

Joan Jonas on *Joan Jonas: Light Time Tales* at Pirelli HangarBicocca and Malmö Konsthall interviewed by Barbara Clausen, July 27, 2020

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- Barbara Clausen: Okay, we're starting. Hello, this is the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. We're interviewing Joan Jonas today, discussing her exhibition *Light Time Tales* at the Pirelli HangarBicocca in 2014, 2015, which then traveled to the Malmö Konsthall in 2015. Thank you very much, Joan, for taking the time to discuss this exhibition with us today. So we'll start out by the simple question, how did this exhibition come together? Who invited you, and how did it all start?
- Joan Jonas: I was invited by Vicente Todolí, who is the director of HangarBicocca. And I had known him for many years before that, and had been in a show that he did in Serralves. He had me make some *My New Theaters*, big ones, to project some of the video works in that show. And so he invited me to be in the show. At the time, Andrea Lissoni was the curator of HangarBicocca.
- Joan Jonas: I can't remember the sequence exactly, but I met Andrea right after that in Italy, I remember. We took a train together, and immediately began talking. And so that's how it began. And Vicente really wasn't involved at all in the curating. His own main stipulation was that there not be any walls filled in the space, and that the space be left open. Which was a completely new situation for me, and proved in the long run to be very interesting and productive as a way of showing my work. And there was just one room in the space that we left up, at the end of the space, as you came in. There was one enclosed room.
- Barbara Clausen: So to give our listeners an idea, the Pirelli HangarBicocca is a former airplane hangar. So we're talking about a very big, vast, very high space. Is that correct?
- Joan Jonas: That's right. It's actually literally an airplane hangar. And I had seen it a few years earlier. Now I can't remember the name of the curator. She's now in Venice. Was the curator of HangarBicocca. And I went to see a show there. And she wanted me to do a show, and then she left HangarBicocca, and went to a space in Venice. And so I remembered that first show I saw. So I had an idea about what it was like. It was cavernous and dark,

completely black, the floor and the walls, and no light but artificial light. And so I had an idea of the space.

Barbara Clausen: And just to give our listeners a better idea, this was about two years before the opening of the show. So we're talking 2012, 2013. Because I imagine it takes some time to prepare a show such as a retrospective, right?

Joan Jonas: Absolutely.

Barbara Clausen: Of such space.

Joan Jonas: Yeah. Well, this was a big show. And it was different because the space was different. I'd had other survey shows, one in Barcelona and Stuttgart, big survey shows. But I'd never had one in a space like this. And there were some newer pieces that were not in the other shows. So the other curators, and people that I worked with at HangarBicocca, Fiammetta-

Barbara Clausen: Griccioli.

Joan Jonas: Yeah. And Matteo. Fiammetta and Matteo. Matteo was the main installer, and in charge of all the technology. He was very good. Fiammetta was great.

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, Matteo De Vittor.

Joan Jonas: And during the time that I was getting ready for the show, they put together a small brochure or catalog, which had an extensive little piece about each of the works that was in the show for the audience to take home and read. So there's quite a bit of information that went with the installation.

Barbara Clausen: And for our listeners also, that brochure is available on the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. You can download it and look at that. So people basically walked through the show with this little brochure in hand because I imagine, without there being walls, there were also not really wall labels. So people could really-

Joan Jonas: Well, there were labels, but you couldn't really find them so easily. They weren't right in front of it. But also... Where was I?

Barbara Clausen: Yeah, maybe we can speak about, so you were asked to do the show, you saw the space, and then obviously you flew back to New York to your studio. And then you were in probably avid conversation with them. How did you start working on the show in your studio? How did you-

Joan Jonas: Well, first of all, we chose which works that were going to be in the show. Many of the works were in past shows. There was one show at the Queens Museum, I forgot to mention, that was a big survey show. And so we chose many works from those shows, as well as a few new works, which I'll talk about in a minute.

Barbara Clausen: You once said you had a model...

Joan Jonas: Yeah. So the first thing I did after we decided which ones were going to be in the show, we made a huge model that was bigger than a four by eight foot table because the space was so big. And I always make models for my big shows, for my survey shows, even my smaller installations. And they're very carefully planned out before moving in, or before even deciding what to do in the space. And so I worked on that model, it must have been for over a year. And I worked with my team in New York.

Joan Jonas: But really, they had never seen the space so I had to [do that] pretty much on my own. But they helped me build the model and the concept of the show. There were several things about the space that, for instance, there was no climate control. So whereas I would like to have the very early *Organic Honey* work, we couldn't have that because the Stedelijk wouldn't lend it because of the fragility of it. We couldn't have any unframed paper works or anything because of the atmosphere.

