JOAN JONAS

reflections on projections

STEVE MILLER: ***When we decided that the theme of this issue would be 'Risk', your work came to mind for various reasons, which I hope we can discuss. My perception of your work is that it's refreshingly outside of the commercial world which dominates the contemporary conversation. You've always taken your own unique path. Do you ever consider the personal path you took a risk?***

JOAN JONAS: It was a plunge into the unknown, in a sense, and I do believe that you have to take risks. My work from the very beginning was about taking a risk. I think many artists take risks, but I always believed that you should be continuously on the edge and never at rest and never content with what you've done so that the work is always challenging in some way.

STEVE: ***The title of your monograph, "In the Shadow, a Shadow," is also a title of one of your performance pieces. Why did you choose that title for the book and what does it mean?***

JOAN: John Simon, the editor, chose the title from one of my minor theater pieces. Everything I do is, in a way, a performance for the camera. So, it wasn't actually a full-blown performance, but "In the Shadow, a Shadow" has to do with a mystery of double invisibility and exposure, but it came out of my imagination. I work with shadows a lot in my work and the idea of doubles and the layering of different elements of images on top of each other, so it's a reference to that.

STEVE: ***Well, you've hardly been in the shadows with six appearances, representing the U.S. at the Venice Biennale, and solo shows at major museums, most recently at the Tate. However, shadows imply freedom more than being in the spotlight. Do you ever think about that? Were there quiet moments in the shadows that gave you the opportunity for reflection, inquiry, and experimentation?***

JOAN: It's been that way until recently when I got much busier and there's been more demand for me. However, I think throughout my career or my work I've had that time, especially when I go to Canada in the summer, where there's more time, none of the demands, and not as much going on socially and publicly.

STEVE: ***I read that Jones Beach piece in 1970. You had the audience view the piece from a quarter-mile away, and that does seem riskier than containing the audience in a traditional white box or auditorium-type space. Were you interested in the distance affecting audience attention, or did you feel the audience focused more by being so far away?***

JOAN: I wanted to work outdoors. I wanted to get away from these white boxes, as we call them — the indoor gallery. Outdoors was unexplored territory for performance, and I was primarily interested in the way distance affects the audience's perception of movement, prop, and sound. That Jones Beach piece was then reconfigured for New York and it was called "Delay Delay". You see an action and then you hear the sound depending on how far away you are or how thick the atmosphere is. I was interested in that perception.

STEVE: ***Why?***

Portrait by Andrea Blanch.

JOAN: I was always interested in making and altering images. My earliest work was made with mirrors as a prop. I was interested in how mirrors altered and broke up space. Seventeen performers carried mirrors facing the audience so the audience saw these reflections moving in space and it really did affect the perception of the space to see these mirrors reflecting and refracting the space, the other performers, and the audience themselves. That was one way to alter the image, and then outdoors and through distance were other ways to alter them. So, I was always interested in finding ways in which the image can be, not manipulated, but shifted or altered. Then when I worked with video I continued to think about my images, meaning construction of space like a painting.

STEVE: ***Film was always a recording option for you, what made you choose video over film and continue that choice today?***

JOAN: The film cameras were much more complex than the video cameras at that time and the films I made were always shot by a filmmaker, not myself directly. I didn't learn how to use a film camera, which involves much more knowledge about lighting and so on. For me, the video camera was just a natural place to go. I knew about the video camera before I went to Japan. At that time those video cameras were extremely simple devices, and it was very simple to alter the lighting, although I wasn't interested in that kind of altering the image. I was interested in comparing video to film. I wanted to make films. I studied films and I looked at the films where the image was framed in a film, just like the way it's framed in a painting. That's what I brought to my work.

