purchased in a sex shop, as well as veils and jewellery, she created a female alter-ego, portraying herself as an "erotic-electronic seductress": «I named this TV persona Organic Honey»⁵.

At the same time, the artist – who had previously used video to create several experimental films – was investigating the possibilities connected with the illusory, repetitive and manipulative capacities of video through the superimposition of more than one time within a single event. Thanks to the use of a closed-

circuit video system⁶, Jonas counterbalanced the live element of an action taking place with images directly broadcast via monitor as well as with pre-recorded sequences, producing complex time-space dynamics. As with the mirrors, the feedback on the closed-circuit system created an infinite series of reflections, within which the action and her own broadcast image appear together in a single space, just slightly out of sync, each interfering with the other.

Joan Jonas, *The Juniper Tree* (1976), performance, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1979



Her artistic practice has always been influenced by literature and poetry. Beginning in 1976, with her performance *The Juniper Tree* (based on a fable of the same name penned by the Brothers Grimm), the literary element began to take on a significant role. From this moment forward the artist initiated an intense period of work on the translation of narration into movement, image, sound and time, in a continuous process of superimposition and interweaving that, over years, incorporated Norse myths – as was the case with the *Volcano Saga* (1985/1994) – and epic tales – as in *Lines in the Sand* (2002).

In 1994, for her first retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the artist set about “translating” performance to installation, understood as a transformation mechanism from one method to another, as well as a constant flow and re-elaboration in spaces and contexts that are forever different from one another. The fluidity with which Joan Jonas moves from one media to another is an integral part of the process of continuous evolution inherent to her artistic practice: her installations are not intended, in fact, to document performance, but to develop as complex works in which a multiplicity of images and objects co-exist with one another, giving life to a sort of visual cacophony in which narrative sequences and abstract compositions alternate with one another.

Sound is an essential element in Jonas’s work. In addition to using music ranging from jazz to reggae, electronic music and sound poetry, the artist’s practices embrace vocal sounds like words, chants, cries and sounds deriving from performance actions. In recent years she has also intensified her collaboration with diverse contemporary musicians in order to create acoustic

compositions designed specifically for her works.

Jonas also often involves friends, artists, dancers and even her own house pets – dogs in particular – in her works. Like characters in a fable, these creatures populate stories in which myth is superimposed with daily life and imagination, bringing to life oniric representations that mimic recognizable situations.

In creating her works, the artist uses recurring props including mirrors and masks. Some of these elements are created by the artist herself, and derived from elementary forms like the line or the circle. Others are gathered and collected during her travels.

Often these objects are utilized in different works, and perform multiple uses. For example, the conical form is used as both a megaphone through which to amplify sound, and as a telescope turned both to herself and to the audience. These objects are then transposed and incorporated within the installations, *de facto* representing the instruments with which the artist continues to work to create new live actions.



The Exhibition

The anthological exhibition “Light Time Tales” presents, for the first time in Italy, the most important installations of Joan Jonas, displaying them together with a new video and several single channel films and videos. The show includes historical as well as more recent works, unveiling the artist’s ceaseless spirit of investigation, distinguished by experimentation and exchange between different practices, techniques and disciplines.

The title “Light Time Tales” underlines core aspects of the artist’s production: light from her projections; the time dimension characteristic of her videos and performances; and the narrative aspect that lies at the heart of almost all of her work.

For the project in Pirelli HangarBicocca, Jonas worked on the specificity of the exhibition space, creating a display in which all the installations coexist in a single space, breathing life into a continuous interplay that highlights the confines between one work of art and the next, exalting the dynamic modalities through which her work can be appreciated.

The layout of the exhibition emphasizes the cyclic nature of the artist’s investigations, which over the course of years have always returned to recurring themes and elements, utilizing techniques typical of experimental cinema, characterized by diverse and not always linear edits, rhythms and timing.

1 **Wind (1968)**

16mm film transferred to video

Wind is one of the first films Joan Jonas created. Shot with help from Peter Campus, an American artist famous for his pioneering work with video during the 1970s, the film is set on a snow-covered beach in Long Island, New York.

The film has no soundtrack, and shows a group of people conducting a choreographed effort to overcome the power of the wind. Two figures (Joan Jonas and Keith Hollingworth) are filmed from a distance, and throughout the film they appear and disappear, always maintaining their distance from the group. Both are wearing heavy coats that have a number of mirrors attached, reflecting fragments of the surrounding landscape. These same elements had been used by the protagonists in the first public performance of the artist, *Oad Lau*, presented in 1968 at the St. Peter Gymnasium in New York City.

In order to produce this film, the artist created a sort of formal, symmetrical choreography that responds to the rhythmic and spatial canons characteristic of the language of film. Most of *Wind* is realized through the use of long fields in which the human figure, shown in its entirety, is placed in a direct relationship with the surrounding environment. Nature and its force (in this case the wind) are among the central themes in Jonas's work, and with regards to this film she wrote: «The wind became a character and a force. The wind turned what could have been a familiar everyday movement into a comedy of chaos».



Joan Jonas, *Wind* (1968), video still; 16mm film, 5'30", b/w, silent

2 **Paul Revere (1971)**

(in collaboration with Richard Serra)

16mm film transferred to video

This film was born of a collaboration between Joan Jonas and American minimalist artist Richard Serra, and developed around two sources: the performance *Choreomania* (1971), realized by Jonas and based on the fragmentation of actions and movements in relation to a moving wall – designed by Serra – hung on chains inside an exhibition space; and the book *Kinesics and Context* (1970) by Ray L. Birdwhistell, the creator of Kinesics (from the Greek *kinesis*, or movement), a systematic study of the relationship between nonlinguistic body motions and communication. The work is a further iteration of experimentation conducted

by Jonas on body movements and communicative body language including gestures, signs and expressions.

