

# ARTFORUM

September 2015

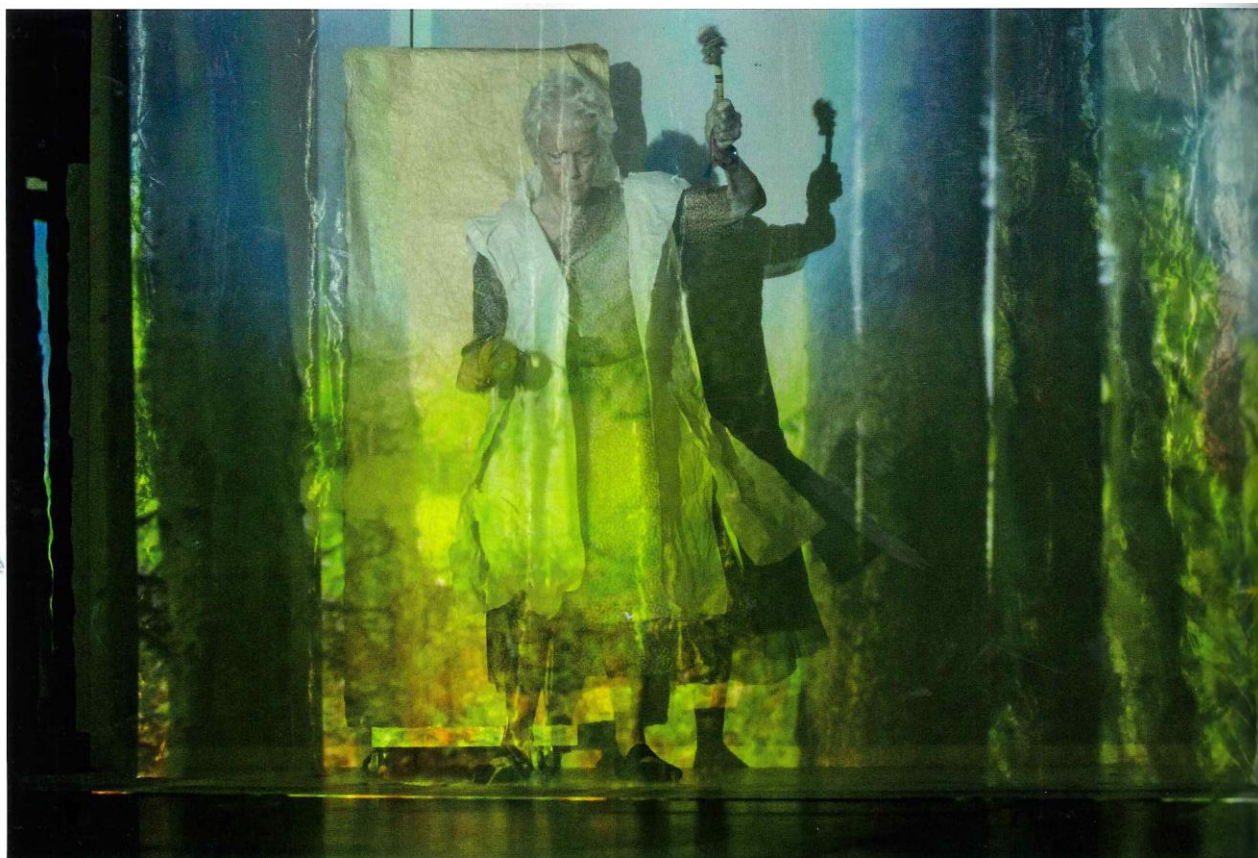
VENICE 2015

## Destination Unknown

GETTING LOST IN VENICE, they say, is half the fun—and it's precisely the appeal of the Venice Biennale, which, at its best, upends our established coordinates and unmoors our points of reference. For this issue, *Artforum* asked four distinguished contributors to cut a path through the fifty-sixth edition of the international survey of contemporary art: BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH and JESSICA MORGAN assess the main exhibition, Okwui Enwezor's "All the World's Futures," while CLAIRE BISHOP takes stock of artist Danh Vo's curatorial turns at the Danish pavilion and Punta della Dogana, and ANN REYNOLDS focuses on Joan Jonas's performances at the US pavilion.

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Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word II*, 2015. Performance view, Teatro Piccolo Arsenale, Venice, July 21, 2015. Music by Jason Moran. Joan Jonas. Photo: Moira Ricci.