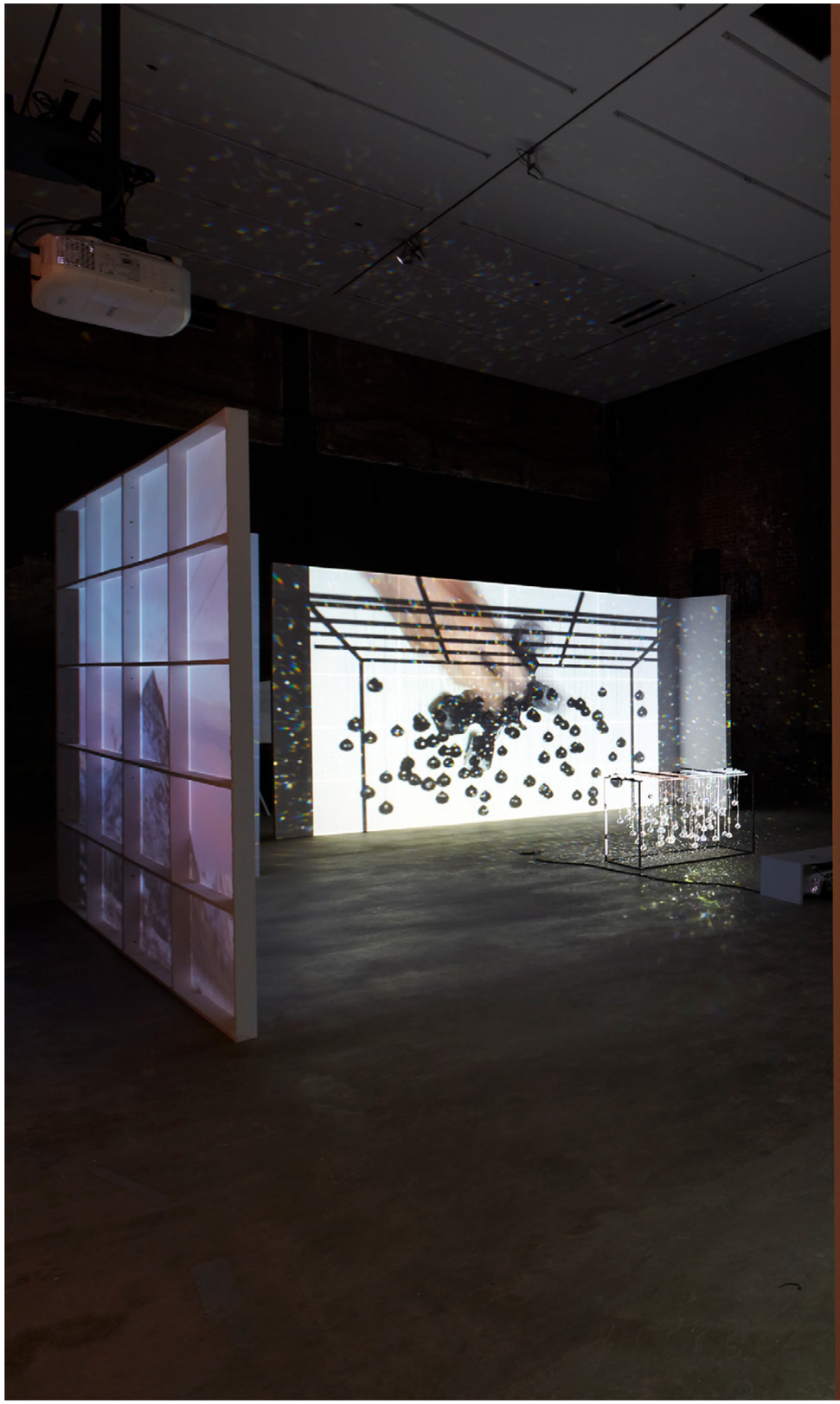
STEVE: ***So, roll is widely talked about. What was the conception behind getting that image to repeat, and then finally at the end you bring in the head of a woman?***

JOAN: The reason is, all you have to do is turn a little knob on the TV set, it shuts off the set, and you turn the little knob that turned on the vertical roll. I liked the idea of the vertical roll for two reasons; it was a device peculiar to video and it referred to film frames going by in a film. It's just the frame going by continuously and it’s shot with a video camera from a TV set, because you can't record that unless you shoot it with a camera. It was made in Venice, California in Robert Irwin's old studio, which was a very beautiful white room with a very diffused light from some kind of cloth over the skylight. It was made by shooting over and over again. We rehearsed the movements. There are no edits in that film. It's all one shot. The reason my face comes in between the camera and the monitor at the very end is to reveal the structure and space, although you don't necessarily know that when you look at it.