The title refers to Paul Revere (1735–1818), an American revolutionary fighter and patriot who created a secret light signal in order to warn Americans about British soldiers during the American Revolution.

Through the use of specific parts of the luminous signal created by Revere, the work highlights the limits that underlie several different communication systems.

3 *Barking* (1973)

Single-channel video

Filmed in a long take, *Barking* shows a car parked in a field in Nova Scotia (Canada), while the walls of a home can be glimpsed in the distance. A white, barking dog can be seen near the car. Offscreen we can hear a female voice saying «She is still barking», after which a woman (artist and experimental choreographer Simone Forti) enters the scene, pets the dog and turns to gaze at the horizon. After the woman exits from view, the video camera explores the surrounding landscape. This entire scene remains suspended within an uncertain realm, starkly contrasting the calm that pervades the landscape being filmed.

The filming style of the sequence is amateur: the frames are often unstable and seem to want to describe the spontaneity of the situation in which the video was created.

4 *Songdelay* (1973)

16mm film transferred to video

Songdelay was inspired by the performance *Delay Delay* (1972), which in turn was based on the *Jones Beach Piece* staged in Long Island in 1970. As with the performance, the film is based on detailing the discrepancies between the visual perception of an action and the acoustic representation of the sound it generates by the viewer.

Fourteen people (including Joan Jonas, the artists Gordon Matta Clark and avant-garde choreographer Steve Paxton) execute structured choreographies and movements that employ various different objects including clubs, circles and mirrors. The soundtrack is characterized by percussion sounds created by several pieces of wood, and echoes traditional practices from Nō theatre, which Jonas discovered during her trip to Japan in 1970.

As in *Wind* (1968), here the landscape is in close dialogue with the action being filmed. *Songdelay* is characterized by the creation of light reflections and linear trajectories that fragment perceptions of the space and create diverse rhythms. The film is articulated through a series of long takes in which the performers emerge from an urban background in an interplay of continuous relationships with the surrounding environment. The frames are almost always shot using a fixed camera, providing singular perspectives in which even casual events – like a merchant ship passing by in the background – interrupt the flow of the images. The alternate use of different lenses and objectives further distorts the environment. The audio montage also reflects this aspect, alternating noises from the location – like a ship's



Joan Jonas, *Songdelay* (1973), video still; 16mm film transferred to video, 18'35", b/w, sound

horn – with the sounds of the voices of the film's protagonists.

5 *Merlo* (1974)

Single-channel video

Merlo, produced in 1974 in Florence at Art/Tapes/22 (at the time one of the world's main centres for the production of videos) is based on an analysis of the perception of sound in relation to distance.

The video is divided into four different parts, each characterized by an action that evokes different atmospheres and associations. In the first sequence Joan Jonas is filmed from above

while she repeats lines from a song inside a cone. The artist is wearing a long dress, and attempts to climb up the walls of a hole. In the second scene, Jonas is portrayed in a flat landscape as she barks into the same cone, and several dogs seem to bark back to her. The video continues with a new scene: the woman is filmed on the banks of a river while she says the word “*merlo*” (Italian for blackbird) into the same cone and the wind blows through the leaves of the plants around her. In the last scene, the artist is standing facing an open landscape, imitating a bird’s movements with a veil that is carried away on the wind.

Merlo is part of an artistic path that began with early performances like *Jones Beach Piece*, and which investigates the relationships between images and sound in an extensive reflection on aspects connected with the development of an action.

6 *Mirage* (1976/1994/2005)

Multimedia installation

Inspired by a trip to India undertaken in 1976, *Mirage* is one of Joan Jonas’s most articulated works, and is conceived as a collection of references to different elements and media that the artist has added and/or modified during successive phases.

Thanks to its complexity, fragmentation and richness, *Mirage* is one of Jonas’s most significant installations and testifies to the attitudes of an artist who ceaselessly reflects upon and returns to her own work as subject.

The performance that lies at the origins of *Mirage* has an open structure in which movements derive from a form of meditation the artist undertook during her travels in the Orient. The word “mirage” describes an intangible situation based on a precarious equilibrium, underlining the correlation – both fluid and unstable – between the artist’s body and the projection of her energy during the performance.

Mirage was conceived in 1976 as a performance designed for the projection room at the Anthology Film Archives⁷, a legendary locale in New York City’s cultural panorama, and a place where the artist often viewed experimental cinema, sharing the experience with an audience made up of musicians, dancers, artists and of course filmmakers. The use of film occupies a key role in Joan Jonas’s artistic production: the language of film offers infinite possibilities to alter and recombine both visual and temporal elements connected with the action.

Characterized by sequences of short, syncopated movements, the performance combines ritual, memory and repetition in an abstract game of contrasts between light and darkness: developed based on the dimensions of a movie theatre projection screen, it shows the artist working at carrying out a series of actions while interacting with diverse elements, both sculpture and video.

In 1994, as part of her solo show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the artist began “translating” the work – moving from performance to installation – through a process distinguished by numerous reconfigurations. *Mirage* was one of the works presented for this occasion.

