

Perth Institute of
Contemporary Arts



Joan Jonas'
Sun
Signals

Creative challenges for students:
**Making and responding to Installation
and Performance Art**

Try these fun activities at home or in class to learn about the things that inspired Joan Jonas and her *Sun Signals* exhibition! Joan Jonas is an American artist who has influenced generations of artists since the 1960s — who knows, she might even influence you.

We've set some creative challenges to spark your imagination. This might help you get ready before your excursion to PICA or might help you afterwards to understand and respond to the art you experienced. There are no right or wrong answers — just a chance to be creative and have a great time.

Setting the scene

In the 1960s and 70s Joan Jonas lived and worked in New York City. It was an exciting and creative place which became a new home for many artists and people who moved there from all over the world. Artists in the city were trying new things, thinking 'outside of the box' and breaking the rules about what art was supposed to be. The New York art scene changed the way we think about art. Here's some examples about what was going on and the artists Joan was hanging out with.



Installation Art

Artists told stories in new ways by pushing the boundaries of what art is. Imagine walking into a room and the entire room is part of a single artwork! Installation artists brought all sorts of items and objects together, arranging (or ‘installing’) them to transform a room or gallery space. They created ‘environments’ for people to have surprising or unique experiences. Art didn’t have to be made from traditional materials anymore, like paint or clay. Art could be made from almost anything — even ordinary objects you might find in daily life. Artists combined different materials to make ‘mixed-media’ art. Sound, light, images and moving images (e.g. video), were also used. Installation artists asked questions about how things are connected or related to each other and their surroundings. People can move around, and at times through, installation artworks. Sometimes they’re allowed to touch or play with parts of the artwork, like stepping into a creative adventure.

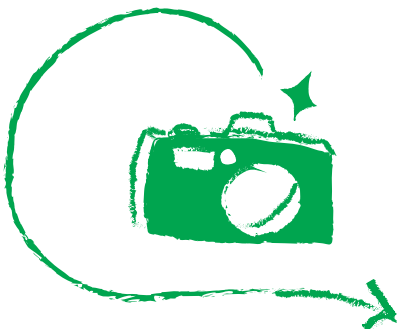
Check out: [Nam June Paik](#) and [Yayoi Kusama](#) 

Try It Yourself:



- Build a creative adventure playground!
- Pick a space to transform into an ‘installation’ for fun new experiences. It could be a corner of the room, a backyard area or even a tabletop.
- Collect ‘mixed-media’ items for your installation art. Look for things that would end up in recycling or be chucked away, but make sure they’re clean. Things like cardboard, plastic bottles, newspapers, jars, fabric scraps, old CDs, paper towel rolls, buttons, old toys.
- Before you start building, sketch ideas on paper and think about what you’d like people to experience in your installation.

- **What kind of environment will you create?**
- **A jungle, alien planet, an underwater world?**
- **Who might visit this place?**
- **What adventures could happen here?**



- Start arranging the materials you’ve collected. Using lights or music will add to the atmosphere or vibe.
- When finished, invite people to explore the magical world you’ve created.
- Make sure you take some great photos before packing away.



Site-Specific Art

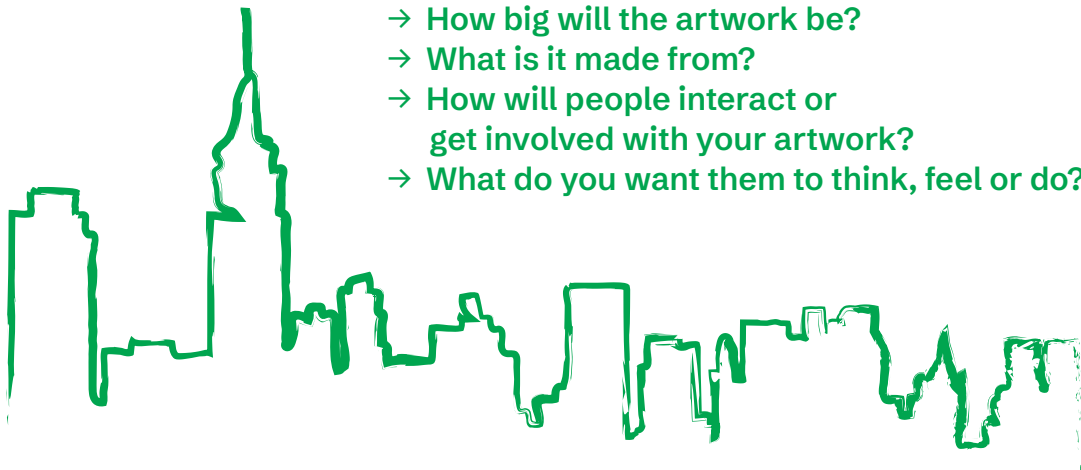
Instead of making art that can be moved from place to place, like hanging a painting on a different wall, some artists made artwork for, and about, one specific location. The location (called a 'site') could be anywhere — indoors or outdoors, in big cities or in faraway deserts and forests, even underwater. Art no longer had to be inside museums or galleries. Site-specific art was meant to become a part of its surroundings. Just like a puzzle piece to fit a specific spot! These artworks were inspired by what already existed in a chosen place. Artists paid close attention to the history, landscape and buildings in the places where artworks would be. They often made art with living things in mind — designed for the community, people, plants and animals there. Sometimes this kind of art was designed around the changing natural light and weather throughout the day or seasons.

