

HERESIES # 17

# ACTING UP WOMEN IN THEATER AND PERFORMANCE

A Feminist Perspective on Art & Culture (1994)

HERESIES is an idea-oriented journal devoted to the examination of art and politics from a feminist perspective. We believe that what is commonly called art can have a political impact and that in the making of art and all cultural artifacts our identities as women play a distinct role. We hope that HERESIES will stimulate dialogue around radical political and aesthetic theory, as well as generate new creative energies among women. It will be a place where diversity can be articulated. We are committed to broadening the definition and function of art.

HERESIES is published by a collective of feminists, some of whom are also socialists, marxists, lesbian feminists, or anarchists; our fields include painting, sculpture, writing, anthropology, literature, performance, art history, architecture, filmmaking, photography, and video. While the themes of the individual issues will be determined by the collective, each issue will have a different editorial staff, composed of women who want to work on that issue as well as members of the collective. HERESIES provides experience for women who work editorially, in design, and in production. An open evaluation meeting will be held after the appearance of each issue. HERESIES will try to be accountable to and in touch with the international feminist community.

As women, we are aware that historically the connections between our lives, our arts, and our ideas have been suppressed. Once these connections are clarified, they can function as a means to dissolve the alienation between artist and audience, and to understand the relationship between art and politics, work and workers. As a step toward the demystification of art, we reject the standard relationship of criticism to art within the present system, which has often become the relationship of advertiser to product. We will not advertise a new set of genius-products just because they are made by women. We are not committed to any particular style or aesthetic, nor to the competitive mentality that pervades the art world. Our view of feminism is one of process and change, and we feel that in the process of this dialogue we can foster a change in the meaning of art.

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HERESIES # 17

ACTING UP!

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"This is daring,  
smart, and **POLITICAL**.  
Just what Heresies  
ought to get all  
the time."



"I love it. It's  
hilarious. I think  
we should definitely  
use excerpts."  
"I don't get it.  
Maybe I'm too sleepy  
--but I hope this  
play is a parody!"



"The theories were so  
dense I got a headache  
trying to read them."

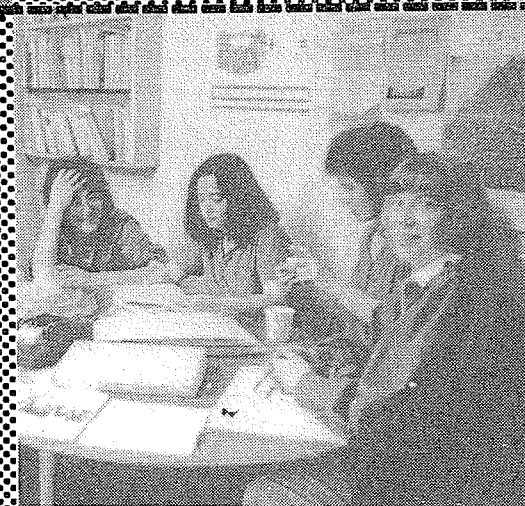
"Where's the article?  
We're not supposed to  
write it for them."



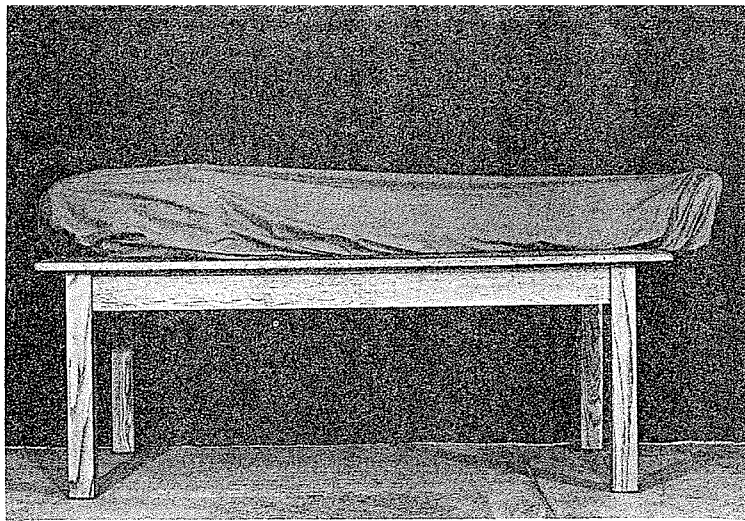
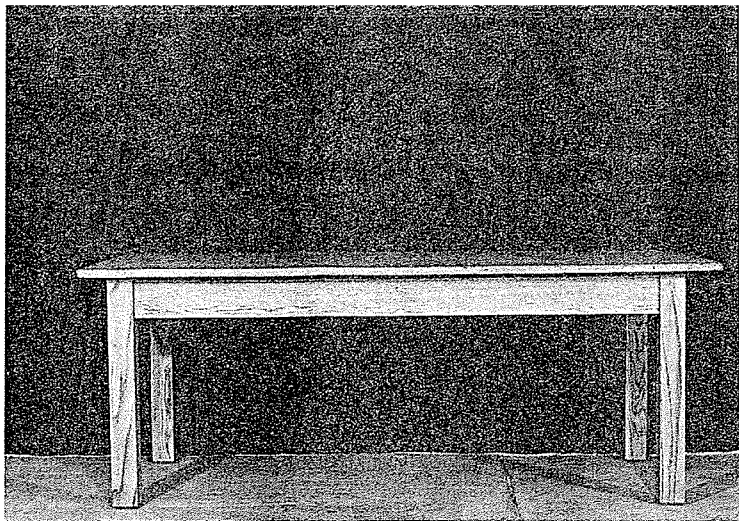
"Huh? It may be an  
interesting moment on  
stage, but I don't  
think it's poignant  
enough to work in  
print."



"No. I hate this.  
It's supposed to be  
interesting but it  
isn't."  
"Poor \_\_\_\_\_. I mean,  
she really does try."  
"No."  
"No, too."  
"Don't be narrow-  
minded so fast! The  
piece about \_\_\_\_\_ is  
good. The rest is  
junk."



"This is the article  
I've been waiting  
for. YES!"



Kathy Hemingway Jones, noise from the dark. light breath (a multimedia performance). Currently living in Minneapolis, Kathy Hemingway

**On "The Garden Planet Revisited (Siting #1),"  
written and directed by Jacki Apple:**

The past, present, and future are compressed in time.

Historical time. Cinematic time. Real time. Remembered time. Dream time.

The audience is seated ceremoniously by attendants on an archaeological site—the set.

An astronaut in a silver suit and closed helmet looks down from a pool of blue-violet light above.

In wall-sized projections the performers appear on a desert landscape.

A performer with an M16 automatic weapon confronts the audience at close range.

A man addresses the audience in German, challenging his own recorded voice in English.

—Lin Hixson, collaborating performer

**On making work:**

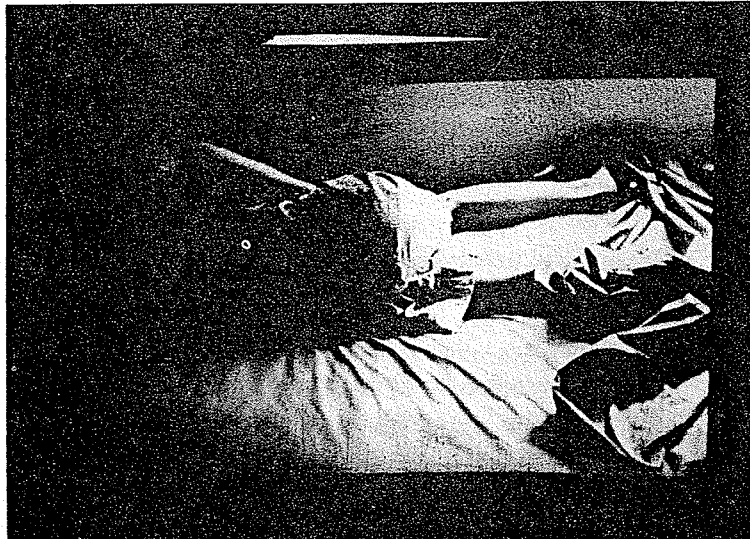
Words evoke images. Sound touches, elicits sensations. The listener/audience participates, becomes a "performer" on a remembered, imagined, desired, projected "set." The "movie" is in the mind. We are all dancers. I want you to travel through time/space zones.

—Jacki Apple, on the soundtrack for "The Garden Planet Revisited"

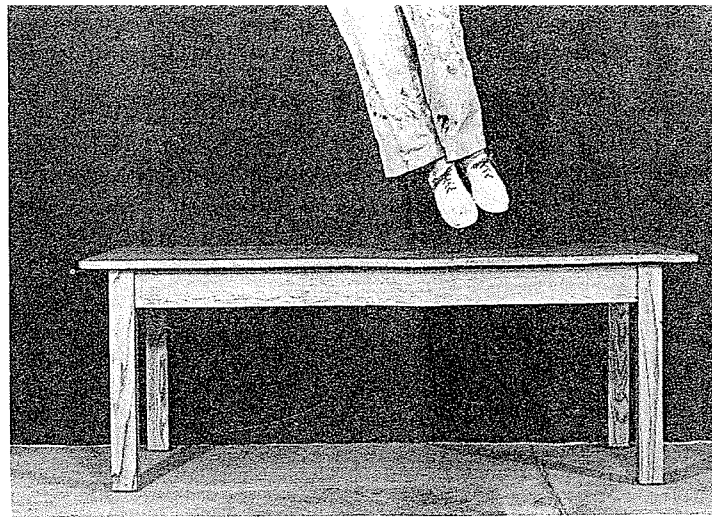
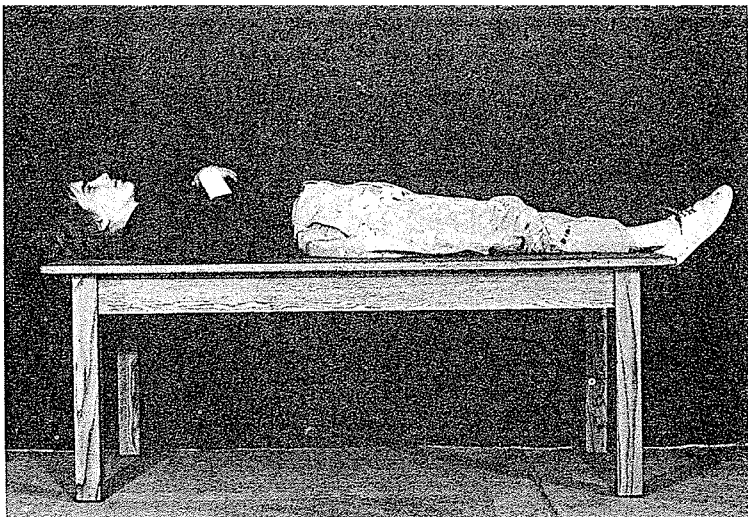
These excerpts are from "Conversations on Performance," a longer piece by Jacki Apple, Lin Hixson, and Jane Dibbell—performance artists living in California.

© 1984 Jacki Apple, Lin Hixson

Kathy Hemingway Jones, noise from the dark. light breath.







Jones works with photography, drawing, and performance.

### On imagery:

Sometimes a piece is built around a strong emotion.

An Irish woman describes a police break-in and shooting while the audience watches a blank screen.

The same voice repeats the same story while the audience watches a black and white film of a woman seated in a room talking on the phone.

The audience watches a color film of the same woman recounting the same story on a talk show.

The same woman appears on stage clad in a green prom dress, standing near a cocktail lounge pianist, and sings the same story into a microphone.

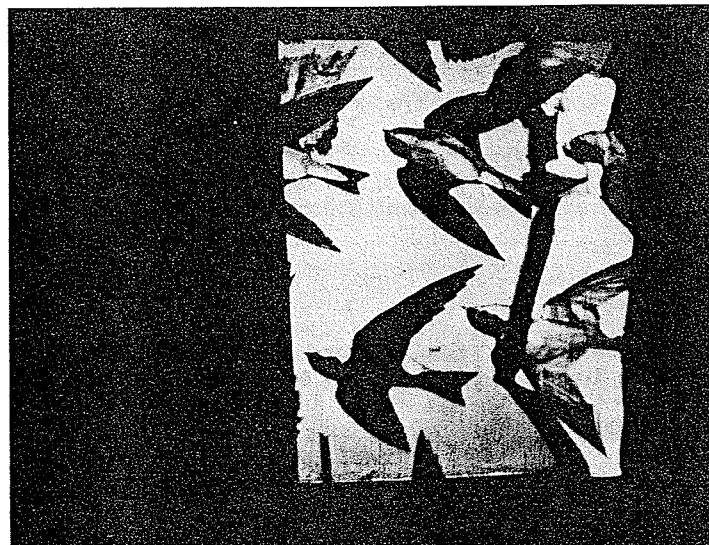
[from *"Birds on Pedestals with Bomber Ladies,"* performed May 1981, LACE, Los Angeles.]

There was a story read earlier—February 18-24, 1981 issue of the *Village Voice*. "Bernadette Devlin: Hanging on to Life" by Kate Millett.

"And Bernadette Devlin? Seven bullets, five in the trunk of the body. It was meant to be enough. . . . Michael, Bernadette's husband, had seen the raiders out the window, had actually seen them coming. The children are still in their bedrooms. Michael knows they come for Bernadette. He wraps her in blankets, odd symbolic garment; it is blankets that the Irish prisoners wear. It is all they wear in fact. And he goes to the door himself. But the raiding party is already sledging it down. And when it is opened he is met with a barrage of bullets."

—Lin Hixson, director/producer,  
discussing her performance works

© 1984 Kathy Hemingway J





## SILENCE AS PROCESS

Most of the women in the world live their lives in silence. Silence, as the consequence of biology, as the reality for us under the patriarchy. Our lives, our deeds go for the most part unrecorded, unnoticed, unheeded.

Yet this silence itself is a kind of noise, a definite process in the life of the world. We can choose to become silent as a means of commentary or protest, or be forced into silence as a means of oppression. There is also a third way: the silence of women who in their everydayness present mute testimony to life as lived.

For some time I have been interested in writing a play without words. Hamlet, in his advice to the Players says, "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action." Writing plays is always an attempt to achieve that unity. But is it possible to write a play without words, to convey by the actor's choices as written by the playwright, a kind of meaning that would be more to the point than any word?

I read everything I could about Joanne Akalaitis' production of Franz Xavier Kroetz's Request Concert. Request Concert is about a German petite bourgeoisie woman who comes home one night after work and commits suicide. It is played without words. I deliberately avoided reading the play or seeing the production because I was excited by the idea of the play as opposed to its realization or how it read on the page (although, after I wrote my play, I found a copy of Request Concert at home and read it).

From that idea, the story of a Black maid who kills her employers emerged.

The most challenging and intriguing question next for me was: What is a Black middle-class woman? Is she a consciousness, an accumulation of life choices, or both? These questions are part of my continual exploration in the theater: the question of identity for the Black bourgeoisie and the reality of Afro-American life in the Diaspora.

I knew that the BLACK WOMAN would not kill herself. Homicide is still considered a means of salvation, a blow for freedom. The BLACK WOMAN would kill her employers as the natural consequence of her life.

The video monitor is the second actor in Vigil. The latest Arbitron Ratings show that the average Black family has at least one television set. Television is one of the unfortunate shapers of Afro-American consciousness.

The monitor in the production looks like a television set, but it is that and more. It is also a commentator and illuminator of the onstage action. In one scene the BLACK WOMAN is ironing her uniform for work, lost in a daydream. The monitor shows her reverie: she is dressed in a beautiful white tulle dress, seated on a plush blue Victorian couch, sipping tea from a fine china cup.

The role of the BLACK WOMAN called for a person with the unique combination of the training of an actor with an actor's precision and attention to detail, and the spontaneity and interaction with the environment of the performance artist. Robbie McCauley filled the role expertly.

Vigil Part II is an attempt to show the theater of our everyday lives. As John Cage says, there is no such thing as silence.

# VIGIL PART

### TIME:

Some time in the future. The morning before.

### PLACE:

The small ghetto apartment of a petite bourgeoisie Black woman, aged mid-30s or older.

### CHARACTERS:

BLACK WOMAN  
VIDEO MONITOR

### SCENE ONE

(Bedroom)

(The loud insistent ticking of an alarm clock is heard as the audience enters. This ticking is heard throughout the play.)

*Vigil Part II* was performed in 1982 at Inroads, NYC, with Robbie McCauley (Black Woman), Ethan Taubes (French Instructor), Donna Hamilton and Kim Wilkes (girls on video); director, Bonnie Greer; color video, Sonia A. Thompson; music and set, Craig Gordon; French dialogue, Ethan Taubes. Bonnie Greer, whose plays have been produced in NYC and Chicago, works in both mainstream and experimental theater.

The BLACK WOMAN is asleep in bed. She sleeps peacefully, perhaps snoring softly. Sometimes her sleep becomes more fitful, and she tosses as if she were having a dream of being chased. She mutters unintelligibly to herself. But most of the time there is only the ticking of the clock.

### ON VIDEO

A typical test pattern. Suddenly the screen comes alive as a military band plays the National Anthem. Now the screen is awash with the images of an idealized America: an interracial group of workers laughing and working together in complete harmony; a woman lecturing to a roomful of businessmen, their faces reflecting deep admiration and respect; a middle-class family tending to their spacious home; the vast and virgin lands of the West; the rolling farmlands of the Midwest; nuclear-powered submarines patrolling the oceans; jet fighter planes with ever-ready soldiers; a table groaning with food...

The image now fades to a Black woman giving birth. She is having a difficult time, but the woman is determined. White male hands cajole her to push. They wipe her brow, adjust her body, the hands try to instruct her. The woman fights them. She does not need their assistance to bring her child into the world.

Slowly, the crowning begins and the screen changes to red. A female child pops quickly out of the woman. The woman laughs and cries in relief. The baby lets out a loud cry. Freeze. Fade.

The alarm clock sounds as the baby cries. The BLACK WOMAN jumps up. For a moment she does not recognize her surroundings. She stares at the clock as it continues to ring.

Slowly, almost painfully, she shuts off the alarm clock. She closes her eyes for a moment and sighs. There are cigarettes

and a crowded ashtray on her night table. The ashtray says "Las Vegas." The table is cluttered with various Black fashion magazines.

She lights a cigarette and pulls her knees to her chest as she smokes slowly.

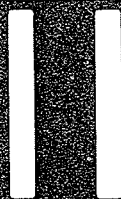
The wig that she wears to work every day is sitting on the night table, covered in an intricate pattern of pink foam curlers. She glances at the wig as she smokes the cigarette.

The alarm clock, a present from her employer, sounds again. However, this time it plays a bit of the *Brandenburg Concerto* while a hollow computer voice says: "Excuse me. Time to get up. You're going to be late."

The BLACK WOMAN watches the clock as it rings a few more times, each time exhorting her to wake up. Finally, she tires of it and shuts it off. She goes to her bureau to select her lingerie for the day.

She pulls out several items and inspects them. Each piece is more sensuous than the last. She selects a sexy black pair. She turns on the radio and goes to the bathroom.

She sits on the toilet for awhile, but does nothing. She flushes it anyway and scrubs the bowl with the brush. She carefully washes her body, paying close attention to her ears, neck, underarms, and between her legs. After she has dried herself with a towel marked with the initials of her employer, she looks at the towel for a moment, then violently throws it into the hamper.