The installation – which took its current form in 2005 – is made up of several blackboards with drawings, diverse black and white photographs taken during earlier performances of the work, and a series of cones positioned on the floor. There is also a stage-like platform upon which various props have been positioned, including a metal cone that echoes the shape of the volcanoes shown in one of the work's videos, and a Greek mask. The videos *Mirage I* (1976) and *Mirage II* (1976–2000) are projected over the stage like structure. The first shows the artist as she repeatedly traces and erases drawings on a blackboard; the second is a montage edit of news program clips from the 1970s showing the President of the United States Richard Nixon, as well as sequences from the performance of *Mirage* and a scene in which the artist and another woman, seated on the steps of a Wall Street office building, blow into long aluminium cones as white vapour escapes from manholes in the street. As with the images, the sounds of the video are marked by a rhythmic montage that alternates the voices and sounds of the original extracts. Made of archival footage and originally screened during the performance at the Anthology Film Archives, *Volcano Film* is projected onto a wall over a second platform, displaying various excerpts of a volcanic eruption.

Three monitors positioned vertically broadcast the videos *May Windows* (1976), *Good Night Good Morning* (1976) and *Car Tape* (1976). The subject of *May Windows* is the window of a loft in New York where the artist lives. Through a series of superimposed images, the video describes the luminous passage from darkness into daylight. The sound, which was recorded live, is characterized by noises and the off-screen voices of Joan Jonas and the artist James Nares as they whisper incomprehensible

sentences through the cones. The room accentuates the reverberation of the sounds emitted, each of which has a different intensity and length, in turn overlapped with dogs yelping in the street down below the building.

Intended to be viewed vertically, *Good Night Good Morning* is made up of numerous recordings of the artist's face as she says «goodnight» before going to sleep, and «good morning» just after she has woken up, staring directly into the video camera from a variety of different contexts and environments. *Car Tape* is a video shot from the front seat of a car moving along a narrow road. The horizontal roll on the monitor creates a flashing illusion of the landscape.

In *Mirage*, film and video coexist, a practice that was quite unusual in the 1970s, a period when experimentation with the two different media was still markedly separate and distinct. Jonas's choice is representative of her pioneering approach to creating art through the use of these two technologies, which allowed her to bring to life a deceptive interplay of improvised speeds and timing, illusory passages and repetitions, based on their respective characteristics of definition (film) and the possibilities provided by live recording (video).

7 *After Mirage* (1976/2011)

Multimedia installation

This installation was first presented as a performance conducted by Joan Jonas together with the artist James Nares in 1976 at 112 Greene Street in Soho, New York City. In *After Mirage*, produced



Joan Jonas, *Mirage* (1976), performance, Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1976
Photo Babette Mangolte

immediately following *Mirage*, the artist reuses the cones from the previous performance as musical instruments and tools to amplify sound.

The building at 112 Greene Street in Soho was self-managed exhibition space founded by the artist Matta-Clark and Jeffrey Lew, a sculptor. It became a meeting place and experimental space for a new generation of artists, including pioneers of minimalist music like Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

In 2011, as part of the exhibition entitled "112 Greene Street: A Nexus of Ideas in the Early 70's" held at the Salomon Contem-

porary in New York City, Jonas presented a new version of *After Mirage*. The installation is based on the original work with the addition of a video. It is composed of different cones made out of photographic paper set in a circle. Near these elements, which stand over 2 metres high, is a monitor set up vertically on the ground broadcasting the video *May Windows* (1976), which was also present in *Mirage* (1976/1994/2005).

After Mirage is based on one of the fundamental concepts of Joan Jonas's oeuvre: the idea of process in which elements – in this case the cones and the video *May Windows* – drawn from different contexts are gathered together and assembled so as to create new and unusual ways of experiencing the works.

8 *I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)* (1976)

Single-channel video

I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances) is a non-linear, at times oneiric story that blends time and memory, imagination and melancholy. It was realized as part of the seminal Television Laboratory Programme conducted at WNET/Thirteen in the US, which encouraged collaboration between engineers and artists with the aim of creating experimental videotapes.

The video is shot in two locations: a coastal landscape in Nova Scotia (these images were originally shot on Super-8 videotape), and inside a television studio in New York City. The artist uses a number of different objects in this environment – a blackboard, two cones (one made of paper and the other of tin), a globe, a bronze statue of a horse, and a Mexican mask –

putting them together in order to create a set not dissimilar to the metaphysical structures of paintings by Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico. Images of the scene are recorded and transmitted through a closed-circuit video system which also appears at several points in the video, in a box at the bottom right-hand corner of the monitor. In the opposite corner the viewer can see a close-up of a woman shot from behind who seems to be observing the centre of the screen. In this manner, Jonas orchestrates an interplay of references in which the artist is at once observer and the subject of her own observations.

Throughout the work, her voice can be heard reading several excerpts from a diary she kept during her travels in Nova Scotia (Canada), broken up by music and animal noises.

9 *Street Scene With Chalk (1976/2008/2010)*

Single-channel video

The video *Street Scene With Chalk* shows an action performed by Joan Jonas during the performance *Reading Dante*. Whilst she is drawing on a blackboard with white chalk, her movements are being captured and projected on a screen onto which another video from a performance of 1976 is broadcast simultaneously. The images show Jonas together with the artist Pat Steir and another man who by chance becomes part of the scene, improvising movements using a large circle and metal cones on streets in New York City's Wall Street district. Some extracts of the performance have been used by the artist for the video *Mirage II* (1976–2000).

The audio of the video includes sound recordings of the performance along with night sounds from the surrounding city, sounds produced by moving the metal objects along the asphalt and the notes of a popular song broadcast through the cones.

The video is part of the installation *Reading Dante III* (2008/2010) as it was presented in 2010 at the Yvon Lambert gallery in New York City.

For the exhibition "Light Time Tales" the artist decided to show the video *Street Scene With Chalk* as a reference to and evocation of *Reading Dante*.