VENICE 2015

# Without Words

ANN REYNOLDS ON JOAN JONAS'S PERFORMANCES FOR THE US PAVILION

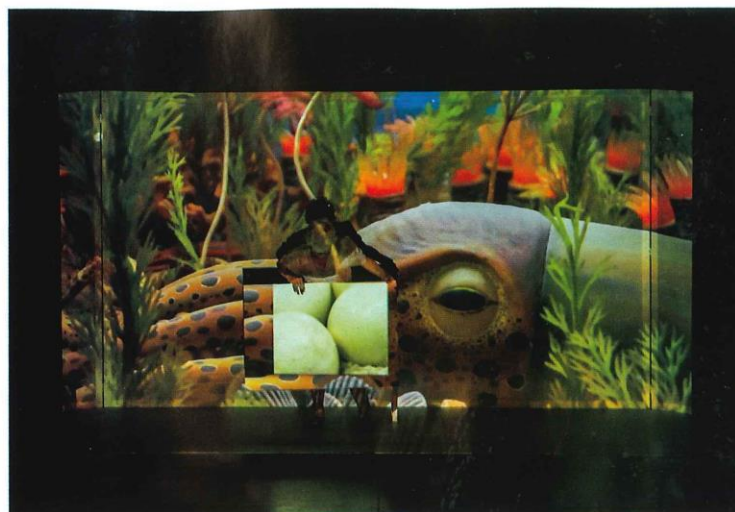


**SILENCE IS NOT A TERM** one readily associates with Joan Jonas's work. Think of the jarring sound track of *Vertical Roll*, 1972—probably Jonas's best-known single-channel video—characterized by the metallic clang of a spoon relentlessly banging on a mirror, then the sharp clack of two wooden blocks repeatedly hitting each other, the latter device echoed in *Delay Delay*, 1972, and *Songdelay*, 1973. Or the intensifying clatter of a large metal hoop as it rotates faster and faster down to its resting place on the ground in *The Shape, The Scent, The Feel of Things*, 2005/2006. Or Jonas shrieking like a maenad in *Lines in the Sand*, 2002/2005, and howling like a dog in *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, 1972, and *Waltz*, 2003. Or the sustained, piercing blast of a mountain horn that the artist blows in *Reanimation*, 2010/2012—all examples of the artist's consistent use of dramatic sound.

But the titles of Jonas's installation in the US pavilion, *They Come to Us Without a Word*, and of her related performance, *They Come to Us Without a Word II*, which premiered at the Teatro Piccolo Arsenale on July 20 and ran for two additional evenings there, evoke an equally important aspect of Jonas's use of sound—its absence. Indeed, *They Come to Us Without a Word II* began with a sustained silence. Several of the performers noiselessly entered or crossed behind a large screen in the center of the stage, casting their shadows on it as they passed. Jonas then sat at a small table, stage left, and placed a sequence of postcards of drawn, sculpted, or frescoed images of a Hiberno-Saxon ox, an Egyptian cat mummy, and a human figure in a Renaissance fresco under a live video camera. These images were projected, one by one, onto the large central screen, followed by a fade to a recorded video projection of three figures wearing masks and standing behind a translucent indigo-blue cloth suspended from a pole between two trees in a wooded grove. Gradually, as the volume increased, one began to perceive a low, rhythmic electronic bass sound; then attenuated chords played on an accordion by Jason Moran, the composer of the music for the performance; and, finally, two recorded voices, one feminine (Jonas) and one masculine (Jan Kroeze)—the first naming a type of bird or other animal, the other identifying a location: "Rook . . . high in the birch," "Lapland bunting . . . on the ground," "Wryneck . . . on the branch," "Honey buzzard . . . on the stump," "White stork . . . by a nest," "European hare . . . lying among the tussock." During this recitation, Jonas, still seated at the table, positioned a small taxidermied bird on a branch under the live cam so that it cast a shadow, which she traced in black Magic Marker on paper. The image appeared superimposed on the video projection.

The spoken text was nondiegetic and did not directly relate to any of the projected images. It was drawn from an inventory of taxidermied animals in the late-nineteenth-century dioramas housed in the Biological Museum in Stockholm. Through the juxtaposition of this text and the projected images of animals, Jonas denoted two systems of visual display. Each depends on a type of capture—fixing, containing, stilling—and creates a proper distance so that nature can be observed and accounted for in a picture or an object, in a clinical inventory, or through a framed pane of glass in a museum vitrine.