## Bonnie Greer

Then she sprays on underarm deodorant and feminine hygiene spray. Next she carefully brushes and flosses her teeth. She checks her underarms again and decides to spray them once more.

While she is preparing herself in the bathroom, a bulletin comes on the radio:

### RADIO

#### Voice of Reporter

Shock and amazement swept this community today after the bodies of a prominent businessman and his family were found early this afternoon. A neighbor, who had come by for a visit, found the family still in bed, their throats cut. The suspect, the family maid for over twenty-five years, was found calmly sitting on the couch in the living room.

#### Voice of Neighbor

It was terrible. I came in and found them... yes, yes, I can go on... I came in and found them with their throats cut. The maid was just sitting there, just sitting there. She'd cleaned the house and cooked the meal just like nothing had happened. It was awful. She was just sitting there, like she was holding some kind of vigil or something. It was just terrible.

#### Voice of Reporter

As of yet, there is no motive for these gruesome slayings. Only last year, the maid accompanied her employers to Jamaica. She was to go with them to Europe, but she declined.

#### Voice of Another Neighbor

They were always doing things for her, taking her on trips, buying her presents, you name it. I just don't know. Goes to show you, you never know....



#### Voice of Reporter

The maid is at police headquarters, where she is being questioned. Stay tuned for more information. Today, the President...

The BLACK WOMAN, now wearing the exotic underwear underneath her sensible robe, reenters the bedroom and turns off the radio.

She seems even more tired than before.

Carefully, she selects fresh sheets. All of her sheets are designer labels.

She makes up her bed with the Yves St. Laurent sheets. She regards them for a moment, mentally comparing them to the first time she saw them in a Bloomingdale's catalog her employer had. But she does not like the St. Laurents and decides on the Christian Dior instead. She carefully puts the St. Laurents away and remakes the bed with the Diors. She is satisfied.

The BLACK WOMAN lights another cigarette and sits on the edge of the freshly made bed, careful not to disturb the sheets. She absently flips through one of the fashion magazines, then sees a picture that catches her interest. She compares her face to the face of the model, shrugs and collects the rest of the magazines scattered about, and puts them in their proper place in the rack beside her bed. She shakes the wig out and combs it with her fingers.

Then she does her morning exercises with her Jane Fonda "Workout" book, but quickly loses energy and lights another cigarette.

As she smokes, she dusts the night table. The authentic Nava

Above: Robbie McCauley as BLACK WOMAN. Photo: Jimi Giannatti

ho rug that she bought on a trip to Santa Fe with her employers is shaken out and put carefully back in its place beside the night table.

A small picture of a young boy sits on the night table. She picks it up and stares at it as she finishes the cigarette. Then she puts it carefully back into its place and regards the room for a moment. She makes a few adjustments here and there. Everything is in order.

The BLACK WOMAN turns the radio on. After listening to a few stations, she settles on one featuring a woman singing a blues song. She sings to it for a moment, then picks up her cigarettes and wig and moves the television into the kitchen.

## SCENE TWO

(Kitchen)

The kitchen is brightly decorated. Like the perfect kitchen one would find in *Bride's* magazine. However, it is also the kitchen of one who does not spend much time there. Everything is color-coordinated and sparkling.

The BLACK WOMAN lights another cigarette and begins her coffee and toast. She checks the mousetrap beside the refrigerator. It is empty. She takes out some fresh Roach Motels from the cabinet and places them in the appropriate places.

When the song is over, she turns the radio off and opens the kitchen window; the sounds of a poor and deteriorating neighborhood flood in: radios blaring, children playing in the street, sirens, people arguing, the demolition of buildings. It is a terrible din, but the BLACK WOMAN, who has heard it for many years, does not hear it anymore.

She takes a pail to catch the drip from her ceiling. Two small plants grown from sweet potatoes are growing in on the sill. She pours herself a cup of coffee and takes the plants to the kitchen table. She talks to them as she waters them and trims them. They are her children, her real companions.

She puts them back on the sill and butters her toast. She turns the television set on as she eats her toast; however, she is more interested in a fashion magazine than the program.

## ON VIDEO

Two black girls in their early teens are sitting on a window-sill in a tenement apartment.

FIRST GIRL

Cheryl Tiegs is the best.

SECOND GIRL

No, it's Linda Evans. She's the best.

FIRST GIRL

How can you say that? Linda Evans' got no style.

SECOND GIRL

What you talking about? You see them clothes she wears on "Dynasty"? Shit, besides, Cheryl Tiegs ain't got no lips.

FIRST GIRL

You got enough to give her some of yours.

SECOND GIRL

At least I don't look like a gorilla like you.

FIRST GIRL

Yo' mamma.

SECOND GIRL

Who's mama you talkin about? The one who found you in the garbage can?

FIRST GIRL

No, I'm talkin 'bout your mama... E.T.

They argue. Fade....

The BLACK WOMAN goes to the cupboard to prepare her breakfast. Her cupboard is filled with refined and processed foods. She selects a box of cornflakes, pulls down a brightly colored bowl, takes down the sugar bowl and milk, and returns to the table.

She eats the cereal, deep in thought. Sometimes she glances at the wig perched on the refrigerator. She picks up the remote control switch and turns on another program.

## ON VIDEO

A young French instructor is enthusiastically giving the French lesson. The BLACK WOMAN at first attempts to repeat the words, but slowly becomes lethargic. She gnaws on an apple as she watches the instructor.

## FRENCH INSTRUCTOR

*Bonjour. Maintenant pour notre leçon de français.*

(Good morning. Now for our French lesson.)

*J'adore dancer le tango.*

(I adore dancing the tango.)

*Mon repas préféré c'est le boeuf bourguignon.*

(My favorite meal is beef Bourguignon.)

*Nous vivons dans une belle villa au bord de la mer.*

(We live in a beautiful villa by the sea.)

*Ma fille a des grands yeux bleus.*

(My daughter has large blue eyes.)

*Ma vie est un jardin des délices.*

(My life is a garden of delights.)

*Nous aimons tous boire le coca cola.*

(We all love to drink coca cola.)

*Aujourd'hui nous partons en vacances pour visiter Capri.*

(Today we leave on vacation to visit Capri.)

*Ma vie est parfaitement heureuse et productive.*

(My life is perfectly happy and productive.)

*Notre leçon pour aujourd'hui est terminée. Merci et bonne journée.*

(Our French lesson for today is over. Thank you and have a good day.)

The BLACK WOMAN clicks off the set, then washes her bowl and puts it away. Once more she checks the mousetrap. She hums the blues song to herself as she sweeps the floor and tidies up a bit.

Then she takes down her ironing board in order to iron her plain uniform. She takes off her robe and begins to iron the uniform. She irons dressed in the sensuous lingerie. At first she irons routinely, but gradually she begins to iron more slowly.

## ON VIDEO

The BLACK WOMAN is slowly approaching an elegant ballgown. She puts it on slowly, smoothing it over her body. Then she picks up an elegant china teacup, so fragile that it is transparent. She holds the cup lovingly, but begins to tremble as tears roll down her cheeks. The teacup falls in slow motion and shatters into a million pieces. Slow fade.

## ON STAGE

The BLACK WOMAN slowly changes into her uniform, smoothing it over her body. In the street below, someone is playing Mozart on a "ghetto blaster." The BLACK WOMAN picks up a cup of coffee, but begins to tremble as tears roll down her cheeks. She drops the cup. It breaks.

The BLACK WOMAN stares at the broken cup. It frightens her. She cleans it up quickly.

She goes to a mirror to make up her face. She applies her makeup slowly, thoughtfully. She stares at her face.



#### ON VIDEO

The BLACK WOMAN draws an African mask on her face. It glows and shimmers. The woman's face is expressionless. The mask speaks for itself. Freeze. Fade.

The BLACK WOMAN wipes the makeup off her face, washes out the towel, and hangs it up to dry.

Then she takes the wig, lights another cigarette, and finishes styling it. She puts it on and studies herself for a long time. Then she quickly takes it off.

The BLACK WOMAN packs the shopping bag that she always carries to work. She closes the window. Checks the mousetrap once more and leaves for work.

#### ON VIDEO

The BLACK WOMAN is at police headquarters. She is being questioned after the murders. She is calm, relaxed, as if a great load had been lifted from her.

Policeman

Can you talk about what happened?

BLACK WOMAN

Yes, I can talk about it. (Pause.) I came to work like usual, but instead of cooking breakfast, I slit their throats.

Policeman

How did you do it?

BLACK WOMAN

They were sleeping. I went from room to room like picking flowers.

Policeman

Did anyone resist?

BLACK WOMAN

Well, some of them saw me coming. They smiled at me. They thought that I was coming to do something for them.

Policeman

Do something for them?

BLACK WOMAN

Yes. I am the maid.

Policeman

Then what did you do after you slit their throats?

BLACK WOMAN

Oh, well, I cleaned up and waited.

Policeman

Wait? Wait for what?

BLACK WOMAN

There was nowhere for me to go. My people would have taken me in, but that was no good. No good at all.

Policeman

Did you intend to do this?

(SILENCE)

BLACK WOMAN

I was tired this morning. You see, I had a dinner party to cook for. They were going away and this was to be a farewell dinner.

Policeman

Are you sorry?

BLACK WOMAN

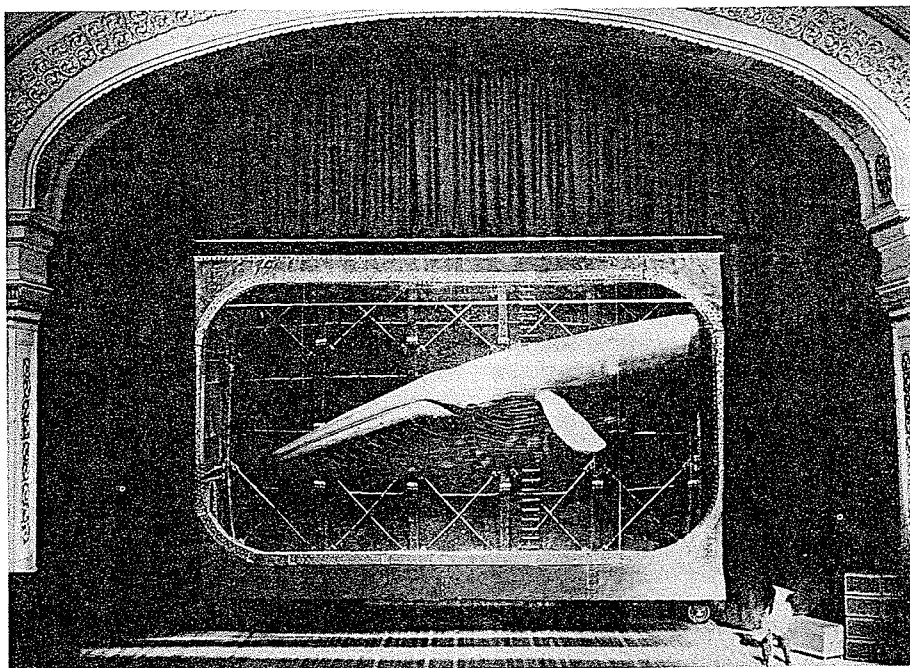
I had to cook for twenty extra people. I had soup to make, plus different kinds of meat dishes, breads, a big cake, and my special sauce. The mister likes my special sauce.

My nephew (I never did have children of my own), my nephew once asked me to cook my special sauce that I cook for the mister. He said, "Auntie, cook that special sauce them white people brag on." And he came right to my place and I had all the ingredients just waitin' there, and he was waitin' there with those big brown eyes just like his mama's and I started to make it. And as I was doin' it and all, I forgot. I halfway raised that boy, don't you know, and I couldn't cook for him. I just couldn't cook for him. (Pause.) I was tired, but I ain't tired no more.

The BLACK WOMAN has more expression in her face now than she has had for a long time.

FADE.

—CURTAIN—



Liebe Gray, *The Whale Concerts* (a theatre fantasy), with design and sculpture by Ph. Grisier, Mary House, Ruthie Anderson, Lance Parker. Live on the tuba, Liebe plays duets with the recorded voices of "Carol," a humpback, and "Julie," a great blue whale. On a gilded miniature replica of the Carnegie Hall stage, a tiny tractor tows out a whale in an aquarium and a Little Liebe figure with tuba. "I want a sense of vastness to convey balance and relativity—human life as part of nature. Whales have been existing in an adapting to their aquatic environment for 3 million years. Humans have been on this planet for less than 1 million." Liebe also tells Eskimo sea myths and interweaves tales of submarines and whales. "The show is not about saving whales. It's about saving the planet." Liebe Gray, now based in LA, has worked as actor, director, technician, and musician. She is a founding member of the Alice Stone Band. Photo: Sherry Ray Barnett.

# Interview with

Meredith Monk's comments are in roman and Stephanie Skura's in italic.

*One of the things that occurred to me is that you're working on a large scale, and there just aren't many women doing that. Do you have any ideas about why this is?*

Actually I do know another woman who's working on a very large scale, and that's Ariane Mnouchkine in France. She has a theater called Le Théâtre du Soleil. They usually do enormous productions. The place that she works is La Cartoucherie, which is an old munitions factory outside of Paris. They do enormous pieces, with maybe 100 people and the audience moving around; and now she's finished a whole film of Molière; and she's doing, I think, some Shakespearean things in a Japanese kind of style. She does very epic kind of productions. . . . She's very special. Her work is beautiful. So that's another person who's working that way.

Myself—the thing that's strange about it is that as I'm getting older I'm wanting to work smaller. I went to Berlin in 1980 and did *Vessel* again on a company in Berlin, and had 150 German extras for the third section, that outdoor piece. And I found myself not very interested in it. It's a nice piece; I know that it's great for an audience to see all the armies and motorcycles and all that, but as a working process I found myself not interested at all. I actually prefer working with people more closely, and I was much more excited about working with 12 actors of that company and seeing what happened in the process. It was more gratifying, on a human level, than having 150 strangers to deal with. I guess I don't need that kind of size to feel my power. I don't really think that's a reason why I did it in the first place; it had much more to do with a kind of vision. But as a process I enjoy working smaller.

*Do you think that's a factor when some people work large-scale—that they need size to feel their power?*

It could be. It could be that sometimes in your life you have to have that kind of expansive energy to be able to include a lot. Now, I'm more interested in a kind of depth rather than a breadth. And from the last large piece that I did—*Specimen Days*—I realized that in the act of performing there's something

that's less pleasurable for me. If I'm that dependent on other elements, I feel that the human element is not as strong. I'm much more interested in just knowing that either I do a bad performance or a good performance, or the people that are working do a bad performance or a good performance, and that decides whether it's a good performance or not—not whether a light comes on or a projector comes on or this comes on or that comes on.

*To me, that was always what was so miraculous—that you were able to do a good performance and deal with all these elements. Not just the number of people, but all the elements you're dealing with—visual and sound. . .*

I'm still dealing with those elements; it's just a smaller scale. The piece that I'm working on now still has film in it. I'm writing the whole score and working on the movement and working on the images and working on the costumes. It's still as multidimensional, but it's just that I enjoy having a rehearsal with six or seven or eight people that I know, and that I've been working with for a long time. There's a certain kind of language that's been built up over the years—rather than have 50 people I can tell to do something very simple, and it's very stunning to look at, but I don't know them. It also may have a lot to do with our time now. Because in the days that I did do pieces with large groups it was a real communal kind of thing. People would come and their kids would be in the show, and that kind of thing, which I loved very much. But in Germany I had a much different feeling. They were hired; 100 or 150 people were hired. And that was a very different kind of feeling than it used to be here. It's much harder to achieve that now, because people don't really have the time and the energy to do it.

It may just be that I'm refining and pulling my scale down so that I'll open back out again. That's another thing. I think that you can't just go on doing piece after piece after piece in the same form. You have to keep on questioning what you're doing and try to be as fresh as you can.

*One of the things about you being one of the few women in the world working on a large scale is that you then become a role model for women, because they don't see any women doing it. It just doesn't occur to you sometimes when you don't see anyone else doing it. For*

*me, when I was working with you, and I was at the time working on my very first piece, I know that was a really important factor—that I saw you direct this project, and so it didn't seem unnatural for me to do that. Just seeing you up there saying, "I like this; I don't like that," made it seem so simple and so realizable that I didn't really think twice—"Oh, can I be in that position? Am I good enough? Do I have enough experience? Do I have to be better than all the people who are in it?" I just saw you doing it and that was really important. So what is that like for you? Do you feel a burden?*

Sometimes.

*Ruth Malaczek talked about that too. One woman asked her, "What are the issues that would occur to you around this issue of Heresies?" And she said, "I can't stand being everyone's mother all the time." How do you feel about that?*

Some of these people think I'm just as much their father as I am their mother.

*OK, so how do you feel about being their father?*

That does get very tiring. Because you do realize as you go along that with a lot of things that happen, there's a kind of illusion that's built up, and people don't realize that that's what's in play. I always, myself, try to avoid that. I think I try to break down those illusions. If I see that someone is reacting to me that way, I'll throw in a monkey wrench. I remember there were a lot of times people did a saint thing to me, because they thought I played Joan of Arc and so I had to be a saint. I would eliminate that illusion immediately.