Check out: [Robert Irwin](#) and [Agnes Denes](#)

Try It Yourself:

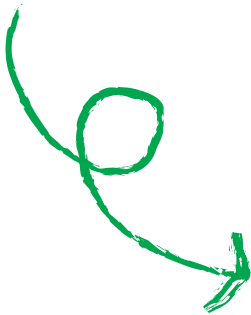
- Select a spot that captures your imagination or is important to you — this is your 'site'!
It could be under a tree, near an interesting building or in your favourite room.
- Spend some time exploring and looking around.
- Think about the history of this place and the living things or people there.
- Design an artwork just for this place and make sketches or drawings.

- What do you want to say about this place?
- Are there any important issues or problems?
- What changes would help those living there?
What is the lighting like,
and does it change at different times?
- How big will the artwork be?
- What is it made from?
- How will people interact or
get involved with your artwork?
- What do you want them to think, feel or do?



Land Art

Using nature as their canvas, artists built their creations outdoors and used things found in the environment. Sometimes land artists made large mounds and holes in the earth called 'Earthworks' by using machinery like diggers and bobcats. As if they were sculpting the land itself! Other times they stacked rocks and arranged branches, leaves and flowers in patterns, or even planted things to grow into living artworks. Land art is a way to connect with nature and learn about the environment by marveling at its shapes, forms, colours and textures. Many land artists were influenced by the Environmental Movement at the time and wanted people to pay more attention to the health of our planet. Wind, rain and the seasons slowly change land art over time, sometimes they eventually disappear.



Check out: Robert Smithson, Nancy Holt and Ana Mendieta

Try It Yourself:

- Next time you're outside, spend some time noticing the shapes, forms, colours and textures found in nature.
- Collect some leaves, twigs or rocks found on the ground. Create your own patterns or build a sculpture by arranging these things in an interesting way.
- Think about the different ways artists can work with the landscape.

→ **Do you like the idea of digging into the earth to change it?**

→ **Or do you prefer a gentle way of working with nature?**

- Take photos of your creation once you've finished. Come back in a few days to see how your creation has changed. The outdoor world is your art studio!



Feminist Art

Artists shared stories about how amazing girls and women are in their own unique ways. They were influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement at the time and wanted to make sure that women have the same chances and opportunities as men. They made art about being yourself, working together and treating everyone fairly. Reminding us that real beauty comes from inside, these artists talked about how female bodies are shown in art and the media. Some feminist artists used their own bodies to make a statement by performing for a live audience.

Check out: [Judy Chicago](#) and [Yoko Ono](#)

Try it Yourself:

- Become a media detective!
- Grab some old magazines, newspapers or books with pictures of people — you might find some in a second-hand shop.

→ What do you notice about how boys and girls are shown?

→ Can you find stories about strong, smart and talented women?

→ Can you see girls and women with different types of bodies, from different places in the world?

- Cut out these pictures and make a collage to spread the message of girl power and equality.

Performance Art

Many artists during this time used their bodies, movement and voices to create art. Performance artists would act and dance, using props and costumes or making music and creating shapes with their bodies. They shared their feelings and ideas with people in the audience — who were often asked to join in. Sometimes artists put on surprise performances in the city — called ‘Happenings’. Unexpected and funny things would happen, like a tennis match with a group of dancers.