Joan Jonas: But, one of the ideas that Andrea brought to the installation was his interest in a couple of works that I wouldn't have focused on. One of them was a piece called *Waltz*, a seven minute piece...I can't remember. It was 2003, I think. And it's a piece I made up in Canada, and my dog is really the star. It's very much a kind of fantasy piece. And he liked it very much. So it was interesting because in my work, because he chose it to be in the show, [it] became kind of a focal point. At least for me, it altered the ideas and the content of it. It became more fantastical and mythological.

Joan Jonas: And then I was asked to do a new piece just for the show. And so I made it work with my GoPro camera called *Beautiful Dog*, which was about my dog. *Waltz* has my dog Sappho. Oh no, not Sappho.

Barbara Clausen: Zina.

Joan Jonas: Zina, who has a starring role. And *Beautiful Dog* has my dog Ozu. And I made it with a GoPro camera. It's just another example of experimenting with media. And just to briefly begin talking

about the order of works, the first part of the exhibit, you walked into an L-shaped room. The bottom part of the L was what you walked into, smaller, and then you walked to the right, and you walked into a big, huge, not a corridor, but a rectangle, huge, that led back to the room with walls in the back. And so that was the space I was dealing with.

Joan Jonas:

And as you walked in, these newer pieces, there was a piece called *After Mirage*, which is a circle of cones, which is a piece I had worked on in the 70s, but I'd just begun showing it again. And it's a circle of paper cones with a TV on its side, with the video *May Windows*. So that was sort of the piece you walked into. And then to your left was a projection of *Beautiful Dog*. It was shot in Nova Scotia. And *Waltz*. On another adjacent wall was *Waltz*. So that was kind of the atmosphere you walked into.

Joan Jonas:

And also in that space, the L-shaped space, was a piece I had made in Japan using curved shoji screens called *Double Lunar Rabbit*. And so that was a group of works you saw first when you walked in. *Double Lunar Rabbit*, I'd made it much more recently in Japan, 2014 or '15. I can't remember. And it was about the myth of the rabbit and the moon that comes from the Japanese tradition. And I worked with the dancer who played the rabbit. Anyway, and then from there, you went into the longer room with the bigger installations. I worked together with Andrea on that, and that was his way of beginning the show. And then the rest of it, I'd totally planned out. And I had to make adjustments, of course, when we got to the space.

Barbara Clausen:

Right. I mean, we're talking to a total of about 20 works, if we look at the exhibition brochure. So that was quite a lot of very big installations as well.

Joan Jonas:

Well no, but 20 works includes all the single channel works that were on monitors, and includes two or three *My New Theaters*. So the big works, the huge works were, I just mentioned the first part, *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*, one part of *Reading Dante, Mirage, Lines in the Sand, Revolted by the [thought of] known places...*, *Volcano Saga*, and *Reanimation* in the back room. And then there were, I don't know how many single channel works on monitors and *My New Theaters* scattered throughout the space in the empty spaces in between the big works.

Barbara Clausen:

Also *Lines in the Sand* was presented.

Joan Jonas:

Yes. I mentioned that. Yeah.

- Barbara Clausen: You mentioned that. And that's interesting also because *Lines in the Sand* is such a piece that I always felt that needed more of an enclosed space. So some of the pieces maybe could kind of spill out into the space, and others maybe were centered around, for example, in *Lines in the Sand*, the green wooden couch.
- Joan Jonas: Well can I say something about that?
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, please do. I want to know more about that.
- Joan Jonas: *Lines in the Sand* was designed to be seen frontally on a platform in front of a projected screen. And it was shown exactly like that. So it didn't spill out in the space at all. It was just...there were no walls around it. So the main difference in a piece like that would be your perception of the sound. The sound turned out to be fine, but that was my main fear, that the sound wouldn't work. However, it did work, finally in the end. But for a piece like *Lines in the sand* where you had to play it loud enough so you could hear all the subtleties, we worked quite a bit on the soundtrack with all these different sounds. Certain things like that were lost a little bit, but it really didn't interfere in the all-over picture.
- Barbara Clausen: And I think there was also space between the installations, correct? There was space to move?
- Joan Jonas: I'll just say, I think if I look at the plan and just walk through the space, and I can speak about each piece in that way that you're asking me to. There was a projection to the right of *Song Delay* with a video monitor with *Paul Revere* that Richard Serra and I did together, which was also...had never been included before. Andrea wanted to include that, which was great. And then a projection of *Song Delay*.
- Joan Jonas: Then the one piece that did kind of exist a little spread out...but nothing was that much bigger than it would have been in another space, except for *Mirage* maybe...but *The Shape*, *The Scent*, *The Feel of Things*, I needed a place to put a large drawing of [a] snake, a big, huge drawing, and then big projections. So what happened in the show is that the screens served as both dividers, in a transparent way, because they were back projected, or they had a projection..so they weren't like walls, but they acted as dividers.
- Joan Jonas: And then we put up a wall with the snake drawing on one side and a projection on the other. So there were architectural elements. The screens became architectural elements, I would say, in the piece. But then you walk through...it was all about