10 *Volcano Saga* (1985/1994)

Multimedia installation

This installation is based on the Icelandic legend *Laxdaela Saga*, which dates to the thirteenth century. *Volcano Saga* is the first work produced by Joan Jonas that is inspired by an epic tale, and continues her investigation of texts that began in 1976 with *The Juniper Tree* and became part of the artist's language. In order to create the work, Jonas used only a few fragments of the saga, in which the female figure of Gudrun is described as she talks about four dreams. These dreams are translated by a soothsayer who interprets them as weddings.

Beginning with the first version of *Volcano Saga* presented at De Appel Arts Centre in Amsterdam in 1985, the work developed over several years. In 1989 the artist recorded a video of the same name, to be broadcast on the show *New Video* on

WGBH TV in Boston. The WGBH TV studios gave her access to advanced post-production technologies. In 1994, as part of the retrospective of her work held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Jonas created the installation *Volcano Saga*.

The work is composed of projection slides portraying images of the performance and photographs taken during Joan Jonas's first trip to Iceland, diverse triangular forms, a red fabric laid on the ground with a map of Iceland and a triangular plinth. Inside a vitrine there are also several masks, some puppets and a blackboard. There are also two video projections: *Veil Dance* (1986), which displays a performance of the work executed in 1986 at the San Francisco Institute; and *Volcano Saga* (1989).

This last video is set in Iceland and includes participation from the actress Tilda Swinton, who plays Gudrun, and Ron Vawter, who plays the soothsayer. The two protagonists dialogue with one another, set against a background that displays a series of images of mountainous, volcanic landscapes. The woman's desires take form through surreal images obtained through the use of the chroma key technique (a video effect utilized mainly in television filming, thanks to which it is possible to superimpose two filmed fragments in a single image). In one episode of the video Jonas reveals the illusory mechanism used to build the scene, opening the work up to an interplay of continuous cross-references between fiction and reality.

Several sequences portray the artist as she appears to measure the landscape with a yellow rod. In other scenes, she rotates a helical form against the background, almost as if stressing the passage of time.



Joan Jonas, *Volcano Saga*, 1989; video still, video, 18'35"; col., sound



The narration of Gudrun's dreams is interspersed with other episodes: the video opens with the story of a car accident narrated in voiceover by the artist. The sound of the wind, a recurrent element in Joan Jonas's work, is woven throughout the entire soundtrack for the video, interspersed with music created by American experimental composer Alvin Lucier.

As Jonas herself affirms, this installation plays a key role in her artistic career: «I see *Volcano Saga* as the beginning of my synthesizing the development of female character, the story as mirror, and the volcanic landscapes as representation of narrative. Here in Iceland was the connection of the psyche to the elements. As in *Wind* 1968, the elements become character.»

As with many other installations, *Volcano Saga* continues the artist's reflections on the ways to make the language of her performance – by nature ephemeral and transitory – capable of resisting the passage of time.

11 *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places...*

Sweeney Astray (1992/1994)

Multimedia installation

This work is based on a medieval Irish epic poem from the twelfth century entitled *Buile Shuibhne*, also known as *Sweeney Astray*, of which Joan Jonas used the version translated in 1983 by Nobel Prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney. Set in Ireland, the text tells the tale of a pagan king who is cursed by a Catholic bishop (Saint Ronan) and turned into a bird, though he maintains his human features. Exiled from his homeland, the king (Sweeney) is

forced to wander the earth, forever moving from place to place. With each new destination he creates a poem that speaks of his feelings in relationship to the surrounding landscape. Eventually the king, descending into madness, is killed when he is impaled on a spear.

The context for *Sweeney Astray* is Ireland during the passage from the Celtic tradition – in which the female figure played a central role in community structure, enjoying the same rights as men – to a Christian culture, founded on a far more masculine vision. Therefore, the foundation of this work is a consideration of the expulsion of the woman's role from society.

Originally developed as an installation for the 1992 Kunst-Werke in Berlin, *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* was presented as an installation and later as a theatre piece for Jonas's solo show at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1994. The artist sets the work between a recently reunified Germany, Ireland and Amsterdam, maintaining Berlin as the main location of reference.

The dominant element in the installation is a tall metal structure with a glass storey, symbolizing at once the "prison" and the "nest" within which the protagonist takes refuge. Its characteristics of transparency and reflection have been utilized in order to create special effects in several videos of the work, defined by the artist herself as "animated paintings" centred on the body and the gestures of the protagonist (Sweeney). Through a complex effort to control light and coordinate the positions of her performers, the artist achieved surprisingly fluid and picturesque compositions deriving from the superimposition of im-

ages reflected on the glass surface.

A central element of *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* is a video based on several excerpts from the original poem that are reinterpreted through different narrative sequences, improvisations and films of the urban landscape of Berlin, where the artist was living at the time. The voyage, intended as continuous travel, is one of the main themes of the work.

Another video in this complex installation is made up of a sequence of shots of the Great Wall of Berlin, filmed on 13 January 1990, in which the viewer can see dozens of people taking away pieces of wall that will then be sold as souvenirs. The remains of the recent past quickly become consumer objects, exhibited on small, improvised tables and stalls, while the sharp sounds of pickaxes and hammers striking the wall together with the murmuring of the crowd provide a soundtrack for the video. Filmed in Sanssouci, another video alternates images of architecture and statues with others of trees and frozen fields, while still other sequences display a group of kids playing hockey out in the open.

In an action space that involves pictorial, narrative and theatrical aspects that influence the nature of representation, *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* reflects the artist's ability to understand and talk about the present through an appropriation of the past devoid of any preconceptions.