Check out: [Alan Kaprow](#) and [Trisha Brown](#)

Try it Yourself:

- Have you ever played emotion charades?
- Create a wheel with different emotions written on it.
- Take turns spinning the wheel in a group and acting out the emotion the spinner lands on — without using any words.
- Think about how you can get your message across.

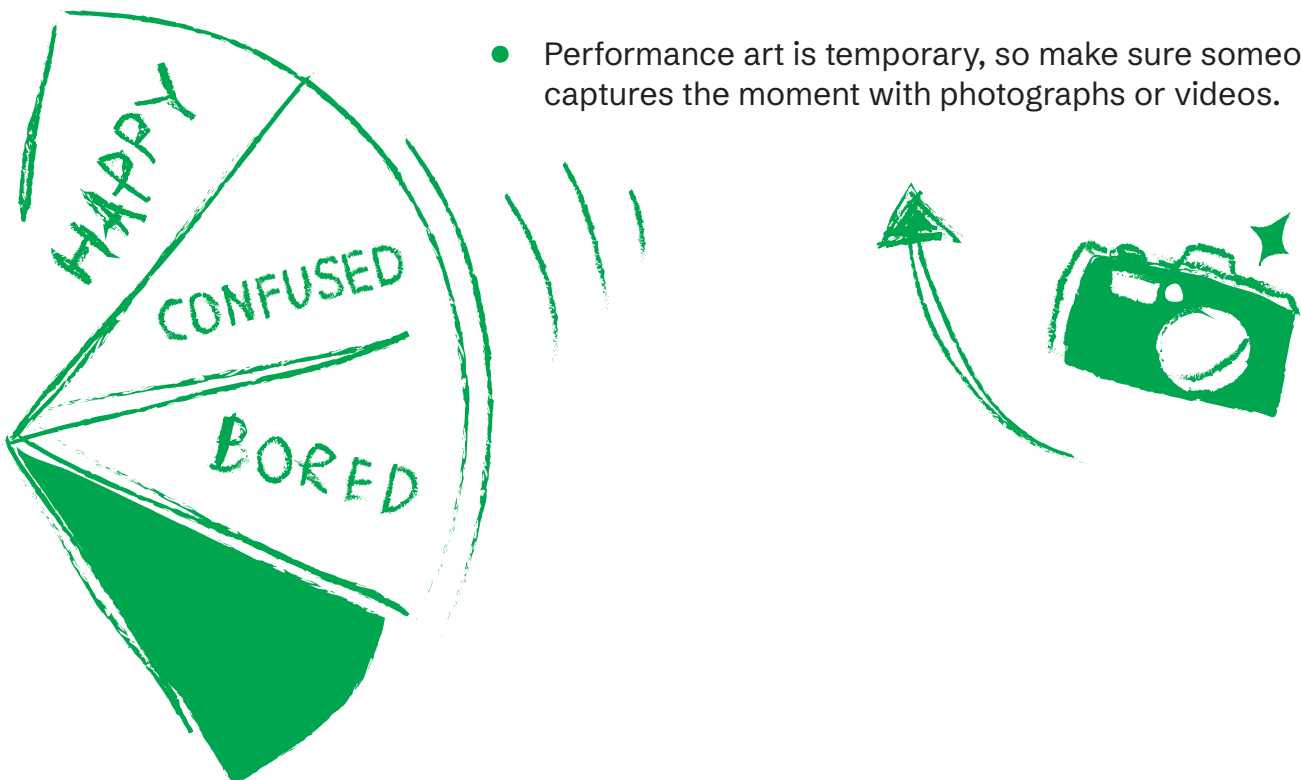
→ **What body language and facial expressions can you use?**

→ **Are there ways to get the audience involved in your performance?**

→ **What music could create the right mood?**

→ **Are there any objects you can use?**

- Performance art is temporary, so make sure someone captures the moment with photographs or videos.



(((Chance Music)))

Music composers were experimenting with performance art. They let go of control by making music that was unpredictable and decided by chance — rolling dice or flipping a coin to see what happens next! Like players in a game, the musicians were free to choose which instruments or notes to play and could respond to the moment. All kinds of sounds were used, not just the usual music notes. Birds singing, traffic noises and raindrops could be just as interesting as musical instruments. Even silence is interesting! Because when musicians don't play anything at all, the audience notices the sounds of the environment around them.