STEVE: ***You continue to change points of reference; you restage your performances differently and think of the recording of the event as a continuation of the performance. How does the shifting landscape of each performance contain or alter your content, and is the arrangement part of the restaging an opportunity for intensification of value?***

JOAN: When there's a difference in the audience's perception of a performance and a video installation or autonomous video, they're all separate works. In a performance, the audience is sitting, and I don't work with editing in the same way for a video and a performance because I slow the time down between the cuts because the audience won't notice if you do very fast editing in the performance. In the early days, the very first video performance consisted of a live feed from the camera which was recording the action to a projection and so that wasn’t edited. There was no editing process going on, except you could turn the camera on and off or move it. That would be the only way to edit. So, when that work would be transferred to autonomous video work, it's a whole other situation for somebody looking, and then you edit one shot after another. In other words, you're just looking at the video work like you're looking at a film and you're making a narrative in time for the film. As an example, now I'm working on a new piece that’s a performance about the ocean. My works have become much more complicated over the years. For the one at MOMA, there are several projections and each of them is edited in a different way. So, an audience member standing in the installation can see more than one screen at the same time, and they edit the film by turning their heads and walking. However, I also edit the individual projections in

Above: *Moving Off the Land. Oceans – Sketches and Notes* by Joan Jonas. 2018, Commissioned by TBA21–Academy and presented in collaboration with Tate Modern, Photograph © Joan Jonas, (Photographer: Brotherton Lock);
Following spread: Joan Jonas, *what is found in the windowless house is true*, installation view, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2017



Above: Joan Jonas, installation view, Tate Modern. 2018, Photo: © Tate photography, (Photographer: Seraphina Neville); Following spread: *Moving Off the Land. Oceans – Sketches and Notes* by Joan Jonas. 2018, Commissioned by TBA21–Academy and presented in collaboration with Tate Modern, Photograph © Joan Jonas, (Photographer: Brotherton Lock)

relation to the content, the rhythm, and the way one would edit a film. I don't edit the performances in that way; they're edited in a slower speed because the audience is sitting.

STEVE: ***So, you restage and you sometimes use different props when you restage it, right? When you bring in those new props and you do restage it, is there editing that makes it a condensation, an intensification of the opportunity to restage it in a new context that gives you greater intensity, or are you just trying to recreate it?***

JOAN: When you say restage do you mean restage your performance?

STEVE: *Yes.*

JOAN: No. I'm very open and loose about it. I don't tie myself down to any one version or performance. If I restage it now when I'm working with people, with big complicated video backdrops, and work going on in front of it with performers, it takes a lot of organization to put those works on. I hardly ever really restage those works. In other words, I have to get a lot of people together and we only have time to rehearse and then perform. If I do, as you say, restage something, I often take it apart and put it together again in a different way depending on my feelings about it, and usually, it's about thinking and I want to make it better.

STEVE: ***Exactly. That's exactly what I was wondering. This is a really off the wall thing, but I want to talk about it anyway; classical art is in three dimensions. I've read and watched innumerable interviews with you, and there's always this question about time. You say everyone always asks you this question, so I'm not going to buck this trend, but spacetime is a dimension of reality that Einstein postulated and spacetime is a mathematical model that fuses the three dimensions of space and the one dimension of time into a single four-dimensional continuum. Spacetime diagrams can be used to visualize relativistic effects such as why different observers perceive where and when events occur. So, we all operate in spacetime. However, in your work, you exploit a parallel metaphorical space-time continuum. It has aspects of traditional theater, but your non-traditional narrative and interest in ceremony ritual and myth set you apart. You create an imagined world outside the constraints of the three-dimensional object. Have you ever thought of your work as a fourth dimension implied by space-time? Does your interest in science include physics?***

JOAN: I always wish that I had studied physics because, of course, I'm interested in it, but I don't totally understand it. In the early 80's, after working with video in relation to the live performance in time of those different ways of perceiving different points of view, I was asked if it was about relativity and I thought it was a very good question. That's all I can say. It's not something I think about, but I'm very interested in complicating and layering the different elements. Over the years my work has become more complicated, more layered, and more elements in a three-dimensional space. For instance, in the installations, people put it together in their own way by walking, moving, and remembering what they saw two seconds ago. I could say that I don't know how other people perceive my work. I have no way of knowing that. I'm sure I don't perceive my work the way anybody else does because I put it together in pieces and then I know it so well that I could never see it the way other people see it.

