

## STUDENT HANDOUT

### **Joan Jonas: *They Come to us without a Word***

Using a Gallery as a Site of Research: a fieldtrip to  
NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore

**Theme:** Environment, Memory, Myth

**Cross-disciplinary subjects:** time-based media, local folklore, history,  
social studies, urban development

#### **A brief introduction:**

Joan Jonas's evocative video installation work, *They Come to Us without a Word*, was shown at the 2015 Venice Biennale in the United States Pavilion. Through her unique visual poetry, which combines the concepts of landscape, memory and myth, she explores the impact of humans on the environment and society, causing viewers to pause and reflect on their own lost or forgotten memories of place.

#### **Exhibition:**

Joan Jonas is an American artist who creates time-based media works using video, performance art, installation, sound, text, sculpture, drawings and prints. She has been an influential figure in the development of the performance and video art movements in New York City starting in the late 1960s and 1970s, as well as other forms of conceptual art and theatre. Her experimentations range from the inquiry into different aspects of social, psychological and physical reality as in her early work, *Mirror Pieces* (1968 - 1971), where she began to use props and mediated images to explore the concept of self and in her seminal performance, *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972), by creating an alter-ego and introducing video into her process. Throughout her career her imagery has immersed viewers in a fragmented and layered visual world, where symbols and myth dialogue with aspects of the real and imaginary.

#### **Pre-gallery visit activities:**

1. Discuss in class the definitions and concepts expressed in the vocabulary list below.

- Environment
- Landscape
- Cityscape
- Folklore
- Myth
- Supernatural

2. Compare and debate the definitions for *environment* and *myth*.

3. Ask the students to make a list of local and regional folk and ghost stories. How are they related to the natural world?

### Gallery Visit Activities: *They Come to Us without a Word*

Singapore's physical environment seems to be ever in flux, a push and pull of landscape versus cityscape. Despite residents' perceptions of losing more and more of their lush tropical surroundings to development, the CBD's Fourth National Report\* claims that of the island's 710 square meters of territory, 47% remains under green cover, which includes parks, nature reserves, heritage trees and roads and even the green roofs on some buildings. Yet we still feel a real sense of loss as more and more concrete structures rise above our remaining jungle.

In Jonas's work, this disappearance of nature can correlate to a sense of irretrievable loss of habitat, alluding to the survival of our planet and the legacy of destruction we leave our children. Yet she also suggests other losses, not only in relationship to our physical world, but to our cultural realm as well. In her time-based media installation, *They Come to Us without a Word*, she incorporates ghost stories from Nova Scotia in Canada with symbols and myths from her sojourns to Asia and Europe to remind us of our cultural roots, many which have sprung from our close connection to nature in the past.

Let's explore our own environment in our city-state through the lens of lost landscape and local folk stories. Once things disappear, where do they go? Are they ever really forgotten?

\*(<https://www.cbd.int/doc/world/sg/sg-nr-04-en.pdf>)

**Activity #1:** (Required materials, notebook, pencil, camera or a smart phone.)

1. Students should work in a group of 3 or 4.
2. Students will first visit the exhibition, reflecting upon the questions on the student activity sheet. They should take photos and jot down short answers to represent their choices, always being prepared to back up their answers!
3. A brief general gallery tour and discussion will follow.