also walking through the pieces. So *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things* existed kind of at an angle in the middle of the space, as you walk in the long, bigger part. And you walk through it and in it, which you would anyway, but you walk around it. In other words, if it was in a room, you wouldn't walk around these screens. So you got a very different experience.

Joan Jonas: And then there was a freestanding screen from *Reading Dante*. Chalk drawing street scene...just one element of that. And then *Mirage*, which also, I would say, now it's showing at MoMA. I think in this space, it had a slightly bigger feeling. But it was almost, I'd say, exactly the same, except the screens were freestanding. And the big screen with the volcano footage projected on it for *Mirage*, you could see as you walked in the room on the other side of *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*. And so things like that happened, which really worked, because there was a relationship in content between all the works. There's a relationship.

Joan Jonas: And what I did was also very carefully, the arrangement of the pieces has to do with...*Mirage* has very abstract sounds. It has a little bit of talking from documentary footage, but basically abstractions. *The Shape*... has quite a bit of text and dialogue. And *Lines in the Sand* has text and dialogue. But they're separated by *Mirage*. So they don't interfere with each other. And so then you walk by *Lines*... and you see, there are also drawings on panels, another kind of separation, big drawings that belong to *Lines in the Sand*. But we couldn't put things right up against the walls because there was a black curtain dividing the HangarBicocca space. On the other side of the black curtain is Anselm Kiefer's huge installation, which is not in sight, it's off. It has no sound.

Joan Jonas: So anyway, so we had to either use screens or panels for the drawings. And then we go to *Revolted by the thought of known places*. The Stedelijk also owns that. And whenever any of the pieces that they own are in a show, they send their curators to install it. They're very nice people. I knew them because I've been there so much. We rearranged it for that. I'd say that piece was much more radically rearranged than any other piece. But not changed at all. All the same video projections and monitors and props. There were props also. Props and objects scattered in these works throughout the space.

Joan Jonas: Then after that was *Volcano Saga*, also freestanding in the middle. And then all along were, there's a *My New Theater* at the end of the room. And then *Reanimation* is in a room, which was lucky because the sound of the *Reanimation* would've

interfered. There would have been too many pieces with very elaborate soundtracks. *The Shape, The Scent...* has Jason Moran's piano playing. *Reanimation* has some of his sounds, and other sounds, and so on.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. We've done a few interviews with scholars and curators and people who saw the show. And they felt also that there was a really very specific moment of constantly being surprised. But at the same time, you were also guided by the sound. And for example, the composer of the music of Jason Moran that would, again, reappear in *Reanimation*. So I imagine the work on the sound was very detailed and very elaborate.

Joan Jonas:

Well, what we did was, I mean, of course I had to just make the sound as good as possible. And I have to give Matteo credit. The sound is always the last thing that you tweak. And so we worked on it. I really enjoy installing the show because it was also a good exercise to walk from one end of the room to the other. It's a very long walk. But I really enjoyed...the team was just the best. And it was the same team that I then got to work on my show for the American Pavilion, a team from Torino plus Matteo.

Joan Jonas:

Anyway, so it was a totally enjoyable experience. And we got the sound to a certain point. It was still bleeding quite a bit. But after we all went home, the night before the opening, Matteo went around and tweaked the sound. And I came in the next day, and it really worked. Because the trick was to play the sound low in all the pieces, but loud enough for people to hear, of course. So it couldn't be very loud, but also you would hear it faintly. So yes, it would lead you to another piece. But also it led you from one work to another. You could see the next piece as you were walking through. So you could always see all the others in the distance, or next to you. So it was a kind of a flow. The piece created a flow, which other works didn't have when there were walls. So that was interesting.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah. Yeah. I think that also really leads us to, I mean, you've talked about how you've slightly were able to adapt some of the pieces in the sense of spacing, but even not so much. Do you feel there was something that in hindsight, where you felt if you could go back and add a piece, or if you could have taken out or changed something about it, was there ever something that you felt like you would've maybe in hindsight made differently?