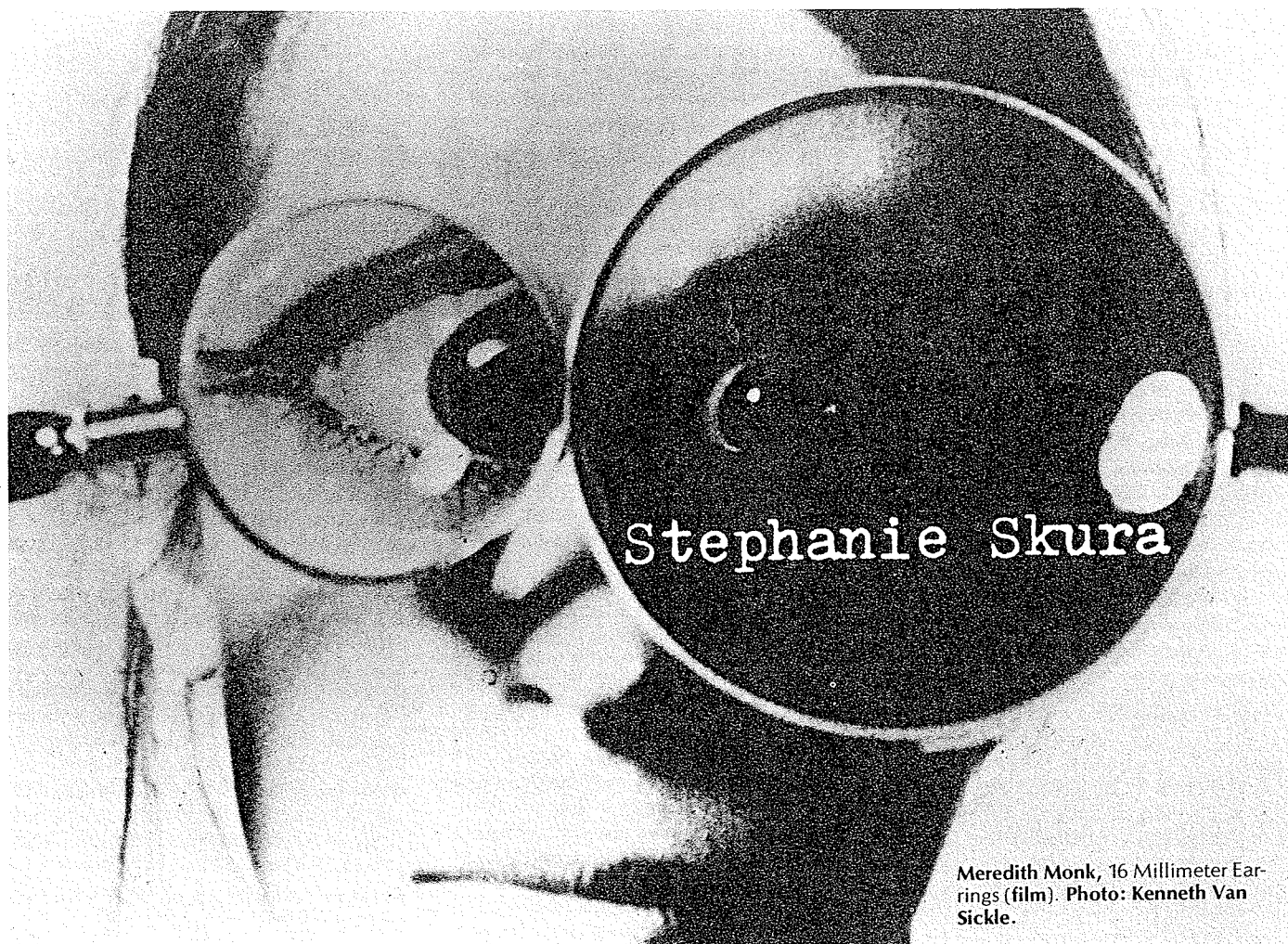
*Well, that's what bothered me about directing: I always felt like I had to be perfect, and I was just figuring things out. And I felt like I couldn't complain and I couldn't be weak and that I had to solve everyone's problems and be a perfect example, and it was really a lot of pressure. I didn't like that role.*

I've been working just about 20 years now, and the way that I see it, it's just somehow trying to keep going. That's about as far as I can go. As I'm getting older, I'm trying to be much more sensitive to those kind of things, even in an individual rehearsal. Just to nip them in the bud, so to speak. Because I see how, especially if you've been working with people for a long time, these patterns form.

*Your work reaches a lot of people; it has*

Meredith Monk's work includes *Quarry* and *The Games* (with Ping Chong).

# MEREDITH MONK



Meredith Monk, 16 Millimeter Earrings (film). Photo: Kenneth Van Sickle.

some kind of universal quality. And working on this magazine, which calls itself a feminist magazine, I had to define for myself what that was, which I'd never really done before. One thing that occurred to me, which is maybe a cliché, is that women are more comfortable with dealing on an unconscious level, not always a rational level. They don't really need to constantly articulate to themselves what it is they're doing and why. To me that's one of the strengths of your work and work that really reaches down to a lot of people deeply. Somehow you're able to tap your unconscious and you're comfortable with not knowing all the time what you're doing.

I've been finding, the more that I've been working, that if I can give myself the time, even in the rehearsal process, to slow down enough to really let my intuition operate, that's when I'm at my best. In a way I'm becoming more intuiti-

tive as I go along. I really know when I'm off now. It's really a thing of giving myself enough time in a rehearsal, and not feeling pressured: that I can give myself that time to change mode, to get back to that place where the intuitive thing comes out. And it's usually right. I'm actually going more in that direction.

So that's something that you're conscious of, and that you have control of—how to keep yourself...

I do and I don't. If I'm working well, I'm conscious of it. If I'm working badly, I can't help myself—that I'm intellectualizing everything. It just depends on how connected I am. In this particular thing that I'm working on now... I have to really almost stop the rehearsal, to just stop enough to get what the next thing is. Then my voice or my body tells me what the next thing is. And I think a

lot of times people—and I don't know if it's just women—really have a hard time trusting that part of themselves. A lot of it is just stopping enough to let that exist, not just putting this editor up right away and having a judge in the mind, cutting it off too fast. That takes a little doing.

Right. Because, in the rehearsal process, in order to have that happen, you have to sort of slosh through some stuff that might really look terrible, but you might have a sense that it could lead somewhere. Most people don't have tolerance for that, because it has to look perfect and presentable from the start.

But I think that's a learning process through one's life. I don't think you actually ever achieve that. Or you might achieve it for one piece, and the next one you go right back to the bad habit of doing what you said, which is that i



has to look perfect right off the bat. It takes a lot of time to learn how to give yourself permission to do that. With this form that I'm working on now, basically I think the form is right, but there's a lot of stuff that's going to have to be filled in or changed and this or that. But I'm allowing the form to exist right now. I do it over and over again until the little things start spreading out. Or filling out. But that's not necessarily the way that it happens all the time. Sometimes I also panic and get into that perfectionist thing right away, and then ruin a piece.

*Well, that's encouraging to know, that you can slide back and then get there again.*

I think it's not that linear a process. Unfortunately. Because you'd think once you'd learned that lesson, that's it for the rest of your working life. And it's not true. It depends on what kind of state you're in when you're working.

*Well, one thing the women on Heresies wanted to ask you about was archaeology. I thought maybe it had to do with this whole thing of getting down to your unconscious, being able to use your unconscious as a mode of functioning. And archaeology is such a metaphor.*

Freud always talks about archaeology as a metaphor for psychoanalysis.

*Does he? Sorry.*

I've never really been conscious of using archaeology as subject matter until *Recent Ruins*, where I really was using it as a theme. But I always have been aware of trying to uncover things that have always existed. I always feel that if I'm working well, that the form exists, and it's just a matter of finding it and allowing it to tell me what to do. When I feel like I'm working well, that's what the process feels like, more than it feels like me inventing. And that's really like archaeology; it's sort of like discovering—

*The pots are already there—*

Right. It's discovery as a mode of crea-

tion. You could say it's an older mode of the idea of creation than the way post-industrial people think of creation. Because the pre-industrial idea of creation did have a lot to do with using what was already there. Whereas the post-industrial revolution idea is that you invent something new to fit a function. You don't use this table as a hat. If you need a hat, you make a new hat. But I like the idea of using the table as a hat. That's much more the way that I work, which some people have called "primitive"—but I say that with big quotation marks.

I love the idea of archaeology. That you have a civilization, and then over that is another civilization, and over that is another civilization, and over that is another civilization. It's incredible.

*The other really broad subject I was thinking of is this whole business of working multimedia. You don't just do that by chance. There's some kind of commitment there.*

I think for me it's been a psychic necessity. Even through my childhood and late adolescence. I was very dedicated in the dance field, when I was 18 or 19. I took two or three classes a day, that kind of thing. But I also was singing, and I was also composing music, and it never felt right that I would just go and be a physical specimen. That's really what dance was about at that time. Physicality as a source of creation never interested me. For some people it's right; for me it was wrong. Integrating a lot of different elements that I was interested in, and was always interested in, became a way of integrating myself. That I could try to use as much of myself as I can. And that's always been how I felt; you should use anything you have.

There was a guy that came up to me when I was in Berlin, who was in a wheelchair, who had been in a bad car accident. And he said he was going to do a piece in a wheelchair. He had heard that I had said to somebody, who

had told him, "Use everything you have." And so he was going to do a piece about his accident, in the wheelchair. And that just seemed great to me. Really, you owe it to yourself and to everybody else to use as many centers—I would call it centers, or parts of yourself—as possible.

*More people are doing that now, but there's still an enormous amount of pressure—*

To be in one field—

*To specialize in one thing. That you're a better artist if you just specialize.*

Yeah, I have a lot of pressure from the officials and the government. I don't get included in history books; because I'm more than one thing, I'm not included. It's as if I'm not serious enough.

*In a way, you have to be even more serious, or more brave.*

But, on the other hand, I feel that ours is again—I keep going back to this "primitive" people thing—but I feel like ours is the only culture that separates its functions that much. In cultures that exist now and ancient culture, what I would call the three main elements of performing—which are dance, theater, and music—were pretty much integrated within each person. Storytelling, music, and dance were always done as one thing, not three separate things. . . .

But now there's a whole field that's called performance art. Richard Schechner said last week, while I was doing a workshop, "Before performance art, there was Meredith Monk." Well, in a certain way, it's true. I could never think of what I could call myself. And I still don't know what to call myself.

*Are you happy about that—"performance art"?*

Not exactly. I've never been able to find any way of saying what I do. If a cab-driver says, "What do you do?," I go "uh . . . um."

*Did you have trouble dealing with the business of your career?*

Yes, I still do.

*Did you have to really work hard at that, or feel like you were bending yourself out of shape?*

I guess that the way I dealt with it was that I ignored it for a long time, and then it got so bad that I was totally bankrupt, so I had to stop ignoring it.

*You might have been bankrupt, but you always had a lot of visibility for what you were doing. You seemed to have a good sense of how to make your work*



Meredith Monk, *Education of the Girlchild*. Photo: Peter Moore. L to R: Meredith Monk, Blondell Cummings, Coco Pekeys, Lee Nagrin, Monica Moseley, Lanny Harrison.

...after a while, OK, you've worked 20 years or 25 years, OK, so you've got this many grants, this many pieces you've done, you've got this long a résumé, you have these people that hate you, you have these people that love you, you've done this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece and then you go to your grave. And what do you think you have-- a piece of paper that tells you all the pieces that you've done? So what? The only reason for doing it is that you might have the joy of that kind of discovery on a day-to-day level.

*visible in the world. Maybe not raising money...*

Yeah. I always had a feeling which I still have—that one can do business and try to be as good a human being as possible at the same time. That's very important to me. I would never want to submit myself to a business mentality, at the expense of my work. I know a lot of times I've been lax about the business end of it. As much as it seems to you that I haven't, I have been. I've been kind of a mess on that level—real disorganized. But I really have felt much better doing it this way. I don't think that I would do very well with a lot of pressure—like doing a Broadway show or something like that. I really like to have my own sort of world that I'm creating, on my own terms, and in my own time. And that means maybe that I won't have as big audiences and be as sellable. But I really do want to have my own integrity and have my own work be the way that I want it to be.

*That's one of the remarkable things; you really have an air of integrity. Usually, observing people who are successful in the art world, we just don't find that—that it's really important to this person to be a human being at all times.*

It's really important to me. The other thing that I try to do very much is to keep myself in a risk situation, which is not what a lot of people like to do. Sometimes it makes me mad at myself; I sometimes am also very ambivalent and confused. If I could turn out the same shirt every time, people would like me a lot better. And then sometimes I feel, "She has this big show, and how come I don't..."—I go through all that stuff too. But then when I go back again to my real self, I think, "I really do want to try to risk, in every show, doing something new for myself. Even if people can't keep up with that, I just

want to try to do that." And that is much more difficult on the selling/marketplace kind of level; but for me, it's the only thing that keeps me going. Frankly, it's the only thing that keeps me alive. It may be just a temperament thing; it may be that other people are kept alive because they feel more secure—about doing the same form over and over again. But I get so thrilled when I feel like I'm pushing myself into something else.

*There are enough people out there who want to see you experimenting. Someone who is at your level with your career, still experimenting, is almost totally unheard of.*

That's what I want to do.

*Well, that has to do with the last thing I wanted to ask you. You once said to me, "Ambition will be the death of us all."*

Yeah, it's true.

*What are the dangers of ambition? What are the dangers of being successful?*

I think I've been very afraid and leery about success, because I've actually seen what happens to people when they have a lot of success. For me, the fact of having creative energy is all I can ask for, and I know that when I'm given that kind of energy I'm blessed. Now if I have that, I hardly could ask for anything else. I think my sister said this to me once: Real ambition is really the ambition to do a good piece. That's good ambition. But a lot of other stuff, ambition in terms of the world—I mean, you have to have some of that, so that you're not going to just do pieces in your own bathtub; you have to have a little of that just to have the courage to get out there at all—but I think that when that starts taking over, the creative thing dries up. That's what I've observed. And it's too much pressure. You get into a kind of whirlwind of pres-

sure, and the work suffers very much. And then there's a lot of pressure from the people around you, saying, "You should be more ambitious."

Yes, that's right, especially people in the company. They want you to be ambitious and have more money and all that stuff. For myself, if I start getting too carried away by trying to figure out what my place in the world is, I think I lose my essence.

*You start getting jealous.*

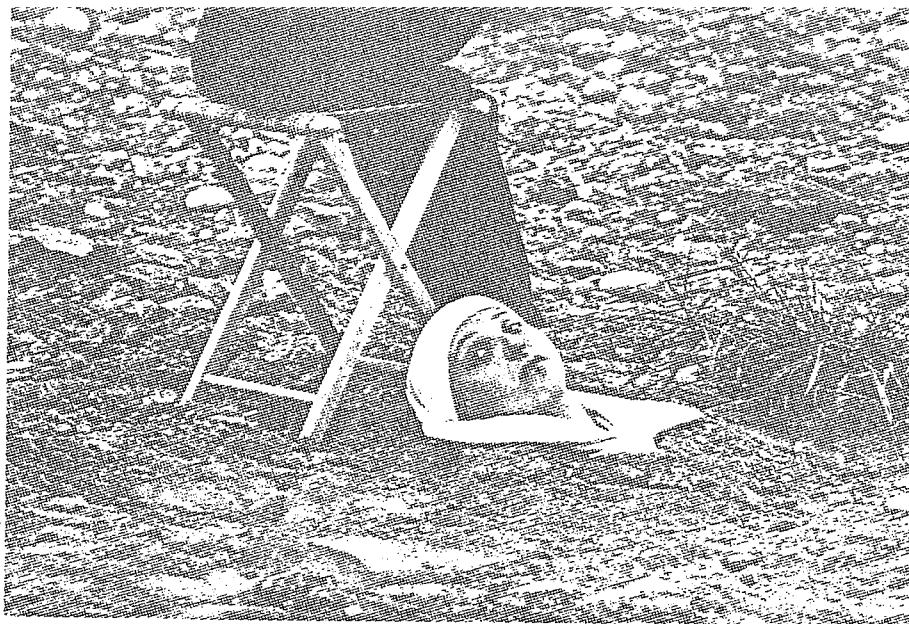
Yeah, it's a real waste of time. I found that for myself. It might be, for other people, that they need to have that to keep on going—I really do think it comes down to what your relationship to yourself is. And how much life gets into the work.

Do you think that there's a different generation of people that have a much different relationship to this ambition thing than we have? Because sometimes I think that I'm more like a dinosaur in terms of thinking about these things. I think there is a generation of people who are really really ambitious, period. It's not even a question; that's it.

*Yes, and it's really frightening to me.*

But I really do think that if you're getting the energy and the information, you're just blessed. It's nothing that anybody could ever take away from you. You know if you have it or you don't have it. I don't think anything can replace that. That's the only reason for doing it. Because after a while, OK, you've worked 20 years or 25 years, OK, so you've got this many grants, this many pieces you've done, you've got this long a résumé, you have these people that hate you, you have these people that love you, you've done this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece, this piece, that piece, and then you go to your grave. And what do you think you have—a piece of paper that tells you all the pieces that you've done? So what? The only reason for doing it is that you might have the joy of that kind of discovery on a day-to-day level. The only reason for doing it is really that you love doing it. And I say this very seriously, having really gone through a lot of pain, a lot of bitterness, a lot of this and a lot of that, and really really trying to figure out why I'm doing it. And I really don't see any reason for doing it except just that I love to do it. Because, otherwise, in the universe, it's meaningless. It's fine that some people are enriched by it, and that you are giving, in a way, everything that you have for other people and for your own fulfillment. But still, it's pretty meaningless in the overall big scheme of things. What it gets down to is: How do you want to spend your time on earth?

**Paula Jardine, Public Dreams, 1981**  
(a walking tour in quest of  
the spirit of the city).



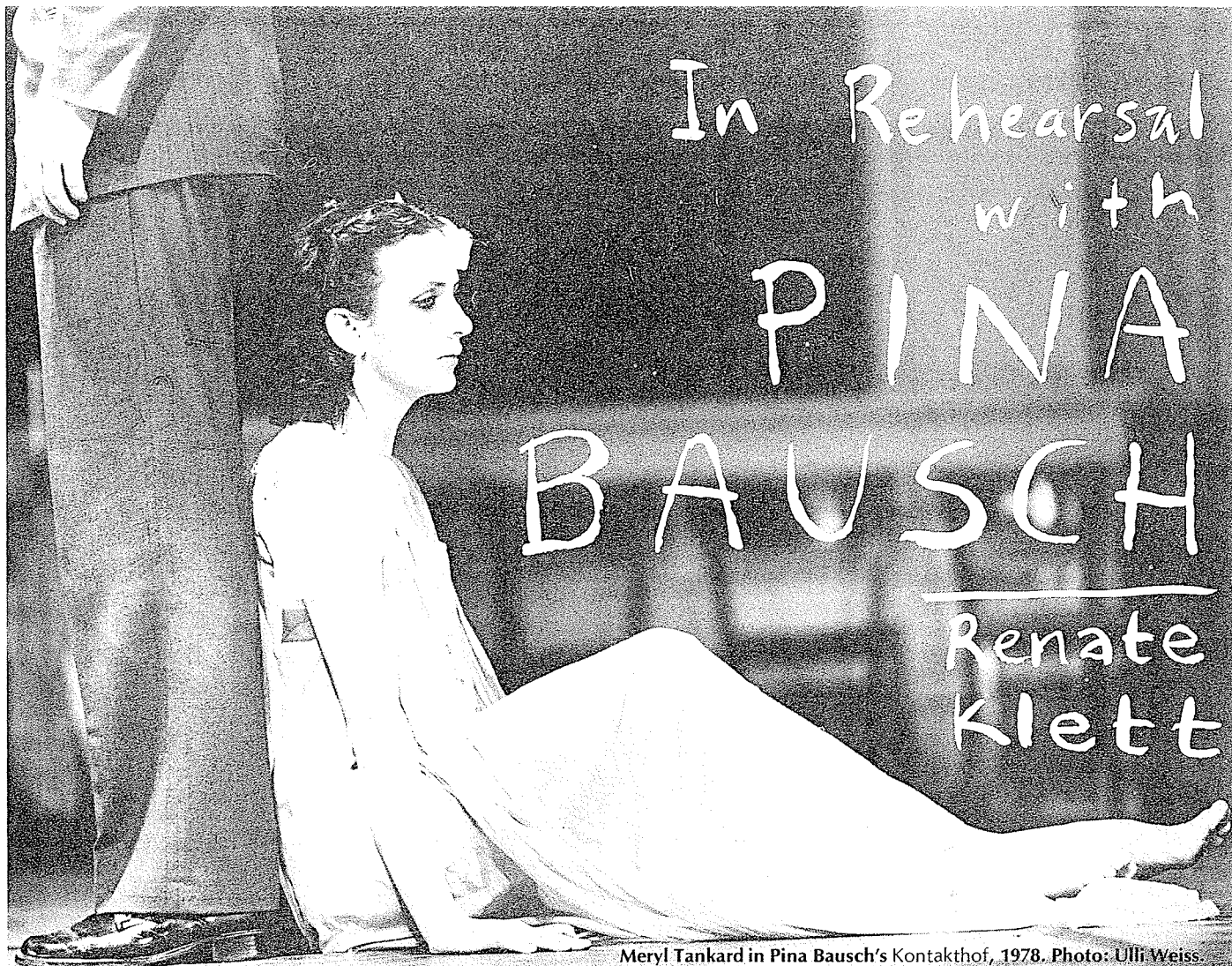
"I had no idea at all what was going on. It had no meaning at the time and has made no sense since. There were people doing something with purpose, playing out a function, objective, characterization. I had no idea what it was, but it was happening in the sense that it appeared to have meaning, or had meaning in the apparent purpose that the people had... and it was entertaining, in that I was drawn to it because one really did not know what was going to happen next. There were no parameters, no conventions. I mean, you assumed that no one was going to get hit on the head or buried too deeply, but we had no idea what was going to happen next."