12 *My New Theater III: in the Shadow a Shadow* (1999)

Multimedia installation

My New Theater III: in the Shadow a Shadow is a sort of portable theatre in miniature, inspired by the use of devices typical of the period prior to the invention of cinema, such as darkrooms and dioramas. The installation is part of the *My New Theater* series, created starting at the end of the 1990s with the aim of continuing to work with performance, but without the artist's physical presence. Long and narrow, similar to the conical elements utilized in historical installations like *Mirage*, the structure rests upon two wooden sawhorses. Inside, a small monitor displays a video. In front of the mouth of the cone sits a bench that viewers can use when observing the installation.

The video shows a performance set in Joan Jonas's studio in Cape Breton (Canada), in which the artist and a naked ballerina improvise rhythmic movements to music sung by Raylene Rankin. Jonas also invited several inhabitants of the village to participate, improvising percussion sounds using wooden chairs. The resulting images are at once paradoxical and ironic as the artist, dressed as a painter, dons a baseball hat and presents Zina, her dog, as a model.

13 *Lines in the Sand* (2002)

Multimedia installation

Commissioned by Documenta 11 (2002), *Lines in the Sand* was initially conceived as an installation and later developed as a performance. It was inspired by the epic poem *Helen in Egypt*



Joan Jonas, *Lines in the Sand* (2002), installation, Queens Museum, New York, 2003
 Photo David Allison

(1961) by the Imagist⁸ poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961), one of the last patients of the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. The narration refers to the myth of Helen of Troy, though it uses a lesser-known version drawn from texts by Euripides (485–407/406 BC) and the poet Stesichorus (630–555 BC), according to which Helen never reached Troy, but headed to Egypt instead. Therefore, at the base of the work lies the assumption that the war between the Greeks and the Trojans was fought over an illusion. Another source of inspiration is the book *Tribute to Freud* (1956), also written by H.D. The text narrates the figure of the famous Austrian psychoanalyst as told through a visionary patchwork of dreams, memories and reflections. The

title harks back to the artist's infancy and the English expression "to draw a line in the sand", which implicates establishing and marking a point of no return.

Unlike other works by Joan Jonas, in which the viewer can move freely around the space, the installation *Lines in the Sand* is designed to be viewed from the front, and is composed of a rectangular platform upon which diverse props have been set, including a small, lime-green *chaise longue*, a radio, a metallic cone and a blackboard. The first of three videos present in the work is projected onto the blackboard, showing a series of drawings of pyramids, sphinxes and spirals created by the artist with a stick that has a piece of chalk attached to one end. The images are accompanied by the sound of chalk on the blackboard, accentuating the idea of the flow connected with creation – as fleeting as it is ceaseless – of the different figures. As in countless other works created by Jonas, the drawing appears as a ritual exploring the relationship between rhythm, gesture and technology.

A second video, projected on the wall behind the work, displays different narrative fragments that mix scenes shot inside a Las Vegas casino with others shot outside; several of the elements in the video are also set out physically within the installation space. The third video, entitled *Pillow Talk* (2002), is based on a narrative fragment of the same name drawn from the Irish epic *The Tain*, in which a king and queen lie side-by-side on a bed in order to decide which of the two owns more possessions; it is transmitted inside a black box created in a shape that seems to be connected with works from the *My New Theater* series.

The installation is centred on Egypt, a place described through the symbolic use of sphinxes, architectural elements and the faux Egyptian statues shot in Las Vegas. The historical memory of this place, represented through the presentation of several photographs dating to a trip Jonas's grandmother took to Egypt in 1910, is set in relation to the imposing reproductions present in Las Vegas. This opens up an interplay of references to and reflections on the idea of doubles and illusion, around which the figure of Helen as described in H.D.'s tale is set. Talking about *Lines in the Sand*, the artist said: «I am interested in the exploring the interlocking strands of myth (as a representation of the unconscious) and reality.»

The process of reinterpreting cultural elements and translating the story in an artistic key is pivotal to Joan Jonas's *oeuvre*, also characterized by a constant search for aspects connected with female subjectivity. This work is a precise reflection on the genesis of the imaginary as the fruit of a constant interplay between history and fiction, subjectivity, community and media.

In *Lines in the Sand*, Jonas creates a collage of scenes that tells the story of the psychological and political power of Helen, who is represented as an ancient metaphor for property that is connected with the aims of the Trojan War. «9/11 took place while I was working on this work, and so naturally the subject of the Trojan War became important to me. It was decidedly supernatural. It also reminded me of the period just before the Second World War, when I was still a little girl.»⁹

14 **Waltz (2003)**

Single-channel video

Waltz was born of collaboration with the composer Robert Ashley on the occasion of the *Celestial Excursions* (2003) project, for which Joan Jonas created the choreographies. According to the artist, the video was inspired by a series of engravings, *Los desastres de la guerra*, realized between 1810 and 1820 by Spanish painter Francisco Goya, even though this particular reference is hard to recognize in the work.

Shot at Cape Breton (Canada), the video shows the artist together with her dog Zina and a group of performers as they conduct several simple actions, like moving some objects around on a table or waving a flag, with gestures that make the action appear to be some sort of ritual. The characters are wearing crafted cloth costumes and papier-mâché masks.

The video portrays a magical universe in which a chair seems to float up off the ground, and the confines between the animal world and the human world grow indistinct. Nature plays a significant role: images of rocks, water and trees are superimposed on images of everyday objects that have been subtracted from their usual contexts and represented in fields or woods. *Waltz* recombines diverse elements present in many of Jonas's works, including masks, flags and mirrors. The artist has always used mirrors in particular to alter peoples' perceptions of events: «I use different mirrors – concave and convex – because they change the image and change the space. Instead of using special effects, I use mirrors to distort space, to create magical worlds». The video is accompanied by a melancholic waltz inspired by

the traditional music of Cape Breton, and is broken up by sounds coming from natural elements like the noise of two stones being rubbed together or the rustling of the wind.