Joan Jonas:

No.

Barbara Clausen:

No? Okay.

- Joan Jonas: No. I worked really hard, and for a long time, on figuring this much out. And it worked as well as I thought it could have worked.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah. I feel that, for example, the work you're working on right now, [*Moving*] *Off the Land*, is a piece that I could so well imagine... I'm saying this because I can so well imagine other of your works that you've done since then [that] subsequently would make sense to also have in that space. There's something of an openness to it.
- Joan Jonas: Of course, but there would be no room for anything else. So that's the thing. I mean, it would have to be a completely different show. But *Moving Off the Land* might be something.
- Barbara Clausen: I mean, you said before that you've never had a situation like that before and after. And when the exhibition traveled to Malmö, which is also a large open space, but a very different type of space, what changed? What did you have to adapt and change?
- Joan Jonas: Well, it just looked very different. The floor at Malmö made a huge difference. It was a beautiful light wood floor. Wood from the North on the floor. And it just looked different. I can't describe it. And we just had to slightly change the positions of the different pieces. I don't remember, frankly, because I don't have the plan of Malmö. So Malmö, Andrea came with me. And I think we planned it beforehand for sure, but I didn't make a model for Malmö. So I don't have it before me to see what we did.
- Joan Jonas: I think we changed the position of certain things for sure. Because it was different. It also a big rectangle. But I think we also left out some things. It wasn't as big. But I don't remember. But it was a very beautiful space, Malmö. Barbara.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes. And sorry. And *Reanimation* also had its own room in Malmö.
- Joan Jonas: I guess it did. Yeah. Did you see that show?
- Barbara Clausen: Yes, I did see it. I was able to see that show.
- Joan Jonas: Then you probably remember it better than me.
- Barbara Clausen: I think it was very similar to the setup of the newer works, and this kind of walking through the show. And the sound was also

very finely tuned. Diana Baldon, who's the curator there, showed me around the show at that time in 2015. And *Reanimation* was also in a separate space behind. But in general...

Joan Jonas: That's right.

Barbara Clausen: ... apparently had a similar feel to it.

Joan Jonas: Yes. I remember.

Barbara Clausen: Interesting. I was wondering how did this show, this experience, and obviously having an open, vast space is not something an artist is gifted with all the time, but still, how did this show influence other shows afterwards? Or how did it influence your thinking around space and installation? Did it?

Joan Jonas: I don't know if it changed my thinking because each time I do a show, I make a model, and I totally adjust. The next show I did after that was the show in Venice at the American Pavilion. But, I would say one big help was that I decided to work with the same crew in Venice that I'd worked with in Milan who are incredible. And so some of those people I'm still working with, sometimes, who I'd met there. And so they worked with me in Venice. I knew they would do a perfect job. Venice is very difficult to work in. Everything has to come by boat, and so on. There's always a lot of problems. But there was no problems. They're Italian, and they could do it. So Venice, as you know, it was a building with...

Barbara Clausen: It was the opposite.

Joan Jonas: ... five rooms. Walls, and very kind of classical and a little claustrophobic. But it was interesting to try to solve... That was another problem. Completely different.

Barbara Clausen: Yes. Yes. Maybe we can speak a bit about programming. For all our viewers, when you go on the Pirelli HangarBicocca website, you see that they really invest a lot in different types of programming, and younger artists, local, international artists. But also I think they made also a huge effort to perform *Reanimation*. Can you speak about that? Because I think you-

Joan Jonas: We performed *Reanimation* in that front part, where the cones were in the first part of it. When I say you walk in and you see *After Mirage*, the cones, and the dog videos. And so that was easy to clear that out. We set up the stage. That is a very big space, and we set up the stage there. I think 600 people came to

see that performance. And so Jason and I did that performance. They built a stage for it. And we did it once.

Joan Jonas: And yeah, I think I realized, of course, that sound is so important in a space like that, which is huge. And the people in the back can't see very well, but they can hear the sound. So Jason, of course, played live at that performance. It was the performance of *Reanimation* which we'd done before several times in different places. And that was the only thing that I did in relation to the programming. I, of course, because I don't live in Milan, so I wasn't there for the duration of the show. So I didn't see all the programming they did. But yes, they keep the space alive throughout all the shows by programming other works of younger artists.

Barbara Clausen: It's also an interesting instance because, correct me, but it's one of the few instances where you actually also perform in the same space as you exhibit, which normally is something you do not do. Is that right?

Joan Jonas: I do not do. But I mean, I'll just say, what I say is I do not perform in my installations.

Barbara Clausen: Exactly.