—Audience participant

**Paula Jardine, A Parade for Spring, 1983**  
(a performance with colored banners, a  
"marching band," and 100 pregnant women).

Paula Jardine, based in Edmonton, Canada, writes, produces, directs, and performs using a wide mix of media.





Pina Bausch is the director of the Wuppertaler Tanztheater, which has gained international fame for its unique blend of theater and dance. It began about ten years ago as a ballet company attached to the opera house in Wuppertal, West Germany. At first Bausch choreographed ballets, but soon she began to work on modern operas like Bartok's *Bluebeard* and plays like *Macbeth*, adapting them for dancers. Then she started to create her own plays, loosely collecting improvised scenes around a given theme. Bausch's plays are nonlinear and deal with dreams and desires, associations and fantasies; the dancers/authors invent stories and actions that reveal their personal lives as well as a kind of collective unconscious.

What follow are excerpts from a report on rehearsals for *Kontakthof*, with which I assisted for four weeks.

The rehearsals take place in the "Lichtburg," a remodeled movie theater with old-fashioned lamps; a narrow stage in front of the screen, a row of chairs before it, a piano in the corner; the floor covered with a dance rug. (The stage set will later have a similar structure.) There are twenty dancers: nine women in pink rehearsal dresses, eleven men in suits. As most of them are foreigners—from twelve different nations—English is spoken primarily.

This is the third week of rehearsal for a piece that does not yet exist. Instead, there are themes: "tenderness," "desire," "I show myself, introduce myself." And there is music—a large number of tapes with tangos from the '50s, Rudi Schuricke. This report was first published in the German weekly *Die Zeit* and has been translated into English by Edna McCown. Renate Klett writes on theater for *Theater Heute*, a German theater magazine.

music from Chaplin and Fellini films, "The Third Man," and some classics (Sibelius).

There is no piece, so anything is possible. This doesn't make decisions easier; rather, harder. Pina Bausch has never been limited by a piece, whether it was *Bluebeard*, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, or *Macbeth*, she always made something of her own out of it—something that distanced itself greatly from the original and yet, in spite of it or because of it, was very close to the original. Here everything must be fantasized without the provocative, but also helpful, friction of a story and its characters.

The rehearsals are relaxed and disciplined. They start with an hour of classical ballet training, followed by work on the piece, which means gathering material. Pina suggests movements, specifies themes for improvisation. "Let's do something with our complexes," she says. "We all have complexes, so let's demonstrate them. Everyone show what they don't like about their bodies." She puts on blaring circus music. The dancers cross the room; stop in the middle; hide double chins or wide hips, a nose too big or breasts too small. The tall ones make themselves shorter; the short ones, taller. They exit with the frozen gesture; return with it on the next go-round, adding a new "complex." This is repeated four times, until they can hardly move for all the contortions they must make to hide their "faults."

Interestingly, what the individual finds unattractive, others find beautiful. It is striking that the women are much more composed and honest with this exercise than the men are—and therefore "better." (In the final piece "The Complexes" will be performed as a circus number, the music loud and

peppy, with commentary in Filipino by Luis P. Layag.)

### The Motif of Presentation

The dancers leave their chairs against the back wall; one after the other, they cross the room to the director's table and present themselves as if before a jury. They show themselves from the front, the back, in profile; present their foreheads and teeth, their hands and the soles of their feet. Their seriousness and concentration, along with the slow, kitschy music, make this self-presentation look very sad. Associations: auditioning, offering oneself, being vulnerable on stage and in life, slave-shows, prostitution, sell-outs.

Vivienne and Gary are a couple who show their naked bodies to each other. They sit far apart and undress slowly, shyly. They smile at each other and are ashamed. It is a very tender scene, touching...like two children who are curious and afraid.

The "Parade of Complexes" is a form of presentation, too. As is an exercise that is later dropped: showing parts of oneself—the shoulder blade, the little finger, the navel. Presentation also means couples who give instruction on inflicting pain, demonstrating with the routine gestures of a tired vaudevillian how to best poke each other in the eye or twist an ear. The gentleman offers his arm, the lady takes it, and they return to their seats—elegant, polite married couples, accompanied by schmaltzy music and the applause of the ensemble. This exercise is called "Aggressive Tenderness." Then there is "The Museum": everyone stands around as if at a party, until someone falls down, throws up, smashes against the wall. The others watch, indifferent or interested, as if looking at a work of art instead of a person.

Pina allows a lot of time to try things out. She doesn't interrupt the dancers, but allows everyone to live out the fantasy, even if something is all wrong. In this phase of rehearsal, the activity lies in the dancers' determining if, how, and with whom they want to carry through an improvisation. Sometimes they digress and lose themselves, thereby giving the stimulus for a new theme.

For me, this kind of work is more collective than what is usually called that. The mutual exchange and inspiration, the enjoyment and spontaneity remind me of rehearsals I saw at the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the directors of both groups, Ariane Mnouchkine and Pina Bausch, are women.

With Pina Bausch, every scene has a bundle of meanings that complement and contradict each other. Nothing is narrow or unequivocally definable; even apparently obvious meanings are suffused by a lot of minor doubts. When I try to pin her down to interpretations, she says, "I don't know exactly." That is true and not true. Of course she knows; only she does not know exactly. "Can one know exactly?" she asks.

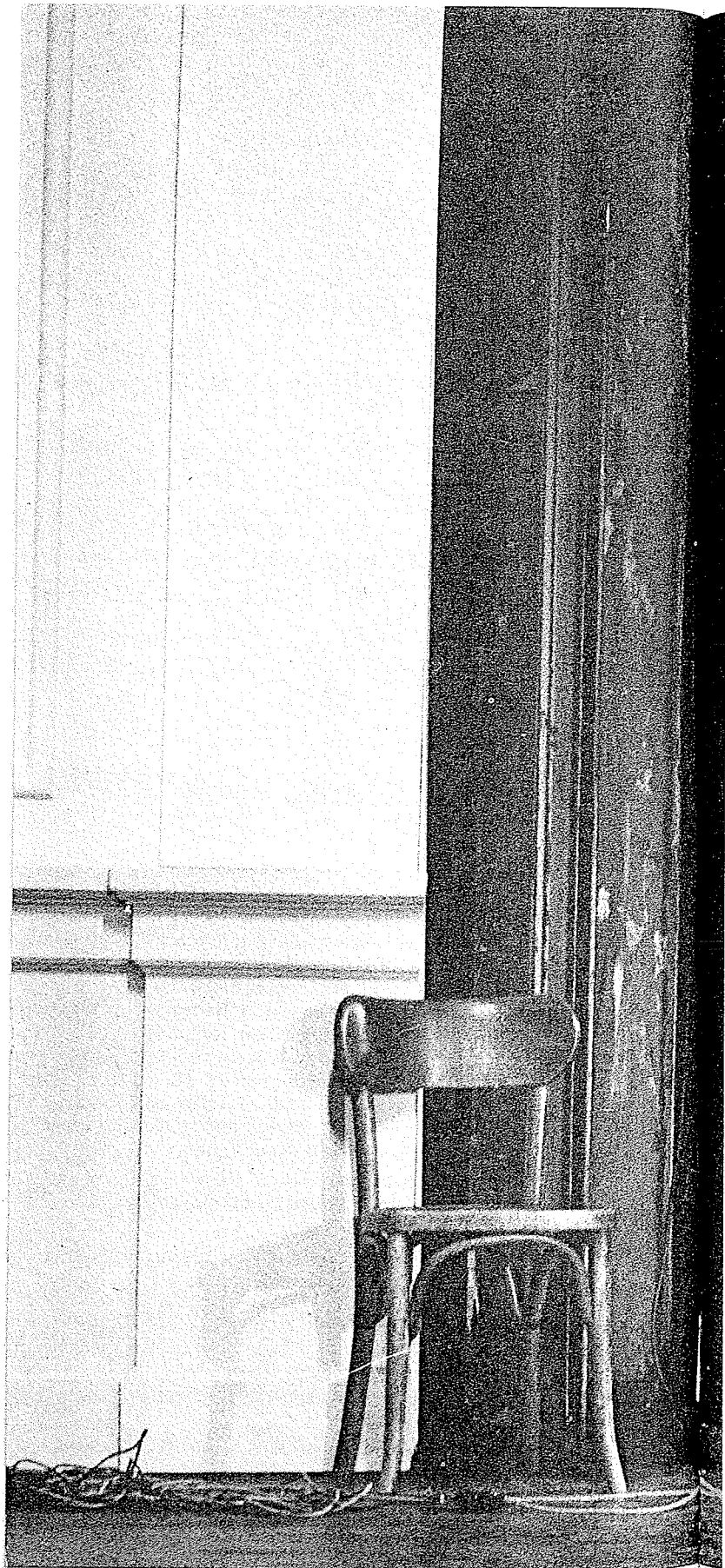
### Hits from the '50s

*Oh dear Miss Grete, when you dance with me  
I feel so deeply that you belong to me  
You are the sweetest, the most lovely creature that I know  
Whoever meets you I am sure will never let you go.*

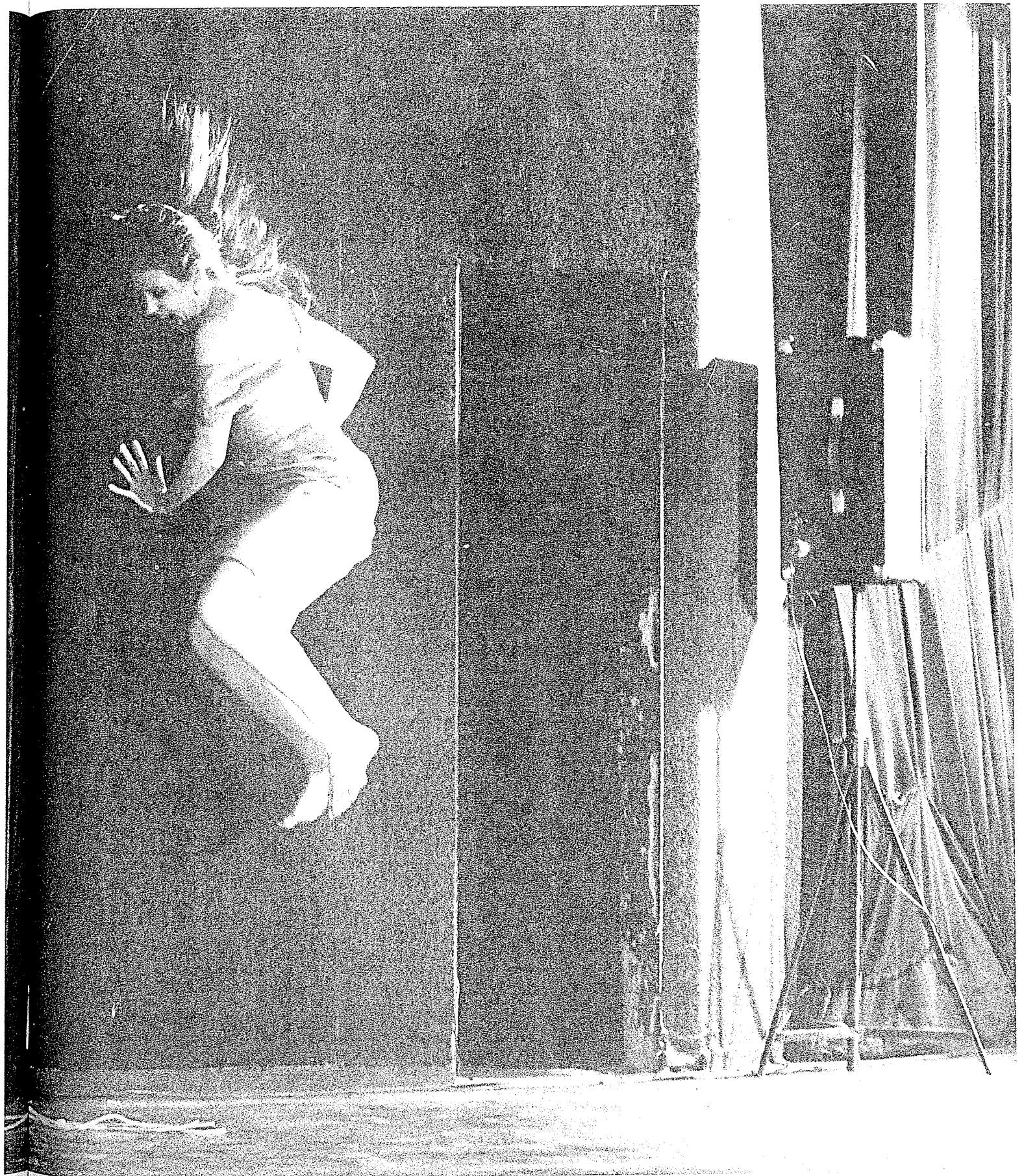
or

*Blond Clair, being next to you  
Makes me feel that my love is true  
Will you do me the honor  
And be my prima donna?*

Men sing to women, never vice versa. The women Pina invents, however, are much more active, more conspicuous than the men. Jo-Ann Endicott's "Wild Animal Walk" for "Blond Clair": long strides on tip-toe, voluptuously swinging her hips, stroking her arms and hair; she feels good in her body. Jan Minarek sits behind a music stand and nervously leafs through papers. As Jo-Ann floats by he grabs for her, runs after her, grabs again—always coming up empty-handed.









She is so at one with herself that she remains "untouchable"; she doesn't even perceive the grasping hands. A vamp straight out of the book and yet a parody of this cliché, invented by men who then added the epithet "man-killer."

*My lovely vis-à-vis  
As far as I can see  
You drink your wine here all alone  
I wonder what you'll say  
If I insist to stay  
To get the number of your phone.*

The social lie that women sitting alone—especially drinking wine—only wait for a man to take the situation in hand is fundamentally ridiculed: Pina Bausch's women are much too self-assured to hold themselves to such rules.

But she also shows, and with the same empathy, the men's side: their difficulties and frustrations, their helplessness and uncertainty. "Perhaps he's so unbearable because he is so desperate," she says. Or: "If you are brutal, it must be out of distress; otherwise it's just silly." Her sadness about the impossibility of being a couple is too existential to be satisfied by discussing the question of guilt.

With every day of rehearsal the material grows, and slowly the outline forms from which the piece can develop. A group of people in a closed space and what they do with/against each other. Couples—those who are and can't manage it, and those who will never be, although they dream constantly of it. Couples who seek, find, and immediately lose each other; or couples who can't separate and hate each other for it. An antipole: two boarding-school girls on a Sunday outing—a couple, too, with their pink dresses and expectations too great for a world too small. They fall in love and are unhappy, cry together, and comfort each other with a film on the life of ducks.

Many stories emerge and disappear again—stories that tell of loneliness and desire, referring to each other in such a concealed way that their common point is sometimes hard to find. Pina doesn't want a continuous storyline; that is too smooth for her. She seeks a logic coming from intuition instead of intellect. That explains the many repetitions and the penetrating detail, to which much of the audience is unresponsive.

The improvisational material adds up to a catalog of gestures and behaviors according to the themes of the piece, such as "tenderness." "Tenderness toward oneself" is the title of an exercise in which the dancers fondle their own bodies to fulfill their emotional needs. They caress their faces and arms; play with their hair; touch their breasts, their bellies; tickle their knees and feet. When everyone practices these gestures on themselves, the effect is harmonious and relaxed; when couples try it on each other, a struggle develops—affection becomes a burden.

This leads to an exercise in which all the women subject a man, and all the men a woman, to the gestures of tenderness. The small, playful gestures of the women have an unpleasant, pushy effect ("It's like ants on an apple," Pina comments), but the men's gestures appear to be really brutal, aggressive and possessive (the infamous slap on the ass). They command the woman, encircle her, lift her up, lay her down. Meryl bears it like a doll, her face expressionless. It is one of the strongest scenes in the play—a ceremony of submission, a desecration of the dead.

#### From Collecting the Material to Performance

Pina has a pile of paper scraps with all the exercises written down. "Chairs Fighting" reads one; "Suicide with Laughter," "Men's Step," "Narrow Shoes," "Shaky Knees." Every night in the Spanish restaurant we rearrange the scraps in a new order. "Line them up," Pina says, and we try to order them according

to themes or movements, music or dancers. This game of solitaire never ends, and sometimes we come up with a meaningful frame. The individual sequences change with the context in which they are placed. Jo-Ann's "Ow Aria" ("ow" in all pitches and moods) turns from funny to sad when it follows a tired waltz.

When I suggest solutions to this theater puzzle, I do so according to traditional patterns of action. I try to show a couple in its different stages or a character in its development. Pina finds this boring ("Now the whole secret's out"). She wants a total impression, from which the audience can choose the events it wishes to follow. Therefore she doubles scenes, complicates their structure by intermixing them. Many scenes run parallel, commenting on and overlapping each other. Sometimes ten different actions occur at once; then again everything is concentrated on one single event.

It is a form of theater that is too demanding for most of the spectators (and critics); they cannot handle the offer to assemble the piece themselves. It is a theater without instructions for use, without an ostensible structure and interpretation—a subjective reality that can be encountered only subjectively. A similar thing happens in Robert Wilson's pieces, but with a decisive difference which perhaps derives from the difference between men's and women's art. Wilson's point of departure is abstract: a mathematical, precisely calculated pattern that is repeated and varied many times. Pina Bausch, however, starts with the personal, making her private sense of rhythm and association the coordinator of the piece.