The image of the masked figures behind the blue scrim, however, proposed a different relationship between viewer and nature—a relationship expatiated by the voice-over and intensifying upsurge of the accordion in the following scene: "It was a beautiful afternoon. Just like a choir, the voices came in. The wind opened the front door. Signs of spirits. You don't see anything where there's electricity." On the sound track accompanying one of the large video projections in the pavilion, the narration continues: "Once the power went in . . . they never heard anything more." These phrases evoke a world in which "power" does not lead to the amplification of sensation but to its absence. All this may seem counterintuitive now, in an age defined by electrical illumination and the explosion of electronically generated imagery and recorded sound. But it also reminds us how



Above: Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word II*, 2015. Performance view, Teatro Piccolo Arsenale, Venice, July 22, 2015. Music by Jason Moran. Joan Jonas. Photo: Moira Ricci. Below: Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word (Mirrors)*, 2015, mirrors, wood, lead crystals, iron, HD video projection (color, sound, 2 minutes 11 seconds). Installation view, US pavilion, Venice. Photo: Kate Lacey.

Jonas's work evokes a world in which "power" does not lead to the amplification of sensation but to its absence.







Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word II*, 2015. Performance view, Teatro Piccolo Arsenale, Venice, July 21, 2015. Music by Jason Moran. From left: Noah Delorme, Malcolm Moran, Lila Gavagan, and Jonas Moran. Photo: Molira Ricci.

difficult it suddenly became to see, or even to hear, in the dark, or to discover nuance or unseen or silent forces and relationships once electric light and sound flooded the world with continuous visual and acoustic stimulation. Our eyes and our ears, unlike those of our ancestors, are lazy. They are accustomed to electricity's leveling effect—everything is illuminated—and, at the same time, to its production of a cult of distraction, as Siegfried Kracauer called it, which directs our focus in certain ways and disperses it in others. So Jonas must encourage us to see and hear the world and the natural environment more fully in a time of electricity, as we did in a time without it. She does so by engaging electricity's progeny, the ghosts and palimpsests of electronically generated images and sound, to undermine the certainty of what we see and hear.

In the video projections in the performance and in the installation, Jonas rarely used synced sound. Sometimes we saw individuals speaking or dogs barking, but we heard other recorded or live sounds—music or portions of sound tracks from earlier videos—or different voices reciting the same lines of text or a live performer executing the same actions as the figures in the videos, or, sometimes, no sound at all. This is a common practice for the artist, one that suggests a range of acoustic effects, from silent film to audio sampling. The sound of Jonas humming that accompanies images of her wearing a mask and interacting with mirrors in the woods in the first room of the pavilion (which some viewers might recognize from the sound track to *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*) suggests a double haunting: of unseen, menacing presences, like those in a horror film, and of memories from the artist's previous work. Since we cannot rely on a conventional relationship between sound and image, our associations become charged, open to question, and more reliant on the subjective context each of us brings to the viewing.

This uncanny experience was redoubled as individual performers, in both the performance and the pavilion videos, held up sheets of paper cut into various shapes and sizes to capture and frame projected images of sea creatures or to isolate details of bees, sea horses, dogs, and objects (miniature wooden houses,

Jonas encourages us to see and hear the world and the natural environment more fully in a time of electricity, as we did in a time without it.

etc.), within the recorded projections behind them, disturbing the integrity of the images and bringing fragments of them closer to and into focus for the viewer. (Jonas has used this technique, too, many times before in her work.) The animal and the human began to merge. In one of the pavilion's projections, a seated group of children watches images of bees dancing in a hive, relaying information about the location of pollen to other bees. The children then collectively imitate these dances amid layered video projections of the bees. Because the children are dressed in white, their bodies become screens for the projected images; at moments they seem to disappear into the projections. Some of the same children repeated this dance in the performance, interspersed with many of the same video images of bees and their honeycombed hives. In both instances, this loose physical and visual mimicry—the children's deliberate movements and their fleeting visual transformation into part of the surface of the projected images—proposed immersion as a path to a shared language: communication without words.