Joan Jonas: So this was a situation in which they could clear part of the space and take out the cone piece, which was simple to move. They could take it out, and then it became an empty space where the only things there were videos on the walls. So that became a big empty space. So I performed, but I wasn't performing in the installation. I was performing in part of the space that had been cleared. It's such an enormous space you could do that, which is unusual.

Barbara Clausen: And yeah, I think that's an important point. Also in regard to the publication, I know that at the same time as this show was presented, this exhibition was presented, a big monograph edited by you and Joan Simon came out. And it accompanied this exhibition.

Joan Jonas: No, it doesn't.

Barbara Clausen: It doesn't?

Joan Jonas: No, it came out late in the installation in Venice in the US Pavilion in the Biennale. It came out during that.

- Barbara Clausen: Okay. Because I-
- Joan Jonas: Yeah. But it was co-published by HangarBicocca, but it wasn't ready. And then when it came out, they wanted to include photographs of the show in the book. And there are photographs, of course, of the HangarBicocca show in the book. And that was one of the reasons that it couldn't come out earlier.
- Barbara Clausen: Yeah. I think it came out at the end of Malmö. Because I got my copy-
- Joan Jonas: No, it didn't. It didn't come out until-
- Barbara Clausen: Really?
- Joan Jonas: Because it has photographs of the Venice piece as well.
- Barbara Clausen: Oh yeah. Interesting.
- Joan Jonas: Joan Simon didn't want it to come out before Venice. She wanted to include Venice. So it got delayed quite a bit, and came out after Venice.
- Barbara Clausen: Later. But it documents the exhibition. And maybe that brings us to one of the final questions, is that...do you ever have guidelines, or do you ever think about documenting your exhibitions? Did you have instructions for...
- Joan Jonas: Of course. I mean, often I video my own exhibitions. But I just have to trust, lately. I used to kind of have a little more control or attention, but there's just so much you can do. So I trust, now of course, the institutions to get a good camera person and photograph the work extensively. Better than I could. And also I would like people to walk through with a video camera, but they don't often do that. I did a GoPro for a walk through of the installation, not the final show of the process. When we were halfway through, I walked through with my GoPro. And that is somewhere online. I don't know where I saw it. But yeah, I think it would be good to have video. But sometimes I just don't have time, and I don't get around to it.
- Barbara Clausen: Yes. We'll come to a close now. But is there anything you still want to add, or anything else you want to say about-
- Joan Jonas: Well let me just see if we've covered all your questions?

- Barbara Clausen: I think we've covered pretty much all. I think let's go get the advice for curators in the future. Is there anything you wanted to...
- Joan Jonas: Advice for curators in the future. Really study the way I put these together in the past. I think that's the best thing.
- Barbara Clausen: It is. It is.
- Joan Jonas: Because for instance, for the Stedelijk show, I spent, with Dorine Mignot, a month setting up the *Organic Honey* piece and the *Sweeney* piece. It was extensively documented by their restoration team. And so when they install that, there's very specific directions and plans for how it should be done.
- Barbara Clausen: And those-
- Joan Jonas: So I would say that-
- Barbara Clausen: And those are also on the Joan Jonas Knowledge Base. The Stedelijk, very generously, just as MoMA and Milan, have shared all this material. So people can really find that on the Knowledge Base.
- Joan Jonas: I mean, at some point a piece just reaches a point where it's not going to be changed anymore. So the installation at MoMA now of *Mirage*, it's exactly the way it should be. And it's contained in a room. It could be set up like that in a place like Hangar with no walls, but the configuration would be exactly the same.
- Barbara Clausen: Right. Well, is there anything you want to add, or...
- Joan Jonas: I don't know. I don't think so.
- Barbara Clausen: Okay. Well thank you very much for-
- Joan Jonas: Oh, I would just add one more thing.
- Barbara Clausen: ... taking time. Yes, please.
- Joan Jonas: And just mentioned it briefly.
- Barbara Clausen: Do.
- Joan Jonas: The perception of my work for the audience was altered in the HangarBicocca because it was the first time they'd ever been able to see works in the distance to be able to see projections in

another piece next to the piece that they were standing in, so that you could see the relationship of the works to each other. And so it was a different kind of experience than walking in one room and one piece is just contained, and then you walk into the next room and then you see that piece. But you don't see these pieces layered. And I think that's a very different way of experiencing my work, and I like it very much, but probably never again will it be like that.

Barbara Clausen:

Yeah, I think that's really a great way to finalize why this exhibition was so important.

Joan Jonas:

Okay. Thank you, Barbara.

Barbara Clausen:

Thank you.