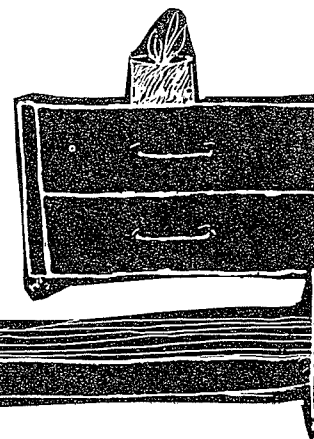
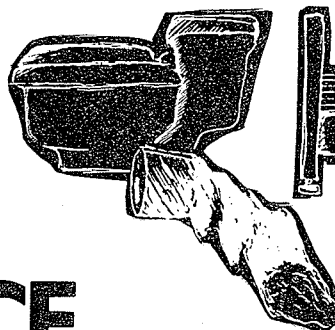
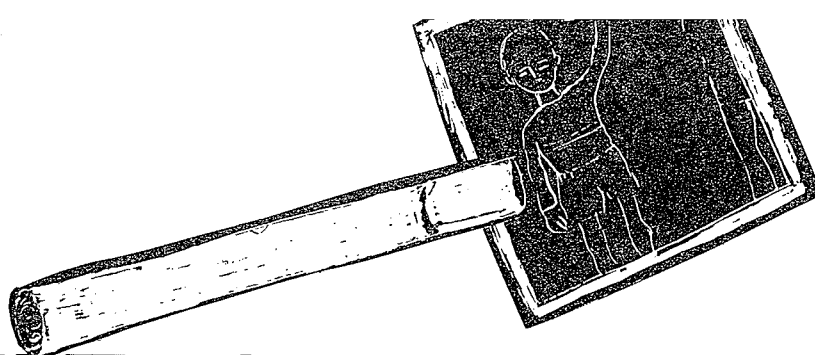
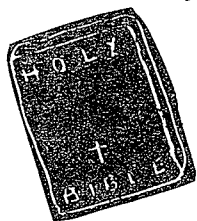
The more the play develops a shape, the more it changes. Scenes that appeared harmless in rehearsal take on an unexpected aggressiveness through the order in which they are rearranged. It has become a malevolent piece, even if there is much to laugh at. "Maybe the saddest thing about it is that it's so cheerful," Pina says. The empty space has something oppressive about it—an elegant prison in which people are at their own mercy and very small. The women wear evening dresses in gaudy colors, changing them often; the men are in dark suits and use lots of hair oil. The elegant style only seems to underscore the wretchedness of the tricks everyone plays on everyone else. "I am standing on top of the piano and threaten to fall off," says Vivienne Newport in one scene. "But before I do, I scream very loudly so no one will miss it."

There is still no title. We search the rehearsal protocols and songbooks, make a long list of words and quotes that suit the piece. Finally Pina comes up with a title she had proposed in the beginning: *Kontakthof* (contact zone). Some like it, others—mostly men—don't. *Kontakthof*—this terrible word refers not only to brothels; prisons and juvenile institutions have their *Kontakthof* too. We test people, ask strangers and friends what they associate with the word. A lot of men emphasize that nothing occurs to them at all. That confirms it: a title that causes so much suppression must be good.

I cannot summarize the work of the Wuppertaler Tanztheater from the four weeks I spent with them. Too much defies description, especially if the work is extremely subjective as Pina Bausch's is. There are also the many long nights, the lack of sleep, too many cigarettes—an entire rhythm of life dictated by the work and reflecting back on it. This cannot be conveyed except in terms of voyeuristic theater gossip.

#### The End

Anecdotes have something unserious about them, but I want to relate one nevertheless. When I ask Pina what kind of theater she likes, she tells me a story. Two people are speaking about Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*. Says one: "The part I liked best was when the white horse slowly crossed the stage." Says the other: "But there was no white horse." Says the first: "But I saw it quite clearly." Pina Bausch: "Theater where something like this is possible is theater I like."



# SCRIPT FOR A WOMEN IN PRISON PERFORMANCE

Clare Raulerson

## THE CAST

Call together a large group of women, anywhere from 20 to 400. The women can be any age, any class, any height and weight. Make sure the majority of the final cast are Black or Chicano or Puerto Rican, or whatever non-majority group peoples your own community. This ratio should hold true for the prison population cast regardless of the population breakdown of your city.

Select at least three of these women to play the non-prisoner roles of guards and classification officers. Select another small group of women to play recently convicted women who have just arrived at the prison. The rest of the women will be the general prison population.

You may need additional cast members for the following roles, should you incorporate all the performance scenes into your piece:

- a parole hearing examiner
- a state legislator
- the assistant warden of the prison
- a nurse
- an x-ray technician
- many people with helmets and billy clubs who are part of a prison riot squad.

The following roles need not be cast because these people are rarely at the prison:

- a prisoner's public defender or private attorney
- the prison doctor
- a prisoner's children
- a prisoner's family.

Their absence is felt.



## THE SETTING

An abandoned zoo is ideal, but may not be practical. Any group of drafty and dilapidated buildings in the middle of nowhere will do: an abandoned farm, a barn, a warehouse. It is important that there be no adequate heating or ventilation, aside from one office which is air-conditioned for the prison administrators. For realism's sake, the performance site should be at least 50 miles from the nearest city and *not* on a public transportation line. This may make travel to and from the performance difficult and/or costly, just as it is for the families and friends of prisoners.

Clare Raulerson is a 31-year-old Florida house painter, named after her grandmother. Between houses, she is working on a new play called *Xena and the Salamanders*.

## THE PROPS

*Each prisoner should have:*

A prison dress, either gold, blue, or pink, designed along the same lines as a waitress uniform.

A pair of flip-flops or thongs, no matter what the weather is like and usually worn without socks.

A cot with a stained mattress, one inch thick.

A wooden bureau.

One (1) family photo, no larger than 7" x 5".

One (1) plant in a discarded Planter's Peanuts tin. This plant sits on the bureau.

One bureau scarf crocheted by the prisoner as part of her rehabilitation.

A Bible, the only book certain to go unchallenged by the prison administration, and the only book a woman prisoner can take with her if she is sent to solitary confinement.

As many cigarettes as she can afford, or as many cigarettes as she can smoke. Preferred brands: Kools, Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights, and Marlboros.

A bar of prison soap, unless she can afford to buy soap from the commissary, which smells of disinfectant and causes a skin rash on most women.

Copies of her trial transcript (if she had a trial—many women in prison are there because of plea bargains), and other legal papers. The papers are usually frayed along the edges from being folded and unfolded so many times while the woman tries to understand what has happened to her.

Half of the women should have ill-fitting, prison-issue dentures, which will never fit properly and which will cause them to cover their mouths while they laugh or chew.

*Each guard should have:*

A set of keys to all cells so she can lock up the women at night. She should also have a special set of keys for the confinement cells, where she will lock up disrespectful prisoners for "disobeying a verbal command" or having contraband—like a fried chicken leg—in the cell. The confinement cell will be a separate part of the stage: a room small enough so you can touch both walls at the same time when you stretch out your arms. No cot, just a mattress on the floor. No table or chest. Prisoners can eat their food best by putting the tray on top of the open toilet.

A list of all prison rules and regulations governing prison behavior. This list should never, under any circumstances, be made available to the prisoners.

A deep disdain for women in prison, sometimes stretching into hatred. She should be especially skeptical of a prisoner's ability to be a mother.

A smoldering rage at being a guard at a women's prison, where she will receive lower wages and fewer benefits than the guards at men's prisons.

*Each classification officer should have:*

A file on each prisoner, her "jacket," with court documents, police records, etc.

A dog-eared copy of the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Interview (MMPI), developed during the 1930s to diagnose mental illness among European immigrants in Minnesota. The test is still in use today and consists of hundreds of questions. For example: "Do you believe you are an agent of the devil?"

Total control over a prisoner's custody status (minimum, medium, maximum—meaning what level of security the prisoner requires), cell assignment, and "rehabilitation" program. She will also assign the prisoner to a job skills training program, such as:

A large, drafty room full of sewing machines where prisoners sew underwear for the men in prison. This is called "Tailoring."\*

A room with a large supply of rollers and makeup and a second-hand barber's chair, where the women can set each other's hair (being careful not to touch too much or risk being written up for "Improper Display of Affection"). This is called "Cosmetology." Women in prison also may receive training in "Runway Modeling."\*

An office with 10 broken typewriters and some key-punch machines on which the prisoners fill out forms, update prison records, and file. This is called "Clerical Skills."\*

## THE PERFORMANCE

Assemble the cast and props. Plan on staying at the performance site for several days. Bring along a lot of high-calorie, high-starch, low-protein, low-nutrition food: macaroni and cheese, biscuit makings, potatoes, canned Vienna sausage (for the canteen), candy bars. Take a supply of Tylenol, but no other medicine or vitamins, for the prison clinic. Take along some Kotex and some tampons. The prison will usually supply the Kotex, but you must buy tampons at the canteen. One prison only carried Rely brand tampons (removed from the market because of a toxic shock syndrome connection) until there was a near riot.

The season is important. Schedule the performance for either the winter or the summer. Then you will capture the true ambience of prison: frigid or stifling. Do not take along extra clothes, blankets, fans, or air conditioners unless you are cast as one of the guards or classification officers.

And take a large supply of fluorescent and regular light bulbs. The lights never go off in prison.

Transport the women and the props to the performance site, using at least one van for the trip. The van may be used in one of the performance scenes.

### Scene One

The five new prisoners meet with their classification officer. Meanwhile, the other prisoners are: sweeping, mopping, smoking, watching TV, cooking, cleaning, sewing underwear, playing cards, swatting flies. The classification officer hands all five women a copy of the MMPI. Three of the five women cannot read, but they are too embarrassed to say so. They

\*These are examples of prison job skills training programs. The on-the-job sewing training typically occurs in states where there is no textile industry. Cosmetology licenses are rarely issued to ex-prisoners, and how many runway models in Paris and New York are former prisoners?

randomly mark the papers. The classification officer will then use the results of the test to assign their custody status, work assignment, and rehabilitation program.

Two of the women are pregnant—one visibly, one not. The classification officer hands the visibly pregnant woman a form to fill out: The Infant Placement Form. The form will show what will happen to the woman's child after s/he is born. Her choices are: (1) Family Placement, (2) Foster Care, or (3) Adoption. The classification officer tells the woman to think it over and return the form the next day.

The other pregnant woman does not tell the classification officer she is pregnant. (Her thoughts can be made verbal by a spotlight and having the other women freeze while she speaks.) She is afraid. She has heard that women in prison who are pregnant are sometimes forced to have abortions and she wants to keep her baby. It is her second child. She had a baby boy when she was 15 and her parents forced her to give up her son for adoption. Since she's been in prison, her family won't even speak to her. This baby is all I have, she thinks. She decides to keep her pregnancy a secret for as long as she can.

### Scene Two

The five women are led to their beds by another prisoner. All the beds are in rows, with barely three feet between them.

Slowly at first, then faster, the other women prisoners walk by the new women and offer advice, admonitions, support. Some whisper; some lean close. Some walk by and talk out of the side of their mouths without missing a step:

"Don't ever let them catch you sitting on your bed during the daytime."

"Don't let the matron see that gum."

"Don't cross Mrs. Wright. She's the fat white guard and she's meaner than a polecat in a hot box at high noon."

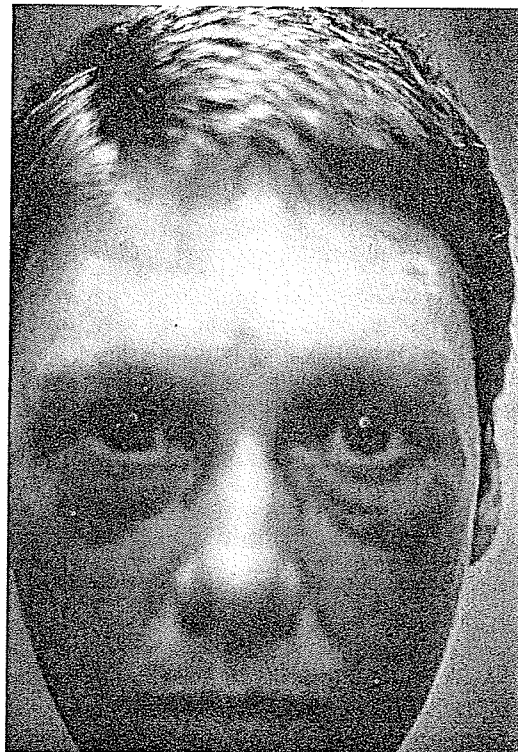
"Don't use the soap. Buy some."

"Don't eat the meat. Sometimes it's so bad it's green, but sometimes it's still bad and you can't tell by looking at it."

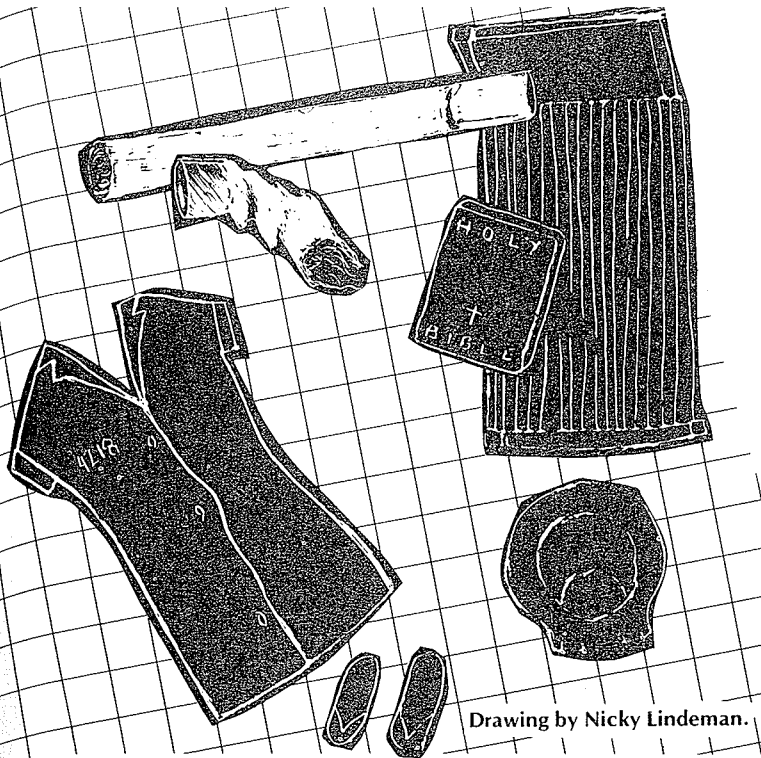
"If you got a pain get to the clinic line early or you won't never get no pills."

"You, you're pregnant. You're 'sposed to get a special diet. Extra milk."

**Tannis Hugill, *Who Are You?*, color xerox (based on a performance about sexual violence). Tannis Hugill, a choreographer/performance**







"But you gotta get your lawyer to breathe heavy on 'em before you get it."

"Where you gonna work? The kitchen? That's good. You can get extra biscuits in the morning. Biscuits are the only decent thing they make here. I gained 30 pounds on biscuits alone since I been in."

"Do whatever they say. Don't never ask 'Why?'"

### Scene Three

One of the women in the general population goes to the prison clinic and gets in the "pill line." There are many, many other women in line. When she gets to the clinic window, she tells the nurse she has been having chest pains and some trouble breathing. The nurse gives the woman some Tylenol for the chest pains and says she will tell the doctor and to check back with her in the morning. The entire exchange takes less than one minute.

artist, directs *A Clear Space*, an experimental dance-theater company in NYC.



### Scene Four

One of the women in the general population has a meeting with a parole hearing examiner. She has been in prison for one year already and the hearing examiner will decide what to recommend to the parole commission about her release date. She has been sentenced to five years for grand theft: stealing three dresses from Sears.

The hearing examiner does not speak to her. He motions for her to sit down next to him while he fills out some papers. Then he hands the papers to her to read and motions for her to sign them. She tells him she cannot read. It is an act of courage for her.

He sighs and jerks the papers out of her hand. He reads them aloud, mumbling, going too fast for comprehension. She listens hard. She is afraid to ask him to slow down or repeat something. It sounds like he is adding some extra months to her time because it says in her record that she once used drugs.

"But what do drugs have to do with it?"

"You are a drug addict."

"But I haven't used drugs in more than three years!"

"You are a drug addict and therefore you are a bad parole risk."

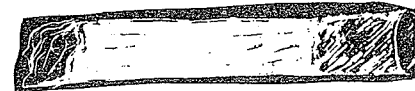
"But I'm clean. I'm in a drug rehab program here at the prison. I go to AA..."

"If you have any complaints take them up with the parole board. Sign here." He hands her a pen.

"What happens if I don't sign?"

"I'll call in a guard and have you written up."

She signs.



### Scene Five

The woman who went to the clinic to complain of chest pains is knocking at the guard's office. She is clutching her chest and she has trouble breathing.

"What do you want? Why aren't you at work?"

"Please. I can't breathe. My chest hurts so bad."

"You know sick call isn't until 6:30. Go back to work and then go to sick call."

"But I can't breathe!"

"You sound like you're breathing well enough to me. There's nothing I can do about it. Go on now."

The prisoner starts to walk away and then collapses on the floor. She is gasping and convulsing. The guard stands dumbfounded for a moment and then calls out to another prisoner to fetch a nurse from the clinic. She bends over the prisoner and unfastens the top buttons of the prisoner's dress. She rubs her hand, patting it, saying, "Come on now. Come on now. You're going to be just fine."

An x-ray technician comes running from the clinic. She is pushing a tray of instruments in front of her. There is an oxygen tank and other gadgets. She tries to hook up the oxygen tank but it doesn't work. "It's empty," she cries. "Go get another tank from the clinic."

The prisoner suddenly stops convulsing and lies quiet on the floor. The nurse feels for a pulse and then starts CPR, a rhythmic pressure on the prisoner's chest. The technician counts under her breath.

After a few minutes she is still getting no response.

"She's dead," the technician says. She looks at the guard. "Why didn't you start CPR immediately?"

"I haven't had the training yet," she says.

### Scene Six

The visibly pregnant woman goes into labor a month early. She goes to the clinic as soon as the contractions start, but the nurse assures her it is too soon and probably false labor. She sends the woman back to her cell. The prisoner has contractions all through the night. She is afraid she might deliver in

her cell and manages to make her way, slowly, back to the clinic.

The nurse examines her, still saying it is far too early, and finds the woman's cervix is fully dilated. The woman is hustled into a wheelchair, with her arms strapped to the chair ("For security reasons"), and she is taken to the prison van. They must drive 30 miles to the nearest hospital.

The woman delivers in the back of the van. She nearly dies from loss of blood because the prison nurse pulls too hard on the umbilical cord when she is checking the baby and the placenta disengages improperly. The baby has slight brain damage resulting from a respiratory problem that impedes the flow of oxygen to the brain—a problem that cannot be corrected in the back of a van. The baby is a girl.

#### Scene Seven

The women whisper, furtively, carefully. They pass notes. They are organizing a strike. They have heard about the brain-damaged baby and the almost dead mother. It is the final blow.

The next morning all the women sit down in the prison courtyard. They have a list of demands and they want to talk to the warden.

The warden is out of town at a "corrections" conference in New Orleans.

The women do no damage. They sit quietly. They do not move. The assistant warden talks to them over the prison loudspeaker:

"Now ladies. I don't know what the problem is, but I am certain we can work it out. Just go back to your rooms and there won't be any trouble. If you'll just go back to your rooms now, ladies, I can assure you there will be no reprisals. Go back to your rooms. If you are not back in your

rooms within the next 15 minutes I will be forced to more drastic measures. I am sure you don't want that."

He does not ask them what they want or why they are sitting down in the courtyard.

A few of the women do go back to their rooms, but most remain seated.