Check out: [John Cage](#)

Try it Yourself:

- Collect six everyday objects from around your house that make different sounds to use as instruments.
- Give each sound-making object a different number from 1 to 6.
- Roll the dice — this is the first sound in your musical piece!
- Write down the numbers from a few rolls of the dice.
- Perform your chance music in a quiet room.
- If you have a smart phone, record your performance.

→ **When listening back to your music, can you hear anything interesting during the moments when you're not making a sound?**



Experimental Dance

Choreographers were also making performance art, creating new forms of dance. They worked with ordinary body movements (like sitting, walking and kneeling) instead of the traditional dance techniques of ballet or folk. Their dance pieces didn't tell a story in the typical way with a beginning, middle and end. That's because the movements were often decided by chance or based on games and rules. The dancers moved in unusual ways — sometimes around sculptures or everyday objects, or in public spaces instead of on stage.

Check out: [Simone Forti](#) and [Yvonne Rainer](#)

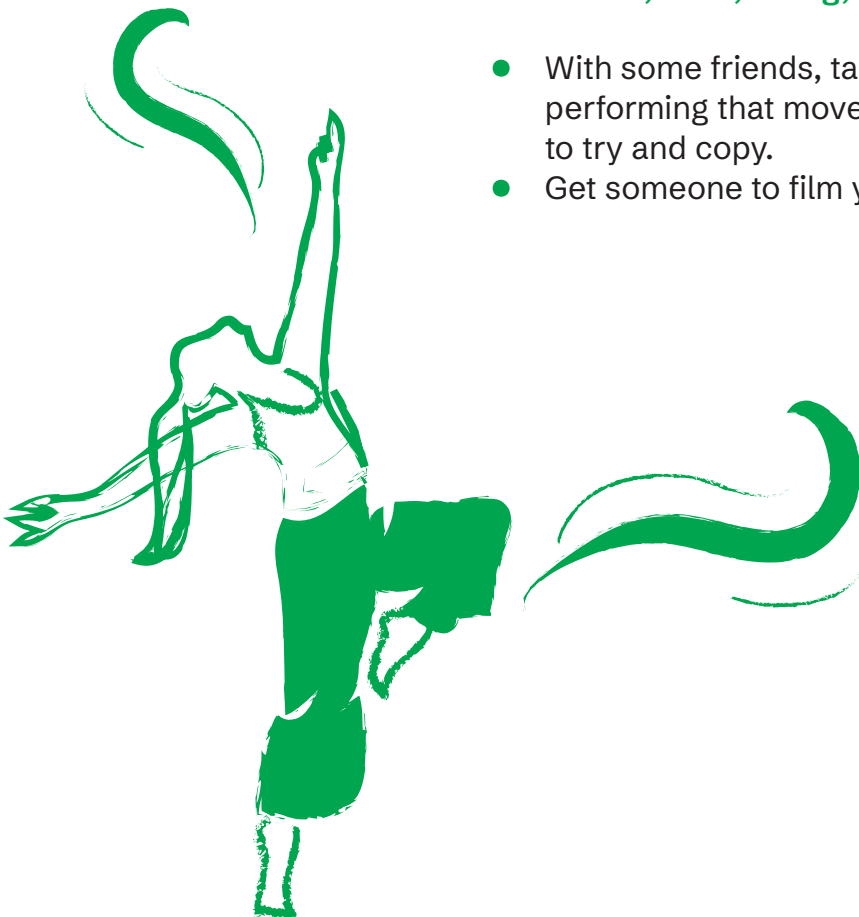
Try it Yourself:

- Find or make an object to use in a dance game — something that isn't too heavy or can be broken easily.
- On separate pieces of card write down different ways to move your body (these are verbs or doing words).

→ For example:

Pull, push, carry, bend, kneel, twist, lunge, squat, run, walk, swing, throw, sit.

- With some friends, take turns picking a card and performing that move with the object for the others to try and copy.
- Get someone to film your dance piece if you can!



Bringing it all together: Get to know Joan Jonas

Joan Jonas is famous for bringing these ideas together and inventing her own style of art. She is known for her work in performance art, video and installation. A magical storyteller and a playful explorer, she creates different characters and costumes for performances where she is both the actor and the director!