The biggest risk Jonas took in developing *They Come to Us Without a Word* was her decision to use children as her primary performers. She made the videos for the installation in New York, working with six children of friends. During the shooting, she offered minimal instruction: simple tasks, which she would briefly describe and occasionally demonstrate. It was constantly surprising to see how agile and comfortable she looked performing, while the children initially struggled—they were self-conscious, and their movements were stiff and repetitive. Slowly, the children began to relax and come into their own, trying out new things, bringing their fantasies about the images surrounding them and the gestures they were asked to make into play through personal, idiosyncratic movements and direct appeals to the audience. Although we rarely hear the children speak in the installation video projections, and they never spoke during the performance,

Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word (Bees)* (detail), 2015, wood, steel wire, paper, bench, ink-jet prints, china-marker wall text, vitrine, two-channel HD video projection (color, sound, 4 minutes 58 seconds and 6 minutes 15 seconds).





they adapted the performance to their own sensibilities and proclivities so that the piece changed, however subtly, every night, constantly producing and maintaining a habitat, an ecosystem of loosely interdependent collaborations.

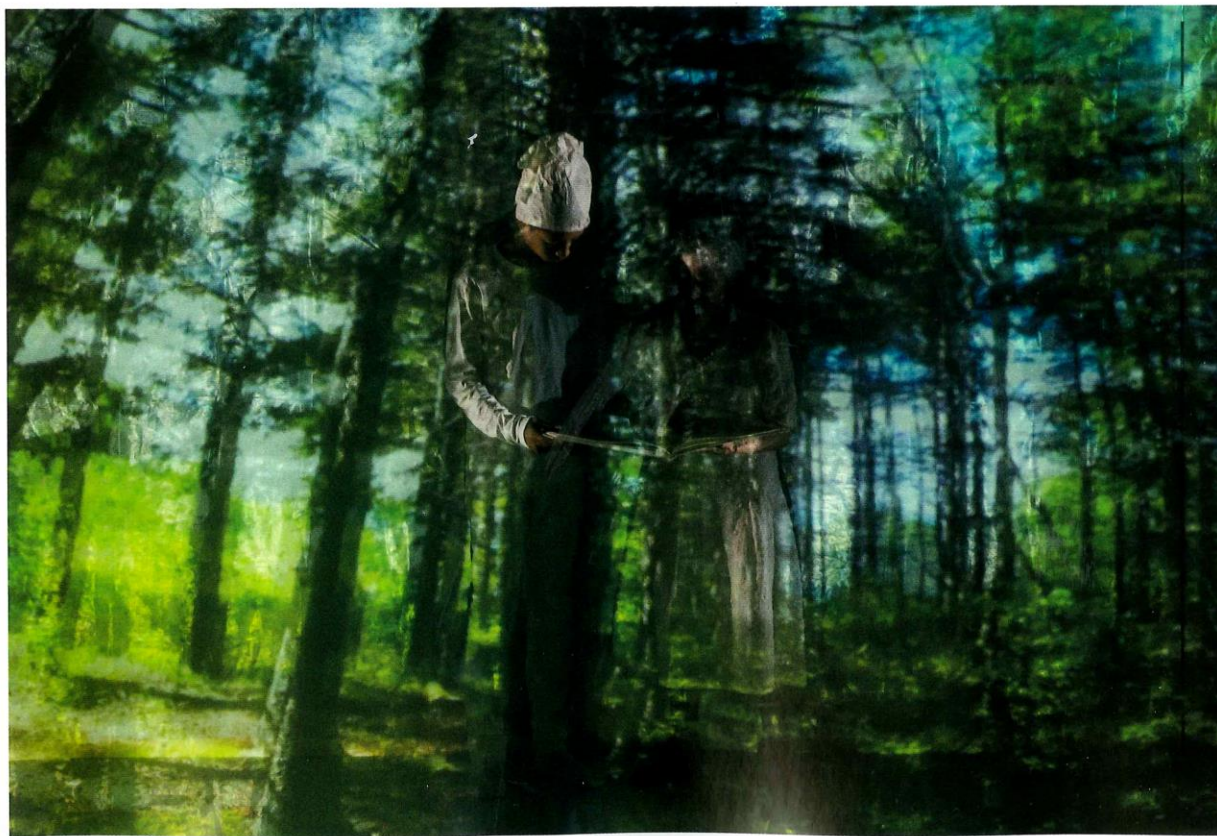
**IN THE BOOK** *Why Look at Animals?*, an important source for Jonas's installation and performance, John Berger claims that it is an animal's lack of a common language with humans, its "silence," that "guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man."<sup>1</sup> By characterizing that lack of language as a kind of silence—as the absence of clear expressive sense—humans have been able to sustain a belief in their separation from the animal world. Yet, ironically, it was the expressive power of silence that made us aware of the ways in which the fates of animals and humans are inextricably linked. In her 1962 book *Silent Spring*, the marine biologist and conservationist Rachel Carson famously and convincingly linked the increasingly obvious absence of birdsong in the US to the widespread aerial spraying of DDT and other pesticides. Bees are now in trouble too, of course, the victims of pesticides, environmental stress, and limited sources of pollen. Their decreasing population—and the decrease in pollination—signals the potential collapse of US agriculture. Jonas's installation is, in part, devoted to such endangered species and natural resources. The first room focuses on bees, the second on fish and the ocean, the third on wind, an alternative energy source that could prove to be a solution to climate change.