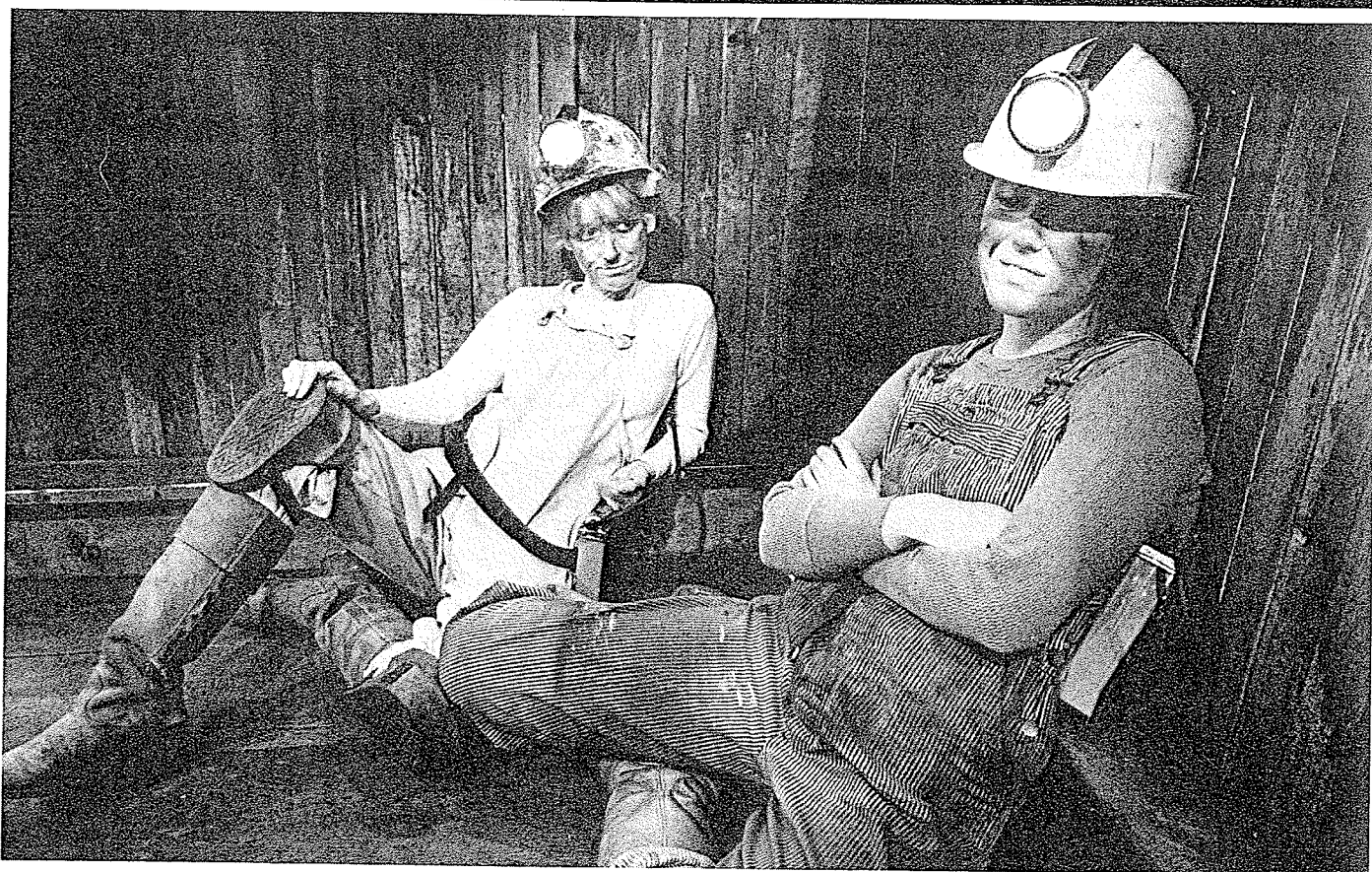
The assistant warden tries another tack. He sends word, via Mrs. Wright, that he will meet with five of the women to discuss the situation. The women have already chosen who will speak for them, and the five spokeswomen go with Mrs. Wright into the administrative offices. They are immediately taken to the local jail and told they may face criminal charges.

The assistant warden cannot locate the warden. He is out on the town and no one knows what fine restaurant he is patronizing. The assistant warden decides to send for the riot squads from several men's prisons. As the riot squads arrive, the press gets a whiff of the action and begins to mill about and ask questions. The assistant warden says, "Everything is under control." One enterprising TV station gets its traffic helicopter to fly over the prison for pictures of the women sitting in the courtyard.

The riot squad soon overpowers the women and they are forced back into their cells. Several women are injured, and denied all but the most rudimentary medical treatment. The five women in the local jail remain there, awaiting trial on criminal charges stemming from "ringleading" the strike.

The helicopter film is on the 6 o'clock news. The next day the newspapers run a couple of paragraphs about the successful quashing of the sit-in. No one ever finds out what the women wanted or why they sat down in the prison courtyard.

The brain-damaged baby girl is put into foster care and her mother returns to the prison with a prescription for iron pills that the prison clinic never fills.



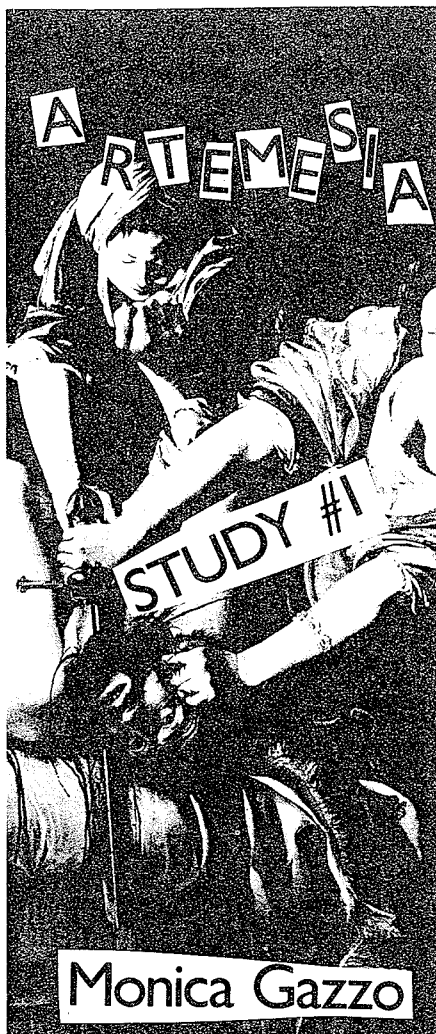
Kristin Jolliff (L) and Mary McDonnell (R) in Paula Cizmar's *The Death of a Miner*, directed by Barbara Rosoff at the Women's Project, American Place Theatre, NYC. Since 1978 the Women's Project has offered career help, play development sessions (workshops, cold and rehearsed readings), and fully mounted productions of women's work. Their address is: 111 West 46th Street, New York, NY 10036.

In Judith Beheading Holofernes the 17th-century painter Artemesia Gentileschi expressed her outrage at being raped by Agostino Tassi, her teacher, at age 17. This work in progress uses the painting and excerpts from the trial for rape (during which Artemesia was tortured and left to defend herself alone) to reflect on violence and love.

The performance began with a series of dinners at Gazzo's loft, where artists discussed California feminist performance art and work related to the issue of sexual violence against women. These conversations serve as documentation in an installation encountered before the performance space. A bed covered with silk sheets dominates the performing area; it is there that a woman (Danielle) dressed in red tells stories about rape and incest in her childhood. Slides projected on two walls beside the bed show the painting and images of contemporary city environments, blood, pornography, etc. The text that follows is a collage of Danielle's contemporary accounts and Artemesia's declarations at the trial for rape in 1612.

Monica Gazzo, a native of Argentina who lived and worked in Europe for 12 years, is now based in Los Angeles.

Artemesia Gentileschi, Judith Beheading Holofernes, Uffizi, Florence.

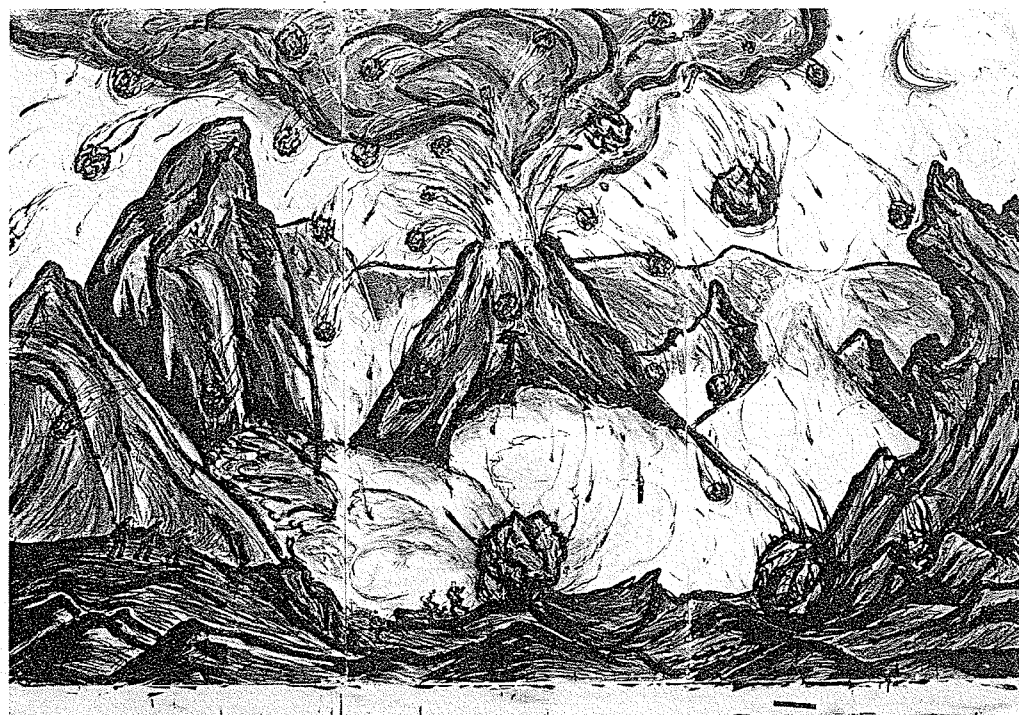


I was seven, my sister twelve. we shared a bedroom. my bed on one wall, hers on the other. my father came in one night, which was very rare. I was turned towards the wall, pretending to be asleep. I heard some muffled sounds—something like clothing. The next thing I heard was my sister saying, "Daddy! Please don't! Daddy! I'll tell Mommy on you!"

When we were at the door of the bedroom, he pushed me inside and turned the key in the lock and after it was locked he threw me down on the edge of the bed with his hand on my breast. . . .

I was walking down La Cienega Boulevard. My arms filled with books. My hair to my waist. It was Sunday and the streets were quiet. As I walked I felt a strange presence behind me. I turned to look at the reflection on a shop window. As I turned a man grabbed my head and pulled it back. Hostilely he said: "If you scream I'll cut your head off." I heard the sound of the garden shears opening. I screamed as loud as I could. My head sprung free as he cut my hair. Paralyzed with fear I watched as he ran, again feeling my legs beneath me. I walked home alone, looking behind me every second.

And after he had done what he was doing he got up off me and as I saw I was free I made straight for the drawer in the table and took out a knife and went at Agostino saying, "I'm going to kill you with this knife because you have brought shame on me."



Helen Oji, "Vesuvius," Volcano Series #28, 1983, charcoal and acrylic on paper, 96" x 144", courtesy Monique Knowlton Gallery. Photo: Alan Kikuchi. Helen Oji is a visual artist living in NYC.



# POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

A discussion by

**SL:** Why did you start doing performance art?

**LL:** Actually I'm not doing any right now and I'm still trying to figure out why I was doing it for several years. My friends say I'm an exhibitionist anyway, but performance also provides a sense of immediacy, feedback, and direct communication I miss in writing. The boundary-blurring aspect is what interests me. I was looking for a way to integrate fiction and art criticism and organizing and lecturing. It allowed a space for me to work between all those things. I started by doing some slide-fiction pieces in a loose lecture format. These led to *Propaganda Fictions*, where I was talking to, or yelling at, an audience within a very stylized framework. In *Help! I'm Being Helped* (with

Suzanne Lacy is a feminist performance artist in LA; Lucy R. Lippard, a cultural activist in NYC.

© 1984 Suzanne Lacy, Lucy R. Lippard

Joan Braderman and Mike Glier) and in my collaborative work with Jerry Kearns, there was some actual "acting" involved—however low the quality.

**SL:** Your evolution brings up the issue we all struggle with: What is appropriately called performance art? Much of what I do I label performance because there's nothing better to call it. At this time, one definition of performance is "that which cannot be encompassed by other forms."

**LL:** So what were your reasons for starting to do performance?

**SL:** In the Fresno Feminist Art Program in 1970, Judy Chicago used performance as a teaching tool—an almost therapeutic theatrical exercise. We learned to express directly our experiences from consciousness-raising sessions. Those first raw works were later polished for public presentation, particularly when many of us migrated to Cal Arts. It was there that I became more interested in the genre, possibly be-

cause of some of the faculty (Allan Kaprow was there), possibly because by that time I had already been through several years of college, and the prospect of spending so many more years to develop sculptural or painting techniques seemed grim. Performance was immediate, exciting, and most important, conceptually rooted in the "real world."

**LL:** Was it political need, then, that brought you to performance?

**SL:** I went into performance art for personal reasons, not political reasons, and I have learned, finally, to trust that the politics—just based on the way I look at life—will inform the work. The problem with many artists' conceptions of "political art" is that they feel that somehow they are being called upon to use a different process in making their art, to start with a rational process as opposed to an intuitive process. It seems to me what's important is to politicize yourself as a person and then



Florence F. Noyes as "Liberty" in Suffrage Pageant, 1913.

# ART :

## Suzanne Lacy and Lucy R. Lippard

learn to integrate those politics into everything you do. As my projects take shape, they are informed at several points by a political as well as an aesthetic evaluation. But I rarely start by saying, "I think I'll do a performance about the oppression of older women." When I begin that way, the images rarely have any life. (The Hillside Strangler performance Leslie Labowitz and I did was an exception to this, but I've done lots of other performances that weren't, unfortunately.)

**LL:** Where does it start—the fact that you are making pieces about older women or some other subject?

**SL:** I never know in the beginning. An image occurs, something stands out about it and I begin to explore it. First in my head, and then with close friends, then finally with some kind of "community," i.e. the people with whom I'll construct the work.

**LL:** We don't disagree. You were saying that as a political person you trust the

politics to affect the evolution of the ideas and images. All I'm saying when I'm "preaching" is that I wish artists would take some political responsibility at an early stage in the development of their work. We've said in PADD [Political Art Documentation and Distribution] that we're not asking people to become "political artists" but to be artists acting politically. I see the politics as a frame within which the conscious person works. Then comes a point, as you said, after all the intuitive stuff goes on, where one has to look at the product and see if it's communicating to anybody, and what it's communicating. That's as political as the content.

I think "the personal is political" and "the political is personal" are both at the heart of this discussion. In the early days of the feminist art movement, when we were talking about the personal is political, we were saying everything that we do—from how we put our socks on to how we wash the

dishes and why are we washing the dishes?—should be seen as political, in other words, given political importance because lived experience is the ground from which all politics come. That was one great insight of the feminist movement. I think for a lot of people it stopped at a certain point, maybe the mid-'70s, when they said, "Now everything that I do is political, so all my art will automatically be political, so I never have to do anything politically." That's when I started getting irritated at some of the self-indulgent and narcissistic aspects of performance and other feminist art. But by turning it around, we had to consider how the political affected the personal, like "What were the historical causes that put us in particular personal places?"

**SL:** It's not that *anything* I do personally is political, it's that if I can tap into a deep experience that is common to oppressed people and to *myself* as an oppressed person, then that experi-



Suzanne Lacy, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, San Diego, 1983. Photo: Edith Kodmur.

ence—if it is universal—will be the manifestation of a political experience. *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room*, a collaboration with Julia London in San Francisco (1982), was not simply about coalition and survival. Over 100 women, arranged in 17 small groups according to their age, ethnicity, social position, or occupation—a portrait of the diversity of women in the Bay area—talked of survival in an elegant furniture showroom. At the end of the performance, after sitting for the evening in their separate groups, these women came together into one large “snapshot” facing the audience. But these overt themes were only part of the politics for me: the real undercurrent of the evening was the experience of love that can be evoked when people consciously come into communion with each other—particularly when they are an oppressed group. It’s a heightened spiritual experience, but we don’t seem to have the language to talk about religious experience in art except in the way men know religion—singular questing, for the most part, not communion through shared experience.

**LL:** That’s just what my book *Overlay* is about. Performance and ritual offer a sort of unknown vessel for us today, a place to put our similar needs in a different context. Most people I know can’t be “institutionally religious,” yet we sense a longing for a kind of universal identification with other people, creatures, nature.

I think your subject is your form, in a funny way. The subject matter is your raw material, and then you transcend that to get to the content, which is spiritual or universal as well as political. People aren’t used to having the politics taken for granted to that extent, so it sticks out, perhaps more than you’d like it to. What’s important in your work is the way it extends the personal experience, the way you’ve taken on different personae, or the experiences of a different age, or race. You’re always reaching out.

**SL:** Isn’t that, after all, one of the major themes of the women’s movement—to express a particular female experience as part of a universal consciousness? When I was just starting the *Whisper*, the *Waves*, the *Wind* performance for San Diego, I didn’t know what it was about. It began as an image of older women dressed in white, sitting around small white cloth-covered tables in a beautiful beach cove in La Jolla. It grew to take on social and political ramifications—the plight of older women’s cultural invisibility, the potential loss of dignity and respect we face as we age, and the resources that this society shuts off in its flight from death. These are all important aspects of the performance,

but as work on it has progressed I’ve delved deeper into my own experience, and fear, of approaching death. The power of this performance will come if I can evoke whatever is going on in me as part of a universal experience of aging. That will be part of my female condition, but it will also be above and beyond being a woman. It’s about being in a body that’s part of a life process, a cycle, like the wash of waves on the beach.

**LL:** That was an important part of feminist performance art. It gave a public articulation to small-group consciousness-raising, gave us permission to speak out loud, to give a voice to the internal dialogues of feminism. It provided a way of talking to women who wouldn’t come to meetings, but might go to an art event.

**SL:** They served the function of raising the art world’s consciousness of feminism—like the demonstrations you participated in around the Whitney.

**LL:** It was much more attractive to artists to have their consciousness raised in a familiar context, within an art form. Performance art also affected the outside community in a political way by bringing the feminist emphasis on process and public vulnerability and the importance of private experience and autobiography out of the closet and into an art world arena, where people who were not feminists or were non-political could use it too. Of course that was a double-edged situation, because it was often coopted by artists who had no politics whatsoever and never acknowledged their feminist sources. Then it got confusing, and frequently we were unable to distinguish between feminist performance and just plain old performance, losing track of the feminist contribution to the genre.

**SL:** Part of that confusion was because performance in the ’70s was confessional by nature. I can’t speak about Abstract Expressionist or Minimalist performance and dance, but West Coast performance has almost always been self-revelatory. It was not necessarily that feminists were in the lead, because I think some men were doing the same things at the same time. But feminist politics expressed in the culture, and in performance, substantiated the men who were doing it—people like Vito Acconci, who used the climate created through feminist self-revelation. It seems to me that confessionalism among women, because of this, ultimately served to lead us toward greater political expression, whereas confessionalism among men performance artists didn’t. Some of them even seemed to run amok without a real context for the feelings they invested in their work.