As in many recent works created by Joan Jonas, *Waltz* is pervaded by a subtle sense of irony through which the artist questions her role and the role of her (now) aged body.

15 *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things (2004/2007)*

Multimedia installation

The first version of the work was presented as an installation at The Renaissance Society of Chicago in 2004 together with *Lines in the Sand* (2002), for which it is a sort of sequel. *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* is in fact a citation of H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud*, the key text in *Lines in the Sand*. In 2005 it was represented as a performance for the industrial spaces of Dia:Beacon (New York).

The installation is based on the text of *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians of North America*, a lecture held by German art theorist Aby Warburg in 1923. The text, which narrates the travel experiences the scholar acquired while spending time with Native American populations in the US during the early 1900s, is set in relationship with the trips Jonas took in the same areas during the 1960s and again in 2004. As the artist says: «As I learned more about Warburg, I felt an affinity to his way of looking at art history. Ideas and histories of different cultures have always been an important ingredient of my work. I view my own process through the lens of history and in

relation to travel». The installation is made up of six projected videos – three on screens and three on walls – a white drawing on black paper with a serpent and numerous props including a stuffed coyote, a small white *chaise longue*, a seismograph and a series of small canvases that make up a long, low screen. The space can evoke connotations of an ethnographic museum, where material cultural objects taken from different times and places are brought together.

The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things is structured around a multitude of expressive forms that draw on theatre and art history. The artist explores the complex relationship between installation

Joan Jonas, *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* (2005), performance, Dia:Beacon, New York, 2005. Photo Paula Court



and performance through a continuous game of references: video images of the performance presented at Dia:Beacon are projected together with a selection of videos backdrops of the same performance showing the empty spaces in which it was held.

Projected on a screen, the video *Melancholia* (2005) refers to an engraving of the same name produced by German artist Albrecht Dürer in 1514, which was also cited in Warburg's writings, and focuses on the performer Ragani Haas as she carries out various actions against a snowy landscape. In a second video, *Wolf Lights* (2005), the same performer appears, her face covered by a wolf mask as she acts like the dog she resembles. The images, luminous and intermittent, of Las Vegas neon signs form coloured patterns and act as a backdrop for the scene. *Mirror Improvisation* (2005), filmed entirely through a convex mirror, shows two women and a dog improvising with various objects including wooden swords. The scene is accompanied by music played on a piano by Jason Moran.

Finally, in distinct contraposition to the visions connected with Warburg's ideas, shots of several landscapes in Southern California are broadcast, including numerous electricity pylons and the ruins of an abandoned motel on the beach that the artist visited while conducting research for the piece.

16 *My New Theater VI: Good Night Good Morning '06* (2006)

Multimedia installation

This work is part of the *My New Theater* series, and is characterized by a conical structure set atop two wooden supports,

and into which a screen has been inserted. Inside a remake of *Good Night Good Morning* (1976) that was also used for the performance of *Mirage* (1976) is shown.

The video, produced thirty years after the first version, has been shot in colour and is filmed through the use of a convex mirror that distorts the images. In numerous frames the viewer can also see the video camera while it records the artist's actions. In this manner, Joan Jonas recreates the closed-circuit system that investigated the borders between reality and its representation.

Unlike the first version, the video *My New Theater VI: Good Night Good Morning '06* exhibits a more playful approach and includes fragments of music by the composers David Lang and Morton Feldman, assembled with sound elements recorded live with the video.

17 *Double Lunar Rabbits* (2010)

Multimedia installation

First presented in 2010 at the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) Project Gallery in Kitakyūshū (Japan), this installation is based on two popular fables that have rabbit protagonists whose image is associated with the moon. The stories, which come from cultures and contexts far removed from one another (Japan and the Aztec territories), provide an interplay of continuous references and re-elaborations, accentuated by the duality with which they are presented in the space. *Double Lunar Rabbits* is in fact composed of two concave wood and Japanese paper screens, onto which four short versions derived from the

two narrative tales are projected.

The Japanese tale tells the story of a monkey, a fox and a rabbit who decide to do charitable things together because they're convinced they'll be rewarded for their efforts. When an old man begs for some food, the monkey gathers fruit from a tree, the fox hunts and catches a fish and the rabbit, who can only gather grass, offers himself in sacrifice, throwing his body onto the flames. The old man turns out to be a God and, moved by the rabbit's virtuous sacrifice saves the animal and draws its silhouette on the face of the moon so that everyone can see and appreciate him. The Aztec story tells the tale of a God, Quetzalcoatl, who undertakes a long journey during his terrestrial life, risking starving to death. A rabbit he meets along his way offers himself up as food so that Quetzalcoatl might be saved. The God, moved by this gesture, elevates the rabbit to the moon so that everyone can see and appreciate his image.

The video, filmed entirely in Kitakyūshū, shows a performer taking on the various identities of different characters in the two myths, and alternates urban environments with natural landscapes as Joan Jonas narrates the two stories.

Double Lunar Rabbits is in part a reflection on the different ways we can view images in movement, which has been one of the artist's main themes since the 1970s. The images always appear fragmented, keeping the viewer from gaining a complete vision of the work. As the artist herself notes: «The viewer's experience is one of constant shifting from moment to moment as two screens are seen together or in part because the curves hide portions as one moves about the space».