The fourth space in the installation is dubbed the "Homeroom," and in one of the large video projections inside, five children occupy a makeshift classroom. They all face the viewer, whether they are standing or seated. No words are spoken; each child attends to the tracing or drawing of images of mostly taxidermied animals that are projected onto an easel or a screen behind them. At a certain point, the video cuts to the same children in the same positions and space, only now they are not moving at all; they wear animal masks and hold carved wooden animals. As with the bee dance, learning in Jonas's homeroom transpires through acts of immersion, association, and drawing as a form of gestural relation, bringing nature close rather than maintaining a clinical distance.

Early natural-history dioramas, like those in the Stockholm museum, were often described as "silent teachers," part of the visual education these institutions hoped to promote. But they were silent in another sense, too. Carefully preserved mammals, birds, fish, and plants, along with artificial landscaping elements and detailed painted backdrops, were arranged to suggest near-encyclopedic, three-dimensional pictures of nature, yet these images also remind viewers that some of what they see may no longer exist or will not exist in the future. This was often the point. Curators at natural-history museums were well aware that their displays might replace—as well as fix, contain, and still—creatures in the real world, "for future generations that may not have the opportunity of knowing the living animals."<sup>2</sup>

*continued on page 408*

Joan Jonas, *They Come to Us Without a Word II*, 2015.  
Performance view, Teatro Piccolo  
Arsenale, Venice, July 22, 2015.  
Music by Jason Moran. From left:  
Noah Delorme, Joan Jonas. Photo:  
Maira Ricci.





## NOTES

1. These include Jeremy Deller's "All That Is Solid Melts into Air," which looked at the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British popular culture, and Mark Leckey's "The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things" (also the title of his September 2010 project for this magazine), an exploration of techno-animism and the life of objects, both 2013.
2. The information in this paragraph is indebted to the research of Natalie Musteata, whose dissertation, "From Radicality to Romanticism: The Institutionalization of the Artist-as-Curator, 1970–2010," is in progress at the Graduate Center, City University of New York.
3. The arrangement is complicated and contractual: The Walker has acquired Vo's *Tombstone for Phung Vo*, 2010, but on Phung's death the work will be returned to Copenhagen for use as his gravestone. In return, Vo will give the institution the vitrine of artifacts comprising *If you were to climb the Himalayas tomorrow*.
4. Lebovici mistakenly notes that the accords were signed in 1975, the year Vo was born.
5. See also: Mariana Castillo Deball, Iman Issa, Joachim Koester, Simon Starling...
6. Arnaud Gerspacher, "Danhs Vo's 'Mother Tongue,'" *art-agenda*, April 22, 2013, <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/danh-vo-s-mother-tongue>.
7. I don't have space here to show how these ciphers fuse with a Catholic approach to symbolism, resulting in a particularly liturgical iteration of the found object. Given Vo's interest in Catholicism, this cultivation of hidden meanings is entirely knowing. But it also sends into reverse everything that was radical about the readymade and the found object, replacing critical and psychological subversiveness with the glow of metaphysics.
8. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.
9. Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
10. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).
11. For a discussion of three examples, see my *Radical Museology, or, What's 'Contemporary' in Museums of Contemporary Art?* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013).