STEVE: ***It's also about the reflection of the complexity of the mind. As much as that is about any context that you want to see. Certainly, the duration of performance creates a sacred space such as the kind of space and time you get when observing. You're going to hate this question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. You've added a personal poetic practice that many others have associated with shamans. I think Joseph Boyce with his coyote exploits this kind of shamanistic activity and authority that I think he's looking to project. You've resisted this role, which I can understand. How do you create this cultural ceremonial dream space with seemingly relaxed presentation and improvisation? Or if you understandably resist this role, why do you think you get this association?***

JOAN: I think when I first began to make performances and when I was beginning to shift to performance I certainly did a lot of research about shamanism, magic, and ritual. I was very interested in

it and probably drawn to the idea of shamanism. The reason I resist the role is that I think it would be pretentious to say that I was a shaman, because I'm not. I think the reason that people would use that word is that when you study something and research it at the beginning of your practice it stays there. It's in your mind and in your process. On the other hand, I could say I like when I work outside - it always sounds pretentious of me to say this - with the spirits of nature. I like to include animals, and now I'm working with oceans and fish. There's a spirit, but I don't call it that when I'm working on it. I like to use very down to earth and matter of fact images and movements that probably lead one to associate the work with some kind of an interest in the spiritual. It's there, but I don't pursue that purposely.

STEVE: ***I was looking at you doing the drawings in the video and performing and, as an observer, that's kind of what I saw; a knowing wise figure connected to nature. The way that installation was set up with the drawings on the wall, it was very complete. So, you really come across as creating a new kind of spiritual space where there is a reverence for nature. I think it's inevitable that we, as observers, have that perception.***

JOAN: When I perform for the camera, I have to enter a different world than my everyday world, whatever that may be. I used to always use costumes to alter my presence. I used to call it another persona. I don't really invent other personas anymore, but for that particular one I put on a costume with a hat and dark glasses. I have to be somebody else. I'm not myself in those works.

STEVE: ***I know you've been influenced by poets such as Hilda Doolittle and you've mentioned Artaud once or twice in other interviews. What was Artaud's effect on you?***

JOAN: When I went to Japan I was very affected by the Noh drama, and I always do a lot of research and reading around my interests. The Irish poets are very important to Noh drama because of the similarities in the stories about ghosts and the atmosphere of the Noh in relation to Irish poetry and mythology. I always mention Artaud as a reference as somebody else who was drawn to other cultures and rituals, and so all those give me support because I've always been drawn to other cultures and rituals.

STEVE: ***Did that make you want to travel?***

JOAN: No, I've always wanted to go away. As a child I wanted to go to South America. I never did, but I always wanted to go away to some other place or else just be in nature.

STEVE: ***You wonder why bees construct living spaces that reflect the structure of their eyes. Glaciers and volcanoes inspire your travels. The sea is a marvel. Did you ever think about Picasso when starting to use the octopode's image or any thoughts you might want to add to our world and our relationship to nature?***

JOAN: I never thought of Picasso in relation to the octopus until I saw his show in London and they had these films of octopus in the show. So, I never associated Picasso with octopus. I became enamored with the octopus partly because of these films, but then when I began to work on the oceans, going to the aquariums and seeing the octopus, I read a book called *The Soul of an Octopus*. It describes this one woman's involvement with these creatures and they're such amazing creatures. So, that's why I got involved with the octopus. Going back to the rest of your question, I think it's horrifying what's going on in the world today. It's very sad when I'm doing this oceans piece; every other day I read something tragic about something that's happened with the dolphins or fish losing their sense of smell. There's a lot of things going on, but I don't focus on those sad things in my work. I focus on the miraculous; how creatures are made and how bees can make honey. How did that happen and how can they make these hives shaped like that in those shapes? I don't say that in the piece. I think that children should learn about these things before they go away. We should know about them and know how close we are to all these creatures. We're made of the same materials. That's what my research leads me to think about and learn about and I've gotten really fascinated by going to aquariums. A lot of people don't like it, but it's the only way you can see them.

Joan Jonas, *what is found in the windowless house is true*, installation view, Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York, 2017