18 *Reanimation* (2010/2012/2013)

Multimedia installation

Reanimation has gone through a number of iterations: after a first work-in-progress presented at MIT in Boston in 2010, it was presented in a small, prefabricated house in Karlsruhe Park during dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012; and as a performance in 2013 as part of "Tate Live", held at the Tate Modern in London. Both – the installation and performance – coexist as two "translations" of the work.

The installation is inspired by *Under the Glacier* (1968), a novel by the Icelandic writer Hálldor Laxness. The artist chose fragments from the book that describe a glacier in Iceland in poetic language as well as referring to certain miraculous aspects of the natural world such as the dandelion and the honeybee. The title of the work is derived from one of the chapters in the novel

Unlike the installation presented at dOCUMENTA (13), where the viewer could observe *Reanimation* from outside through a special window designed specifically by the artist, visitors can walk throughout the version present in Pirelli HangarBicocca. This version consists in a series of videos, sound elements, drawings and texts and is made up of four screens built with wood frames and Japanese paper, onto which the videos are projected. Set in Lofoten Islands (Norway), the videos display Nordic landscapes interspersed with black ink drawings drawn on snow and shots of the mountains. These scenes are accompanied by traditional Laplander *joik* songs sung by Norwegian singer Ánde Somby. A cube-shaped metallic structure is positioned on the floor in front of one of the screens. Numerous crystals hang inside the

structure, refracting light; these crystals also appear in several shots in the videos.

Joan Jonas counterbalances the fragmentation of images projected onto the screens with the static nature of the two *My New Theater* pieces displayed in the space. The video *Glacier* (2010) projected inside one of the two is composed – along with other images – of a collage of a number of different segments taken from two of Joan Jonas's previous works: *Melancholia* (2005), also present in *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* (2004/2007); and *Disturbances* (1974), which plays with water and reflections of light. In the second *My New Theater* viewers can see a video in which fish with almost prehistoric forms appear inside an aquarium.

19 *Beautiful Dog* (2014)

Single-channel video

Shot in Cape Breton (Canada), the video features Ozu, Jonas's dog. Animals – and the artist's dogs in particular – are recurring presences in her works. Talking about this piece, the artist affirms: «A dog's summer in Canada walking, running, digging and participating in the new "ghost" series. The work was made with three different video cameras. I am interested in the juxtaposition of various images altered by the medium.»

Biography

Joan Jonas was born in New York City in 1936, where she currently lives and works. At the end of the 1960s, Jonas made fundamental contributions to the development of numerous contemporary artistic investigations connected with performance, video, installations and choreography. During an artistic career that has developed over more than five decades, Jonas has received numerous honours from various institutions including: The Guggenheim Foundation (1976) and The Rockefeller Foundation (1990); as well as recognitions like the CAPS Award (1971 and 1974), the Deren Award given by the American Film Institute (1989), and the Anonymous Was A Woman Award (1998). She has held solo shows and performances at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1994), Queens Museum of Art in New York (2004), the Dia:Beacon in New York (2005), Castello di Rivoli (2006) and at MACBA in Barcelona (2007). The artist has also participated in numerous group shows over the past thirty years, including the 2009 Venice Biennale and various editions of documenta in Kassel (1972, 1977, 1982, 1987, 2002, 2012). In 2015 Joan Jonas will represent the United States at the 56th Venice Biennale with an exhibition presented by MIT's List of Visual Arts Center.

Jonas's works are included in some of the most famous art collections in the world, including the Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (Amsterdam), and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid).

Recently Joan Jonas was made Professor Emerita at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Boston.

Notes

- 1 The first economical, portable video camera to become available on the market, the Sony Portapak made it possible for a filmmaker to shoot events autonomously and quickly with respect to television video cameras utilized at that time.
- 2 Joan Jonas, "Space Movement Time," in Anna Daneri, Cristina Natalicchio (edited by), *Joan Jonas* (Milan: Charta, 2007), p. 48
- 3 *Ibid* p. 50
- 4 Douglas Crimp (edited by), *Joan Jonas Scripts and Descriptions 1968–1982* (Berkeley, University Art Museum, University of California – Eindhoven, Stedelijk Museum: 1983).
- 5 Joan Jonas in Johanna Burton, "The Strings of the Human Spirit: Joan Jonas's Asymmetrical Symbolic," to be published.
- 6 A "closed-circuit video system" is a system in which a video camera, monitor or video projector are connected to each other, generating a virtual space in which the timing of the recorded image is superimposed on the reception of that image by the viewer. The closed-circuit system induces in the viewer a perceptive comparison with the audiovisual information he or she receives, all within an environment that puts his or her ordinary perception of space to the test.
- 7 Founded in 1969 in New York City by a number of most important American experimental filmmakers including Jonas Mekas, Jerome Hill, P. Adams Sitney, Peter Kubelka and Stan Brakhage, the Anthology Film Archives were established with the aim of creating the first museum dedicated to cinema as an art form. Although the project was never completed, over the years it became a key location for the development of experimental films; a place where avant-garde and independent films could be screened regularly as part of a rich film program. The center has also made a name for itself thanks to its enormous archive and the conservation work it has conducted on materials connected with the history of both American and international films and videos as an independent art form.
- 8 Imagism, led by Ezra Pound (1885–1972), was a literary current that formed in the US and England during the early 1900s. Breaking with traditional late Romantic poetry, Imagism promoted the need for a clear, concise poetic language based on the precision and immediacy with which images were presented.
- 9 Joan Jonas "Space Movement Time," in Anna Daneri, Cristina Natalicchio (edited by), *Cif.*, p. 40