### Once things disappear, where do they go?

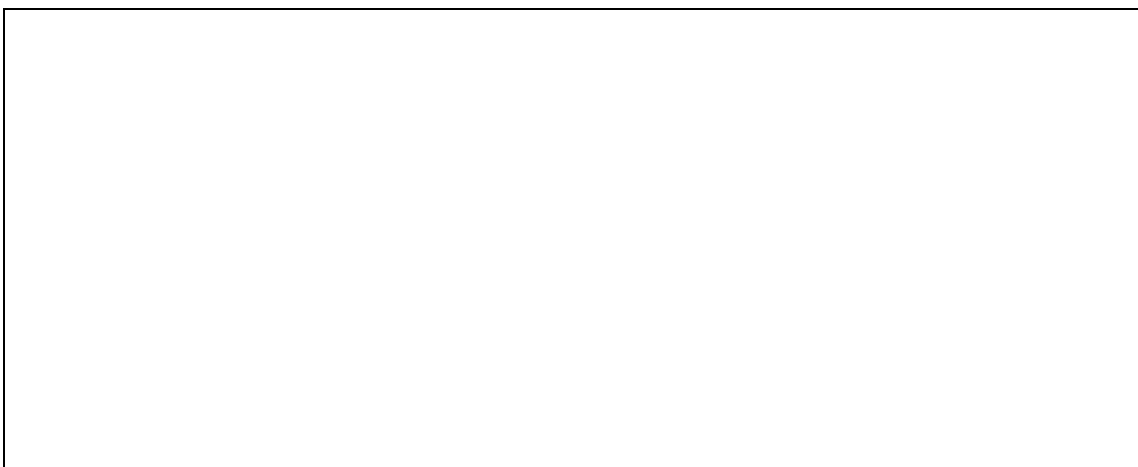
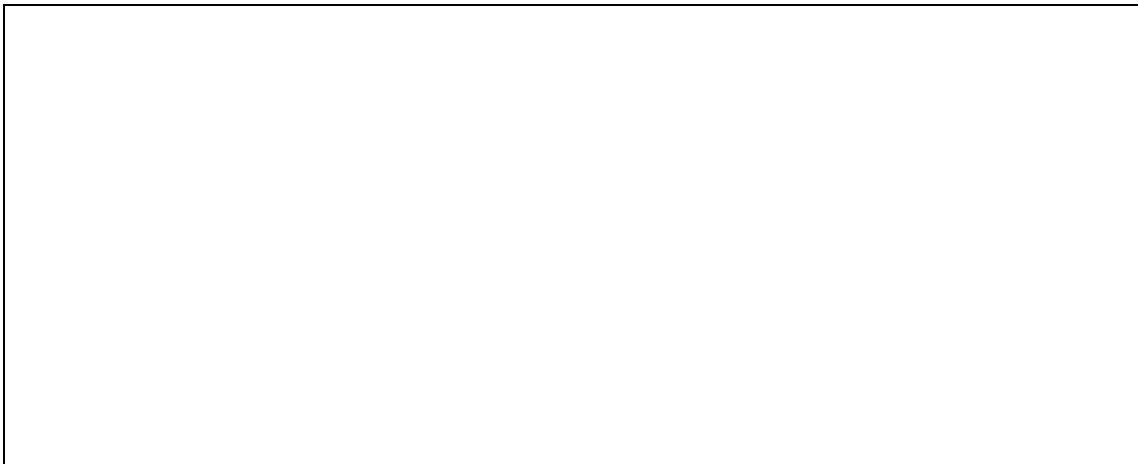
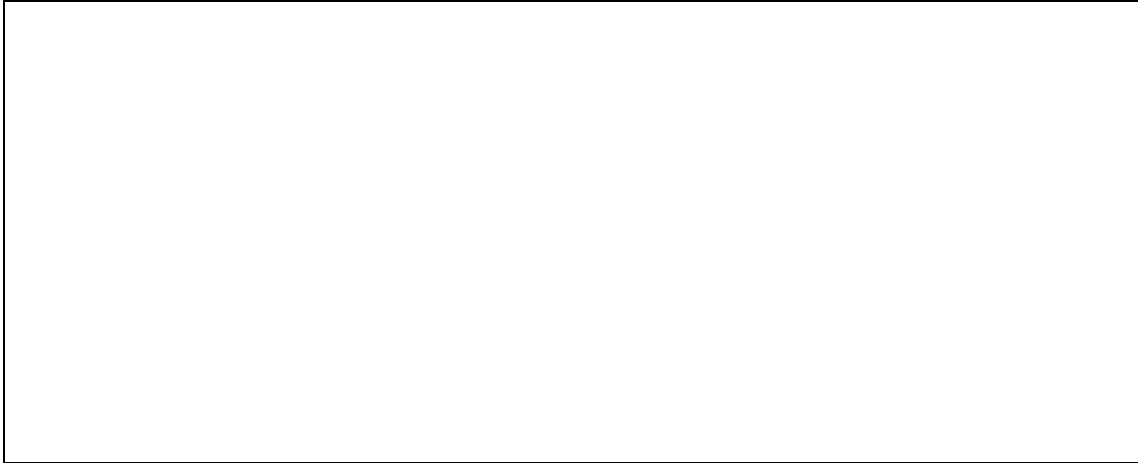
There are five rooms in the exhibition. Each room has two themes, one environmental and one cultural. There is a continuous narrative linking each room. Explore the exhibition with your group and answer the following questions by taking photographs\*, sketching and jotting down notes. Be prepared to back up your answers!

\*Remember not to use a flash!

## Environmental Loss

Urban development affects great change on natural habitats. But do we always notice the damage before it is too late?

- Name **3** themes in this exhibition pertaining to the loss of habitat and/or species . Sketch your answers in the boxes.



- Do any of these themes or issues affect Singapore? If so, how?
- Have you noticed any big changes in Singapore's natural environment or landscape in the past five years?
- What aspects of your own neighborhood are different from when you were 6 years old?

### Cultural Loss

When a natural habitat dramatically changes, cultural memory can also change or be forgotten. Listen to the ghost stories in the exhibition.

- How do Jonas's visual installations interact with the spoken stories?
- Jot down one of the stories being told. Does it remind you of any ghost stories from Singapore?
- What local folk or ghost stories do you know?
- Have you ever had an encounter with the supernatural?

**Literature and text often play a major role in Joan Jonas's work. This exhibition was influenced by the novel *Under the Glacier* by Halldór Laxness. Jonas created an interesting title for this installation work, *They Come to Us without a Word*.**

- How do you interpret this title in relationship to the exhibition?
- Why is this title so intriguing?

- Write your own ghost story using this title as the first line.  
Incorporate a character from a local ghost story into your work.  
Draw a thumbnail sketch of your character.



### Creating a Time-Based Media Work

Time-based media works often use a variety of techniques including audio, video and computer based technology. They fill a space not only in relation to the physical dimensions of length and width, but also to the concept of time. One must be present for their duration in order to experience the whole work.

Joan Jonas's time-based media installations incorporate sound, text and props, such as mirrors, masks and drawings.

- Debate the possible meaning of these elements.

- Make a sketch of your favorite room installation in this exhibition. Why do you prefer it?



- Be inspired by Jonas's art and create your own layered time-based media work narrating your story based a local ghost tale. Use your smart phone and computer to film and layer handmade as well as digital images. Project them onto the wall and get ready to share your story with your classmates!