Above: **The Waitresses cover their duck against nuclear attack.** Anne Gaudlin, Chutney Gunderson, and Denise Yarfitz in LA use the waitress image as a metaphor for women’s condition. Facing page: ©1982 Dona Ann McAdams, *They’re Juggling Our Genes* (performance by NYC activist photographer).

**LL:** It *did* allow men to express their anger about women in their performances. When the confessional part came up in the male psyche, it always seemed to have to do with women or sex.

This was because it lacked our political context. The left, of course, was not the least bit sympathetic toward artists, so feminists were very lucky in the sense that we had a community to receive this work.

**SL:** At least on the West Coast, performance became an important part of creating that community. Ritual not only validated and reinforced women’s current position by calling up some imagined past, but more importantly (whether we knew it at the time or not), it served to create a bonding, to give that experience tangible forms, and then to make those forms visible in the larger culture. In feminist performance art, the move into prehistory was seen as a way to connect with the spiritual. In visual art, such concerns are frequently successful, but rarely in performance. Maybe because we have access to images but not to the actual forms of ancient ritual, or maybe because it’s too difficult to translate ancient ideas into forms compatible with contemporary experience.

**LL:** I find most ritual performance embarrassing on some level. I think it’s got something to do with authenticity. I’m totally moved and convinced by, for instance, Native American people who



are performing dances within their own culture, like the Zuni Shalako festival. But if I see an Anglo artist deriving performance art from that kind of source (and I have), I squirm.

**SL:** Artists attempt to mythologize ritual instead of creating a language out of our own secular rituals of daily life. Allan Kaprow has been a force in naming, and using, secular rituals from daily life—brushing teeth, sweeping floors—in art. In the '70s several women performance artists investigated women's contemporary rituals from a feminist perspective, and some very fine work resulted: Mierle Ukeles with her maintenance art, Jo Hanson with her street sweeping, Mother Art with their laundromat pieces, the Waitresses, and, of course, the performances at Womanhouse which featured, among other things, a woman applying makeup for hours, a woman scrubbing the performance floor "between acts," and a woman ironing a sheet. When a woman does these performances, they tend to be seen less as an exploration of the form of ritual and more as "political" protests. That's one of the major problems with the interpretation of women's performance. Their content is "loaded," and obscures the structural investigations underlying the work. When these ideas appear in men's work, they are elevated to the level of form-innovation, and, as we all know, it's the innovators in form and structure who are our art pioneers. *Three Weeks in May* (Los Angeles, 1977) was explained by critics as being about rape (which it was), but never analyzed in terms of its structure—simultaneous juxtaposition of art and non-art activities within an extended time frame, taking place within the context of popular culture. Women's art is a complex integration of content and structure, and neither can be overlooked for a real critical understanding of it.

**LL:** On a panel this year about women's art and politics, Mary Beth Edelson talked very eloquently about how ritual is used politically, how private ritual energizes the self, the individual, whereas public ritual brings you into a communally energizing situation. So a political demonstration would be a public ritual. It's not like anybody thinks Reagan is watching these demos or is going to give a sweet hot damn. They're affirmative group rituals of mutual empowerment, and if they happen often enough, of course, they are also externally effective.

**SL:** I was struck recently when reading about the history of women's labor unions how organizers used dinners, birthday parties, and gift-giving as rituals to bring women into the labor movement, to build a sense of solidarity.

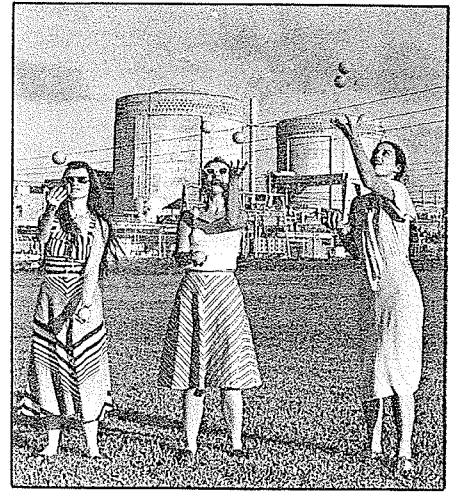
**LL:** Like the quilting bee that began the women's rights movement, or the 19th-century club movement.

**SL:** And then with the pageant movement at the turn of the century, women (and leftist men) turned the popular form of civic theater to their own ends. Feminists staged massive women's rights plays involving hundreds of performers and taking place over a several-hour period. Perhaps slightly better known among today's artists was the Patterson New Jersey Strike Pageant in Madison Square Garden, arranged by John Reed and colleagues as a way to capture sympathy in New York for the strike going on at the same time across the river. Arlene Raven and I have begun to think about contextualizing my work with early feminist pageants, pointing to them as precedents for my explorations. In a sense it's a manufactured history that will encapsulate the work and give it a history, a sense of its existence in time, which is important when you are dealing with a mass audience who doesn't have the faintest idea what performance art is. Calling it theater, for example, gives performance an immediate framework for people outside the art world, and though that's not necessarily accurate or complete, sometimes I resort to that naming. On the other hand, the theater idea sets up certain conventions in people's minds that aren't appropriate to my work.

**LL:** I also keep coming back to the political demonstration as an art form. Cultural organizing is just being understood and among the results, I'd like to see political demonstration moving toward the pageantry model.

**SL:** It might be instructive to look at the difference between feminist *pageants* and feminist *demonstrations* during the early part of this century because I suspect they started from very different places. The Women's Party, for example, used pageants to change attitudes and cultural values—almost like we would use a film today—rather than to inspire immediate action on a subject. They wanted to enroll people in their vision.

In a sense, this is an issue at the heart of my work now. If a performance doesn't have an activist demeanor but rather takes the position of cultural education, is it less radical? I've been trying to figure out the difference between working in an ongoing way in a community as an artist, and creating a piece that clearly comes out of my own consciousness while *still* using people's lives, their bodies, their time. *Freeze Frame* involved a lot of organizing in communities, but it was toward the creation of the performance. Whereas in Watts, I'm trying to help a group come together that will stay active after



I leave. I haven't found a way to integrate these two approaches—community-based organizing toward clearly defined cultural ends, and metaphor creation for the apparently vaguer purpose of "consciousness-raising." I think one of the lessons of the last 10 years is that raising consciousness doesn't necessarily bring political change, so it behooves artists to look more closely at our claims to be "educators."

There are aesthetic problems in these two approaches as well. When is it art and when is it creative organizing? Particularly difficult questions for me since I use community organizing as a structural element in my work, as in several of my dinner performances. I guess I distinguish between art and action in part by my own internal experience of the shape of the work and by the quality of the visual material that comes out of the performance. I have a feeling I'm beginning to emphasize visual images now in my work—essentially trusting enough in my own vision to paint beautiful pictures of people's lives through performance. My fear is I'll have to take a lot more political criticism for making that choice. How do I know that these "portraits" will indeed support social change? Or even reflect the reality of the people's lives they portray? I still feel deeply committed to political change, but my own needs—and images—are demanding more of my attention.

**LL:** On the other hand, as you've been saying all along, you can trust your politics not to be washed away by beauty. You've never offered simple models, which is one reason your work's been so important. Sounds like it's just getting more complex. And I'd love to see more people in theater and in political organizing realize what a great model it can be. Never fear, I'll be the first to complain if the politics get too submerged ... and you'll sure as hell nag me if I push the aesthetics too far out of the way.



Xipaltomal is a women's theater group in Managua, Nicaragua. Members of the company include Dominga Díaz, Marta Tenorio, Socro Romero, Carlita González, Marta Calero, Inés Calero, and Laura Padilla. The women rehearse in the afternoons after a 10- or 12-hour day working in one of the big city markets. Their plays deal with themes that express their own problems and experiences. They rarely play formal theaters but perform mostly in factories, markets, hospitals, and other work places and at informal social gatherings.

These photographs are from a performance on May 27, 1982. The play, *Revolución!*, is about sexism. The "tall woman" is Gigantona, a mythical folkloric figure generally from the Leon area but also occasionally used in other parts of the country. The woman, or man, underneath this tall figure dances to the beat of a single drum or horn. As she dances, couplets are sung which illuminate the action. In this way she is used as reflection and commentary similar to

the "Greek chorus." The Gigantona tradition is probably pre-Columbian in origin. It was generally brought out for religious festivities. The FSLN began using her for more political statements and now that, too, has become a tradition. In *Revolución!*, the Gigantona provides poetic emphasis for the statements being made. This particular performance was a benefit to raise money for flood victims. After each performance the women involve the audience in a discussion on the play's theme.

Xipaltomal (a Nahautl word out of Nicaragua's early culture) is sponsored by AMNLAE, the women's organization of the Nicaraguan government.

—Margaret Randall

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Margaret Randall, the author of several books on Cuban women, formerly worked with the Cultural Ministry of Nicaragua.

Photos by Margaret Randall.



Invisible Performance Workshop brings together choreographers, playwrights, poets, and musicians to teach and perform in the South Bronx—a densely populated yet desolate area of New York City. The South Bronx exports music (rapping), dance (breaking), and visual art (graffiti) to an avid America. In the past year articles covering the “scene” have appeared in virtually every major publication. Unfortunately, the new scene is almost entirely dominated by guys. *The girls are invisible.*

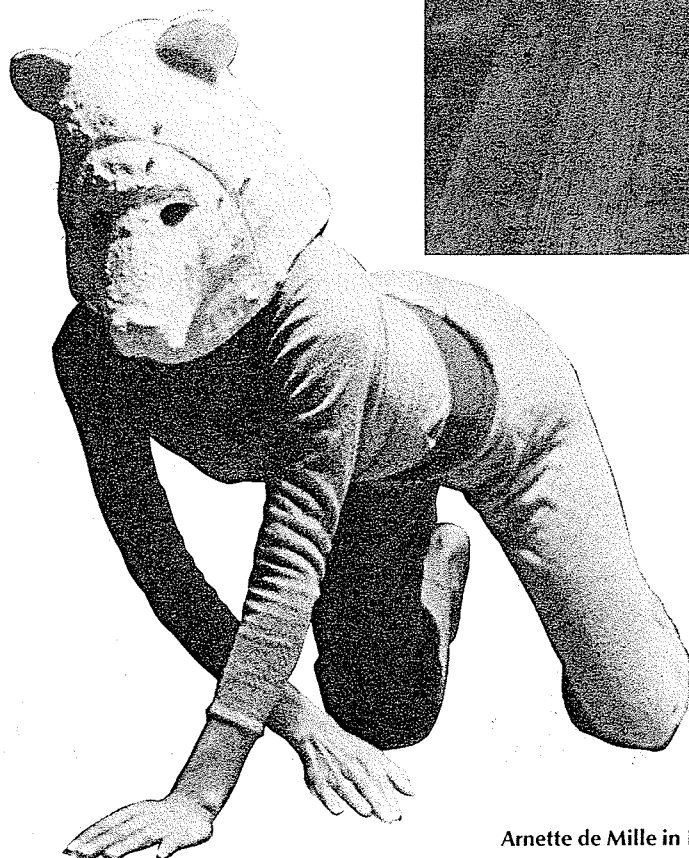
—Malka Percal

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Malka Percal, director of Invisible Performance Workshop, will present her performance piece *Hagar* in 1985.



Student at Invisible Performance Workshop. Photo: Susan Percal.



Arnette de Mille in Bear Dance, Invisible Performance Workshop. Photo: Randy Duke.



# ALL WORK, ALL PLAY, WHO PAYS?

## SUSAN MOSAKOWSKI

All of us in the performing arts need money. We all want more grants, more funding sources, larger audiences, greater visibility and more credibility. In 1983 I interviewed 16 women who make performance, produce it, or

Susan Mosakowski, a founding member and co-artistic director of the Creation Production Company in NYC, produces, writes, directs, and choreographs theater works.



Spiderwoman Theatre. Photo: Martin S. Selway.

both. Interviews with Tisa Chang, Cynthia Hedstrom, Elizabeth LeCompte, Margot Lewitin, Muriel Miguel, Mary Overlie, and Martha Wilson were selected for this article. All of them are engaged in marketing, grant getting, formulating strategies to get the funds and, above all, to make the work happen. This is an exploratory article. My intention was not to build an article. I wanted to see what I'd get. The borders dropped away as my questions lost objectivity, because for all these women, work is not a 9-to-5 job. All questions became a privileged entrance into their lives. No separation here, no clear-cut division—collage.

### MURIEL MIGUEL

Artistic Director, Spiderwoman Theatre

*How did you get involved in theater?*

I have a feeling that I've been involved in performing since I was very young; this is talking about nine, ten, eleven years old. My father used to do these snake-oil shows, horrible stuff on the street corners, Cowboy and Indian shows. I went along. My sisters refused to do it and I was the youngest so I went along. . . . At that time, Indians started to move around, and when they started to move around, they went to NYC, they went to Chicago. And all of these people would end up at our house, teach us dances. So we started to learn to sing and dance—curious, all of these young kids, nine, ten, eleven, started to dance.

*So this was part of your culture.*

Then we were really involved in our culture and we started to look around at schools. We all had a hard time at

schools—always the only Indian on the block, in the school, or only 15 Indians in the school. And then the history books told us that we were dead and our culture was dead; it was very upsetting to me to know that you're dancing and singing, and the grammar schools say you are dead. They call you savages! I mean it's bad enough you have to fight on the corner because of this, but when the whole system holds it up, it's even harder. So we organized. There were about eight of us, from the ages of nine to 13, and we called ourselves "The Little Eagles." We organized recitals and we did dances from each one of our tribes. The families started to get involved: they brought out their old outfits; mothers started to do beadwork. It was really a big thing. We were really involved in our whole culture.

Being Indian, it never occurred to me that I was performing, because we danced, we sang. And at one point we realized that for the non-Indian appetite we had to do something with these dances; we couldn't just show them. We started to stage them and rework them, and added lights, and we began directing this. We were now teenagers; we couldn't call ourselves "Little Eagles" anymore, so we called ourselves "Thunderbirds." It's the 20th year—the Thunderbirds are still going on. . . and almost half of us are dead from that group of Indian kids that grew up doing this because most of us don't make it to 40.

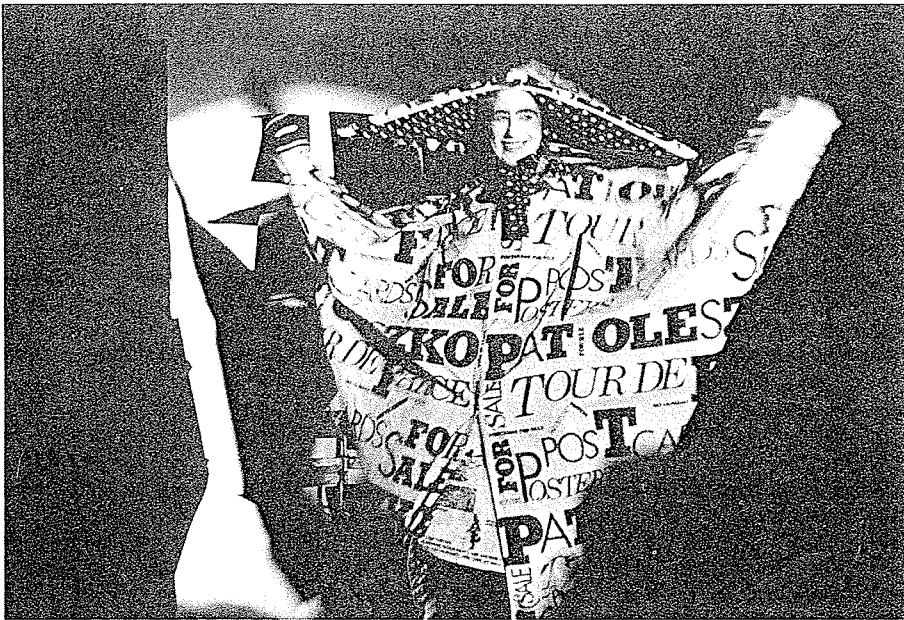
*When did Spiderwoman come together?*

I was in the Open Theatre; I became an actress, I toured, did commercial stuff. I wasn't directing. And then I wanted to do a little bit more; I wanted to do other things. I met a woman who wanted to start a women's group and I started a group with her and did a piece. I received a CAPS grant because of this piece and I started Spiderwoman. I still did not think of myself as a director. It took me a long time to think of it as directing.

*When you began to think of yourself as a director, did you find yourself becoming more political?*

I couldn't become more political. If you're an Indian and involved in a community, you're political. You're reminded of it all the time. When I started Spiderwoman, I knew I didn't want to work with men. I was really interested in working with women—women's problems, women's lives. The dynamic of having men in the group did not work. I didn't feel the same kind of excitement; I didn't get the same kind of thing. I felt that I spent a lot of time explaining the woman's point of view. I just wasn't interested.

(continued on p. 44)



Pat Oleszko, The Soirée of O, PS 122, NYC.  
Photo: ©1984 Dona Ann McAdams. Pat Oleszko is a visual punster who uses the persona of the classic clown.

# SIDELIGHTS

Lois Elaine Griffith

I am standing on stage. The spotlight is on me. I am acting in a play that I wrote. Words are coming out of my mouth, but I am not thinking about what I am saying. At the moment all my energy is focused on confronting a drunken heckler in the audience. He obviously doesn't believe in my character. I must convince him. I ignore the stage blocking that the director has worked out. The follow spot holds me in its circle as I move to stand in front of him, so that we are both held in the light. I am angry and hurt as I spit out my lines, thinking I will never do this again, thinking I will never again act in something I have written. It's too hard being outside and inside myself at the same time, having to convince an audience that it's not me on stage at all, that they're watching someone else be me.

The heckler shuts his mouth; either he is embarrassed or too drunk to speak anymore. There is no time for victory. I remember what I must do next. The play continues to the end. We actors take our bows. We get our notes from the director. I have nothing to say as I change my clothes.

Lois Elaine Griffith is a writer living and working in Brooklyn.

I leave my tongue at the stage door along with the feelings that moved me to give words understanding apart from their meaning. I am thin-skinned, almost transparent. I am filled up with the night and the light mist that is falling. I walk west on Third Street, through the block where all the Hell's Angels live. Their street is deserted. They must have abandoned it for a weekend jaunt upstate. I am searching for comfort outside spotlights. I am not always accurate in following things out to the final measure.

My beginning is someone else's middle or ending. I enter a cabaret where people have been sitting and drinking for hours. I don't know the meaning of "friend," but I have faith that revelation gives purpose to rhythm.

A group of people at a table recognize me, call my name, beckon me to come and sit with them. In the déshabillé of theater-people-talk over coffee and cognac, a young dancer in the group is undressing himself.

"Am I all right? Am I in one piece? How do I look, having been through everything, beatings, burnings, everything? I mean everything. Do you notice any parts missing?"

The woman with the lightning streak through her hair is unmoved by nakedness. "My dear, it doesn't matter what

you've been through. You're here. Now. Accountable."

The dark brown face behind the gold wire-rimmed glasses speaks about the legacy. The heaviness of the dark brown wool melton coat must be a sign. "Waitress, let me get another white wine. And she wants a coffee," motioning to me. He continues. "My grandmother cleaning toilets. . . my father carrying luggage so I could talk about it and tell them I'm an actor on a stage. Aunt Lemima is a political figure, you understand. And if you want to get intellectual about it, I will attest to the validity of her being necessarily who she is."

