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## Joan Jonas Readies Her Exhibit at Venice Biennale

Multimedia artist Joan Jonas, who will represent the U.S. at this year's Venice Biennale, is preparing her exhibit

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Joan Jonas 'Reanimation' (2014). Performance, HangarBicocca, Milan. PHOTO: JOAN JONAS

In an art world infatuated with the young and marketable, Joan Jonas is neither. At age 78, she is not yet a top-selling artist, and her multimedia work is challenging to collect and show. Yet the State Department [has chosen Ms. Jonas](#) to represent the U.S. at this year's Venice Biennale—easily one of the highest honors for a living artist.

“It’s hard to conceive” of her new status as a sort of U.S. ambassador, said Ms. Jonas in an interview in her SoHo loft days before her departure for Venice, where the Biennale opens May 9. During the interview, she quieted her spirited white poodle, Ozu, with the occasional treat. “I can’t say that I represent all aspects of America. Who does? It’s an odd thing.”

Her election to the pavilion represents a victory for mature artists making complex, even unclassifiable, work. She has broken ground for decades. Some of Ms. Jonas's first videos and performances in the early 1970s incorporated movement (usually her own), video feeds both live and taped (a radical gesture at the time) as well as drawing, masks and assorted totems that would reappear in later works. [Her 1972 piece](#) "Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy"—in which she used mirrors and video feeds to play on our perception of space—evoked a multisensory experience well before such events became commonplace.

"What's really current about Joan's work is her multimedia aspect," said Paul Ha, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's List Visual Arts Center, which submitted Ms. Jonas's name to a State Department panel. "When you think about how we consume visual content... it's not about looking at one screen. It's about being consumed and surrounded."

Representing the U.S. at the Biennale in 2013 was [installation artist Sarah Sze](#), who constructs massive yet intricate structures from everyday objects. Earlier winners have included Ed Ruscha and Robert Gober.

In recent years, museum programming has focused more on performance events. In conversation, Ms. Jonas will remind you that such events have been around since at least the Renaissance and were integral to major 20th-century movements like Dada, which arose as a reaction to the atrocities of World War I. "Performance emerges when there is chaos or uncertainty in the world," Ms. Jonas said. "And now of course the world is in total chaos. It gives people a chance to speak spontaneously to an audience. And with the addition of social media—[Twitter](#), [Facebook](#)—people perform all the time" by maintaining their public images.

Though trained as a painter and sculptor, Ms. Jonas was captivated by what she saw at the happenings and experimental dance events she attended in downtown New York in the late 1960s. In recent years, Ms. Jonas favors creating immersive environments using video, drawing, filmed footage and sound.

"She's interested in elements of storytelling, but she's not interested in conventional dramatic structure," said Henriette Huldish, the MIT List Visual Arts Center curator who organized a primer surveying Ms. Jonas's video and performance from 1972 to 2005 that opened on April 7 in Boston. "They're more abstract and dreamlike."

In Venice, Ms. Jonas plans to immerse visitors to the neoclassical American pavilion in a single narrative that spans the pavilion's five rooms. Ms. Jonas will rework footage from an earlier piece, "Reanimation," a work she performed first in 2010. It takes inspiration from "Under the Glacier," an Icelandic novel by Nobelist Halldór Laxness about a church emissary sent to investigate claims of supernatural activities. The Venice piece will incorporate background footage from Cape Breton Island in eastern Canada, where Ms. Jonas summers, and will take ghost stories as one of its themes. The artist says we can also expect a major drawing installation, footage of her late dog Zina as well as a brief appearance by Ozu himself.

Yet those familiar with Ms. Jonas's improvisational methods know that changes may happen up until deadline and that the final piece is always in flux. "We are supposed to be ready on May 6," Mr. Ha said, citing the date of the fair's preview. "I know she will be tweaking until May 6 at 10 a.m."

Such agility has helped Ms. Jonas weather fluctuating interest in her output over the years. Though major institutions such as New York's Museum of Modern Art own significant works (the museum acquired its first Jonas in 1975), Ms. Jonas has remained, as she herself puts it, "an artist's artist."

Market validation has come slowly, and though Ms. Jonas sells prints and drawings, her major works resist the easy pull that painting and sculpture can have on collector dollars—especially the kinds of transactions that happen at the international art fairs, which Ms. Jonas avoids when possible. "I go if I'm invited," she said of the fairs. "But sometimes I find it really depressing. It's not nice to be an artist in that situation."

"She has been for 40 years making this kind of work," Mr. Ha said. "The art audience and the museums have finally caught up."