## REYNOLDS/JONAS continued from page 333

Animals, to paraphrase Berger, are placed in a receding past, and homelessness is its corollary. Homelessness is another theme Jonas addresses in *They Come to Us Without a Word I and II*, most directly through Woody Guthrie's 1938 ballad "I Ain't Got No Home," which was sung by Kate Fenner in the performance. Guthrie's lyrics recount a workingman's loss of his home to a rich man and chronicle his labor in other people's mines and fields, and each verse concludes with the title line: "I ain't got no home in this world anymore." In the performance's next sequence, a young woman (Jin Jung) wearing a mask and a '40s-style dress stepped in front of the large video screen, and behind a translucent scrim, and began to fan herself. A video shot through the windshield of a car moving through a long tunnel was projected behind her, on her, and in front of her on the scrim. As she nervously flicked her golden fan and the camera moved deeper into the tunnel, one heard a sound reminiscent of a phonograph needle running over the dead wax of a long-playing record, interrupted by the short, hissing blasts of molten glass being shaped by a Murano craftsman. The excruciating beauty of this passage, its depiction of repetitive labor, and its disturbing sense of displacement matched the sense of loss and anomie in the Guthrie song.

Jonas has described the US pavilion as a domestic space, and its low ceilings and the modest dimensions of the rooms suggest that it could be. Many of the ghost stories told on the sound track of one of the large video projections in each room relate to the haunting of houses, barns, and roads surrounding them in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, which has been Jonas's summer home since she first visited in 1970; it has been the setting for many of the video images she has produced since then. These ghost stories are all told by Cape Bretoners themselves, about their childhoods in a time "before the electricity came in" or from memories of stories told to them by parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. Each tale deals with encounters with the deceased and otherworldly forces and beings, usually heard but not seen, in the daily lives of the living: "It would come at noon and then at midnight. You could hear it walk up the stairs... It wouldn't go any further, but we wouldn't hear it go back."

Nature also haunts the spaces Jonas creates in her performance and in the pavilion; it literally comes inside the house, just as the spirits enter through the door the wind blows open "like a choir." In the performance's penultimate scene, Jonas and an adolescent performer (Noah Delorme) entered the stage from opposite sides and stood together, looking at an open book that Jonas held. The inventory from Stockholm was recited again, and the gestures and gazes of the two performers suggested birdwatchers on a walk, against the backdrop of a video projection of a wooded landscape. The camera moved through the woods and then toward a little house in the distance—Jonas's own Cape Breton studio. At this point, the recitation ended, the video projection became black-and-white, and the performers turned away from the audience and made small steps as the camera moved closer to the house. Just before they entered the house, the sound track shifted to the telling of a ghost story; once inside, the performers turned back around to face the audience, and Jonas soon left the stage. Delorme, alone, began to tentatively look "out" of the cabin's large windows, projected on the scrim in front of him: "What finally happened to that house? It was torn down... Do you have any idea what it all might mean? No, I do not. Do you feel any of it was trying to do you harm? No, not a bit." Silent and distant, behind the scrim of "glass," Delorme's figure recalled the animals and birds in the dioramas or the spirits frequenting the house in the story, suspended between image and thing, sound and silence, culture and nature, now and then. □

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## NOTES

1. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" (1980), in *Why Look at Animals?* (London: Penguin, 2009), 14.

2. Harold E. Anthony, quoted in the press release for the opening of the North American Mammals Hall, American Museum of Natural History, New York, March 29, 1942.

## BALSOM/3-D CINEMA continued from page 361

## NOTES

1. Thomas M. Pryor, "Hollywood's '3-D's': Producers List at Least a Dozen Three-Dimensional Features for This Year," *New York Times*, February 1, 1953, X5.
2. The anaglyph process uses opposing color filters, usually red and cyan, to encode each eye's image. By contrast, the polarization process—used in today's digital 3-D—employs lenses that allow only similarly polarized light to pass through. Both processes result in a slightly different perspective reaching each eye, creating the illusion of three-dimensionality.
3. Bosley Crowther, "Illusions, Limited: Taking a Sober Look at New Movie Processes," *New York Times*, February 22, 1953, X1.
4. Roger Ebert, "Why I Hate 3-D Movies," *Newsweek*, May 9, 2010, <http://newsweek.com/roger-ebert-why-i-hate-3-d-movies-70247>.
5. Norman McLaren, "Stereographic Animation: The Synthesis of Stereoscopic Depth from Flat Drawings and Art Work," *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers* 57, no. 6 (December 1951): 513.
6. Ara Osterweil, *Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2014), 215.
7. John Belton, "Digital 3-D Cinema: Digital Cinema's Missing Novelty Phase," *Film History* 24, no. 2 (2012): 190.
8. Jodie Mack, "Baby, I'm Your Firework," *Notebook*, May 11, 2015, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/3-d-in-the-21st-century-baby-im-your-firework>.

## Caption acknowledgments

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