Lenders to the exhibition

Collezione La Gaia, Busca, Italia

Electronics Arts Intermix, New York

Joan Jonas

MACBA. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Raffaella Cortese Gallery, Milano

Jessica E. Smith and Kevin R. Brine

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Wilkinson Gallery, Londra

Yvon Lambert, Parigi

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Graphic Design

Leftloft

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Buysschaert&Malerba with Aaron Maines

Research and Texts

Lucia Aspesi and Fiammetta Griccioli

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HangarBicocca Staff

Marco Lanata, *General Manager*

Vicente Todoli, *Artistic Advisor*

Andrea Lissoni, *Curator*

Valentina Fossati, *Curatorial Assistant*

Fiammetta Griccioli, *Curatorial Assistant*

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Lucia Aspesi, *Research and Documentation*

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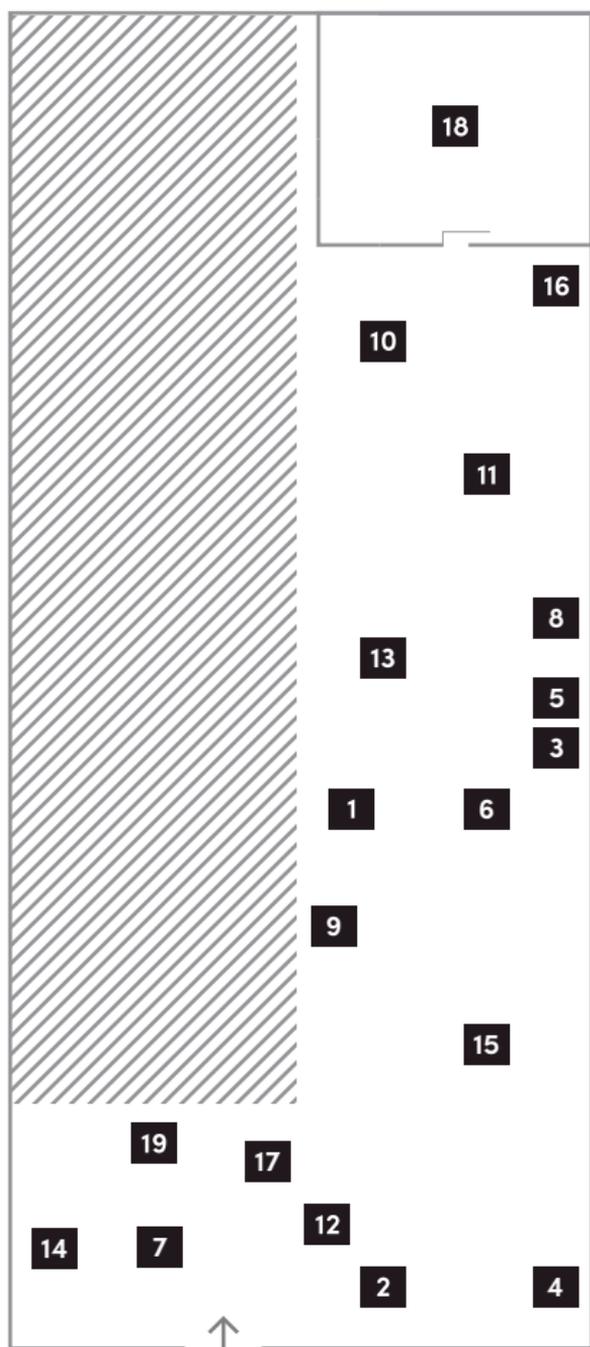
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- 1** *Wind* (1968)
- 2** *Paul Revere* (1971)
- 3** *Barking* (1973)
- 4** *Songdelay* (1973)
- 5** *Merlo* (1974)
- 6** *Mirage* (1976/1994/2005)
- 7** *After Mirage* (1976/2011)
- 8** *I Want to Live in the Country (and Other Romances)* (1976)
- 9** *Street Scene With Chalk* (1976/2008/2010)
- 10** *Volcano Saga* (1985/1994)
- 11** *Revolted by the Thought of Known Places... Sweeney Astray* (1992/1994)
- 12** *My New Theater III: in the Shadow a Shadow* (1999)
- 13** *Lines in the Sand* (2002)
- 14** *Waltz* (2003)
- 15** *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* (2004/2007)
- 16** *My New Theater VI: Good Night Good Morning '06* (2006)
- 17** *Double Lunar Rabbits* (2010)
- 18** *Reanimation* (2010/2012/2013)
- 19** *Beautiful Dog* (2014)



Entrance to the exhibition *Light Time Tales*

Entrance Hall / Shed

Pirelli HangarBicocca is an institution dedicated to contemporary art that offers an exhibition programme featuring Italian and international artists, accompanied by a series of live events, encounters with artists and teaching labs open to schools and the general public. The project, the brainchild of the Pirelli company, is the result of a process that has led to the reconversion of a vast industrial production facility into a space dedicated to art, inaugurated in 2004 with the realization of Anselm Kiefer's *Sette Palazzi Celesti*, the artist's most important site-specific artwork. Beginning in 2012, Pirelli HangarBicocca has presented to the general public exhibitions entirely conceived and produced for its spaces – the Shed, Navate and Cubo – alternating works by renowned artists like Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, Dieter Roth and Cildo Meireles with others by younger artists who have already established an international reputation, including Tomás Saraceno, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Ragnar Kjartansson and Micol Assaël. Open to the city and its environs, Pirelli HangarBicocca is an internationally-oriented project that reflects a business culture based on values like research and innovation, fostering cultural diversity and concern for the welfare and well-being of the local community.

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