She was one of the first!

Joan uses cameras to capture her adventures and then plays them on big screens during her performances - like a movie mixed with a live show. In fact, she was one of the first people to use video technology in art! She used live feeds of herself way before selfies and smartphones were invented. Joan Jonas paved the way for artists today by exploring how live action can be recorded and shown in galleries.



Experiments with performance and dance

The performers in Joan Jonas's works make movements that are slow and carefully choreographed. They play with everyday objects like mirrors, feathers or even a simple chair. Sometimes they use sticks and long poles to extend their bodies and make circle shapes and lines. They also take on different identities by wearing masks and costumes. Her performers may make eye contact with people in the audience to get them involved.



Playing with sound

Sound is an important part of her work. Not only music, but sounds of voices used to whisper, whistle, bark and howl. As well as sounds made by actions or body movements like walking around a room, opening and closing a window, clapping blocks of wood together, and blowing through metal and paper cones.

Joan Jonas played with sound, exploring how it changes outdoors or at different distances. Sound takes time to travel through the air. The farther you are from where the sound was made the longer it takes to reach your ear and be heard — there's a time delay. In her videos, performers make sounds while standing outdoors at different distances from the camera. This shows the time delay between an action and hearing the sound it makes. Joan describes the way we hear sounds and see images from distant places as receiving 'signals'.



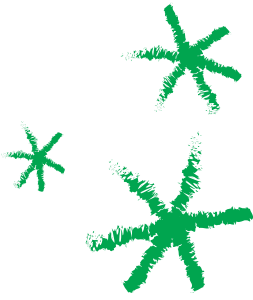
Exploring places and landscapes

The videos of Joan Jonas bring nature into the gallery for audiences to connect with. She tells stories with landscapes, animals and plants — showing outdoor scenes, such as forests, beaches and deserts, and urban landscapes with buildings, streets and pollution. She explored parts of New York that were dangerously polluted and looked like ruins, such as the docks along the Hudson River. The landscapes in her videos are so important that she's even described them as 'characters' in her story. For example, the icy winds and freezing temperatures on a Long Island beach are players in the action that her human performers battle with.



Making a feminist statement

Sometimes Jonas creates imaginary dream-like landscapes and characters inspired by myths and fairytales. Her art explores how female bodies and characters are often outsiders or witches in stories and folktales. She explores the emotions, thoughts and struggles of women, asking important questions about identity and gender.



Find out more: [Five Things to Know: Joan Jonas](#)
[and Who is Joan Jonas](#)



Try it Yourself:

Make performance art inspired by Joan Jonas.

● **Step 1**

Create a character. Write a list of the characters from stories or folktales that you remember. Is there a character from this list that means something important to you? How could you change a character from this list to say something new?

● **Step 2**

Choose a performer. Think about whether you'll be a performer, or if there's other people you'd like to work with.

● **Step 3**

Find some objects or costumes for your performance. This could be everyday items from around the house, or an object that has some personal meaning. You can also make drawings and designs if you'd like.

● **Step 4**

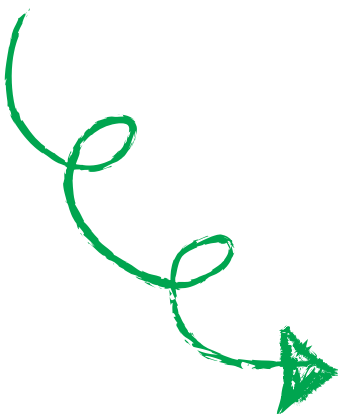
Choose a performance space. Is there a place outdoors that captures your imagination? For example, your favourite spot in the garden or an interesting place in your neighborhood.

● **Step 5**

Explore different movements and sounds. Practice different ways of moving your body or moving objects. Think about how you can move objects to make different sounds and communicate emotions and stories without words.

● **Step 6**

Record your performance. Use a camera or smartphone to capture your performance art. It could be fun to work together with someone to do this. Experiment with different angles and standing at different distances from the camera. What do you notice when the performer is close to the camera, compared to when they are far away?



Feel free to change this activity to make it work for you! If performance isn't your thing, you could focus on designing a character, making objects and costumes, or experimenting with sounds. You could even explore interesting places and capture your adventures with a camera.