"Yes, I know what you mean. The legacy." The mulatta woman is loud with amens and praises to God as she puffs on a cigarette. "Ben, you're so right," she says.

"Do you see what I mean about pieces of someone's life? What do you think a legacy is?" The young dancer is naked, feeling no shame. "I want to deal with you. I put myself out there to deal with you."

The mulatta woman says, "It makes no difference to me. You do for yourself. You don't have to do anything in this life, brother, except stay black and die. You don't have to do anything for me." She moves loosely under her white crepe de Chine blouse. "It doesn't matter."

I have left my tongue at the stage door. I wear the first gold ring that my father gave my mother. I wear it on my pointing finger. I remember once a spiritualist looked into the waters over my shoulder. She saw my great grandmother, dressed in white washing clothes in the sea. She saw the shadow of an old man who follows me around. I think he is real. He gets in the way sometimes when I want to make union in company like now. I have Caribbean blood. I know about the sea. Silence is a moment between the change of the tides. Legacy is giving power to thoughts and dreams that have brought me to the present time, and I give myself permission to create new things from it. I carry all my bits and pieces with me. If there is something I don't need to use, I don't have to pull it out, but it's there, just in case, even when I am tongue-tied.

The mulatta woman says, "It's so rare that I meet complete people. Most are such fragments. We're really all just put-togethers."

She is disdainful of the young dancer, as if touching is out of the question. There is nothing comfortable about her. She

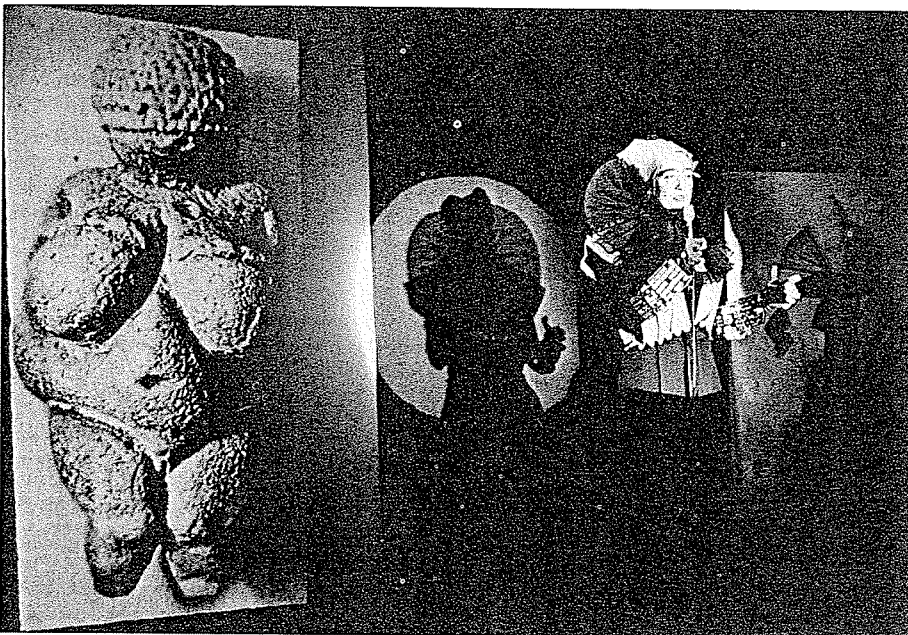
is not easy, even about depending on her exotic beauty to absorb the spotlight. I watch this woman across many miles of ocean as she makes a performance of being in a casual social setting.

The young dancer cuts a poignant figure, as one with no talent for hiding his feelings. He offers himself as a feast for the party, all but saying pull me apart, take me if it is your desire. Sympathy is not in the makeup of this situation.

Suddenly he gives us a moment in late afternoon, although it is way past midnight. We hear Debussy behind his eyes. The young dancer shows us an image of himself with a fawn-colored second skin. Late afternoon. He moves the black cloth in the wind. He flings it up and around as if it were a woman. It doesn't land in the palm of his hand. Tactics change. Drag that bitchy piece of cloth across the floor. Kick some sense into that thing. We ooooo and ahhhh in different languages. He transports us to the auditorium of Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx. A variety show is being sponsored for senior citizens. Old widows still in mourning clothes speak about how good it was to fuck. An old woman, a faded belle from South Carolina, turns away. It is the only way her eyes will not see the openly seductive way the dancer uses his pelvis. He dances the *Afternoon of a Faun*. He should not take it personally that the old women are giggling and heckling. Nijinsky, too, must have felt the dance, not just the steps, in order to make the heart beat in a wild way. There is power in making people turn away from the legacy of the animal in the mirror who looks back with their eyes. He is dancing, this time traveler, showing that the distance from 1906 to 1982 is the wink of an eye, blinking in smoky places at three in the morning.

Comfort is still something longed for. I have come in my beginning upon a middle place where the tobacco is almost stale, and time is pressing the bartender to make last call, since the cook has already closed the kitchen and gone home.

There is a man sitting alone at a corner table. He is grinning. He is staring at the party we make in the dimly lit basement cabaret. He is stealthful about maneuvering himself close to us. He suddenly appears at a table next to ours. No one has actually seen him in motion. He continues to stare and smile without speaking. Someone must have left him in the place, forgotten like an umbrella, carelessly put down after the rain.



Pat Oleszko, *The Soirée of O.* Photo: © 1984  
Dona Ann McAdams.



The New Follies Action Theatre is an anachronism, radiating its forcefield of neon and hyperbole over the entire corner of 16th and Mission Streets. The Mission district itself is a constant force, an abiding element of city in a pretty town; its main drag stretches out in a forty-block yawn, flanked by palm trees that have turned brown, furniture stores displaying heart-shaped beds and vinyl couches, movie marquees in Spanish, bars, groceries, chain stores.

In the late afternoon Chicano, Filipino, and Samoan schoolgirls flutter back and forth over Mission Street's broad expanse, sun swinging in their earhoops, shining in their dark hair. Their men cruise the streets, affecting a casual stance—but then, why not? We have all the time in the world; inevitably, you will love me, and . . . baby; there's no place else for you to go. The windows of the Mission's portrait studios are filled with vanished schoolgirls, engaged and radiant, smiling ecstatically on hand-tinted double-weight matte. On the same street, little preschool mannequins are mounted behind shop windows with outstretched arms, surrounded by the latest in toddler style.

Give me little feet to fill these shoes,  
Round little arms to fill these sleeves—  
Make a curly head for this bonnet . . .

And so it goes, on and on.

The Follies All New Action Theatre is only a landmark in their continuum, a pink stucco building they pass on their way to possible heaven; out of context. Customers leave its matinee show and the sticky residue of their aroused desire evaporates in the sun and wind; loins ache, eyes ache, and their tongues are sour. The phantom women of the Follies leave you with you in the end.

The corner of 16th and Mission is quiet at night. The high palms sway in the wind above the streetlights; only the small cafes and bars are happening—squiggles of baby pink and sea green neon, a menu taped to the window, Lurex curtains. The daylight of banks and layaway stores evaporates down to a half-open door in the night, the smells of Chinese and Mexican cooking, liquor, urine. It is still winter.

For all its obvious dazzle, the marquee of the New Follies Action Theatre is quiet. Its message is matter of fact, direct, even sincere: burlesque is still very much alive at the Follies. All the bygone phosphorescence of theaters long gone broke is shuddering through the bulbs of that marquee.

# DONNA

from "Live Show"

Mary Wagner

## DONNA

"Hey, what do you think of Modesty's fart?" asked Donna.

"Fart! What fart?"

"You know, what she makes with her pussy . . . like that."

"Oh, no, Honey—that's a 'pussy popper.' She blows kisses with it."

"So . . ." Donna grew cautious. "What do you think about it?"

The big, red-headed girl tucked the little envelope of grass back into the sewing machine. The corners of her mouth dropped. "It sells, that's all. What do you expect me to say?—it sells."

"I just don't dig it. I really dig her dancing, but I just don't like *that*."

"She only does it here, Honey. Just here and in Seattle and L.A. Anywhere else they won't let you take off the G-string."

Someone banged and yelled at the door.

Donna was on.

Donna Marie from Guatemala did somersaults, cartwheels, handstands; throwing slippery Latin looks at her customers. She would actually sneer at them, then she'd do another handstand; throwing her heels over her head against the side of the proscenium under a milky spotlight, to bounce back on her feet with a brilliant smile.

As a beginner, Donna Marie was a sensation. The management had given her a noticeable increase in pay in the first few weeks, and she was being groomed to tour. Many felt that she had the makings of a star.

The audience loved her; she was proud and spirited. Something kept the inner well of her femininity from being ruthlessly tapped; you never saw it all at one time. It may have been a case of beginner's charm; she wasn't really part of it yet. Donna had been there for only two months.

Donna Marie's family emigrated to the States from Guatemala when she was in her early teens, and the continuing moves from city to city made it difficult for her to keep up in school—she was never academically inclined. She married young for love and escape, and now that the marriage was over—the escape was ongoing. She was bright, and determined to learn on the way, and most of her friends were much older; she could learn from them, she said. Her former husband and his friends had been violent; she was glad it was finished; this job was a stopover, and she had always loved dancing.

What would she like to do later on? No idea; but she had time to think about it. Eighteen-year-old Donna Marie.

I am with Gina and Donna Marie, number six at the end of the corridor. It's the largest dressing room; Gina's travel-size phonograph is set up on one end of a communal ironing board, playing a B.B. King 45 at low volume. A few other discs are scattered in a heap of clothes, but they haven't bothered with them and B.B. King has played through several times.

Mary Wagner, an artist, illustrator, and writer who has lived in California, now works out of the Lower East Side.

A bunch of black and withered roses sprout from a ceramic vase. Gina shows me the attached card:

For Gina  
From a Secret Admirer

"He always spells it that way. He sent me two others just like this... dead. I've even seen the guy. Some weird ol' man... I seen him sittin' there in the front row goin' *a-hunh-a-hunh-a-hunh-a-hunh* with his lil' weenie! It's only *this* big! He waves at me too! Shit! How come I get all the weird ones?"

"Cause you're *special*," says Donna.

"Right on, Honey—the dream of every pervert in town!" says Gina, drawing back to admire her heavy chest now zipped into the bolero top of a silver lamé breakaway outfit. The pants have stars and stripes, rickrack trim and lampshade flares. She adjusts her ponytail in the mirror. Gina's a Wisconsin girl.

Donna is absorbed in the knitting that spills out of her naked lap; then all of a sudden she breaks out laughing, and takes a drag on her cigarette.

"It gets pretty dull down here, waitin' all the time to go on... 80... one day last week, Gina and I played this little trick on Sammy. We didn't tell you about *that* one. You know that big doll he keeps backstage? Ginger? Man, that's *really* a weird trip. Anyway, she... uh... Ginger was sittin'... [another drag] um... he *put* her there, she *is* a doll after all. Well, he *put* her backstage, an' me an' Gina, while Sammy was gone... we pulled her dress straps down, an' mussed her hair, and set her down with her legs spread out like *this*!"

"Sammy sure got pissed when he found her!"

"No... he looked kind of hurt, actually. He just smoothed her hair out again and pulled her skirt over her knees, and then, he crossed her legs! Can you imagine that? Well, he *ought* to—I think she's got a *snatch*! But he never found out who did it. I know it was a terrible thing to do, really, but it just gets so *bor-ing* sometimes, you know?"

For your love, Darlin'  
I would do anything, yes I would  
For your love, Sugar  
I would go anywhere...

The radio of a silver Buick croons at full volume under the rustling palm trees; neon swims over the car's lacquered body as it passes the Doggie Diner; then it slows to a cruise beside us, its driver invisible behind heavily tinted glass. Donna is crossing Mission Street, her coat collar up against a high October wind, headed toward Chinatown Charlie's for something to eat. She wraps her coat around her and races across the sparkling funnel of light.

"If you take a picture it'll last longer!"

Donna interrupting our conversation to yell at a drunk at the counter who is staring at her. He's wearing a blank, stupid grin and thick glasses, and has turned himself completely around on the stool to look.

"You're not bothering the nice young lady... are you?" The waitress on the other side has turned to him, speaking softly, icily.

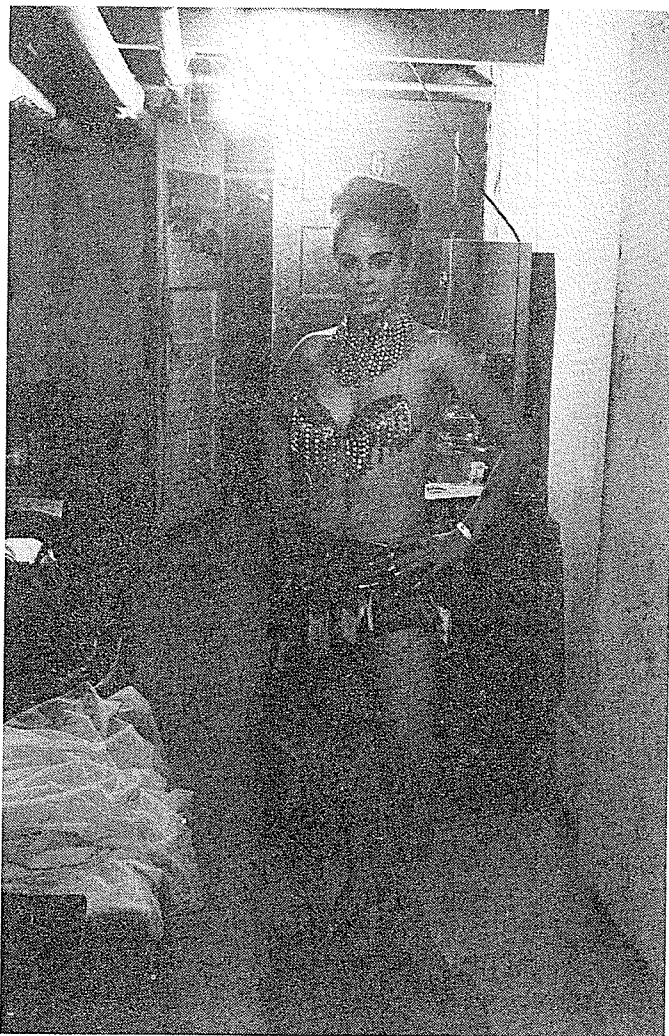
"Oh no, oh no... no... jus' bein' nice."

"Dumb shit—I can't stand it when they do that."

"Why don't you do something else—just straight dancing? You're *good*—why this?"

"I dunno, really. I didn't know this town at all when my ol' man and I first came. It just looked like a good opportunity to make good money—they didn't care about my not having burlesque experience. Like I said—it was this or an office—the way I saw it.

"Me and my boyfriend just got an apartment, a real together place in Pacifica... I've got a few things to pay for, too. Besides, he can't find a job yet—



Donna.

"I *said*, if you take a picture it'll last longer!!" Donna is exasperated; the drunk is staring again. The waitress moves in on him.

"That's a *nice* young girl! Now you stop that," the waitress is hissing, trying to preserve decorum. Charlie's is empty except for the four of us.

"I'll ignore him," says Donna.

"Does he love you?"

"Who?"

"Your new boyfriend."

"Yeah, he does. He worries about me a lot. But I guess I gave him reason—I got raped just after we were in town two weeks.

"It's not really in my head anymore—it's bad to have stuff like that floating around in you head afterwards; *that's* what can mess you up. It can make you afraid, of life... and I *could* have a lot to be afraid of if I took the *time* to check it *out*, you know?" Donna is giggling. "I didn't know anyone else in town, except my boyfriend—no other chicks—so I hung out one night with this stripper who lives in Oakland. Can you *imagine*?—all the way over to Oakland for a little company, and if you don't drive it's a *long* way. So this girl—she's older than me—we go over to her place with a bunch of people to listen to records. Really... it was dull, just smokin' weed, no one talkin' about anything interesting at *all*. So, then this chick goes into the bathroom and she's gone a long time. Gosh, I thought she was sick or something. I got worried about her. Do you know what she was *doing*? Shooting up! Wow. So by *then*, I thought I really *should* go. I told my boyfriend I'd be

home by eleven, but it was way past that. The buses weren't running. So I left this girl's apartment and walked a couple of blocks to the freeway and put out my thumb."

I exhale, sinking in the booth.

"Yep, that's right. So along comes this car with these two black guys—they looked nice, real well-dressed and all. They asked if I wanted a lift and I did, so I got in. It was about three in the morning, and I figured my boyfriend was frantic by then. I really was asking for it. And I didn't want to offend them by refusing them; I'm *not* prejudiced. I thought they were being kind, and *they said* they were going to San Francisco.

"Well, they turned off before we got to the bridge. And then it started. They grabbed me and made me lie down on the floor of the car so I couldn't see where they were taking me. I'm sure it was somewhere in Oakland—they didn't drive far.

"They took me into this duplex-style house. I think they were pimps. Their girlfriends were there, too, right in the living room, when they brought me in. That's the one thing I can't understand—why those women could be there the whole time and not do anything to help me. Not a thing. I think they were getting their kicks from it because I was white. 'Now you're really going to get it—white bitch'—saying things like that all the time."

Donna's red stage lipstick looks black in the dim yellow light of Charlie's. She is looking at the wall beyond me as she talks.

"They had junk there, and they *made* me shoot it up! They held me and forced the fucking *needle* into my arm! That was terrible—that, and those women. I was afraid they *hooked* me by doing that, but... later, the policeman told me I wouldn't have to worry about that—unless I *liked* the stuff. They shot me up until I couldn't see straight and then they pulled me into the bedroom and raped me. It went on all night. I tried to get up in the middle of the night to get away but an arm

would come up in the dark and grab me by the hair and hit me. 'You fuckin' bitch—if you do that again I'll kill you!' I was scared but I kept as calm as I could; I wanted to get out *alive*.

"But I don't think they wanted a murder on their hands—'cause the next day, real early, we went through the car routine again and they dropped me where they had picked me up. I flagged down a police car. The police drove me around and we tried to locate the place. But it was in one of those streets where the houses all look alike. . . .

"The cops really were very nice about it. And my boyfriend thought I was dead or something. The police were already looking for me, actually—'cause he already called them when I was three hours late. He must've called them the same time those guys picked me up. And the police were very polite, especially this one officer who had to ask me for my panties to keep as evidence. I said, 'Gosh, they're *awfully* dirty, shouldn't I wash them out for you?' 'Oh, no, M'am'—he was blushing—'oh, no, M'am, the whole story is *right here*. Hee hee'—I guess they took those things to a laboratory, somewhere. . . ."

Donna's smile breaks, it's the drunk again. She screams at him: "Take a picture and it'll *last* longer! *Believe* me, it *will*!"

The waitress comes out of the kitchen; furious, "Finish your beer and get out!"

"I'm finishin', I'm finishin'."

"Get out!!"

"Okay, okay—sure... here."

The drunk puts money on the counter and leaves. Nice European waitress.

"I've got to get back soon."

"When do you go on tour?"

"In two weeks—to the Paris Theatre in Cleveland."

Donna is fidgeting with a spoon, tapping at it with her long red nails. She's plainly tired and there's one more show to go. God, I hope she cuts it loose.



Marina Gutiérrez, T.V., 1979, monoprint/color etching, 30" x 44". Marina Gutiérrez is a visual artist in NYC.



## PATRICIA

When you grow up in a small town, you learn one thing very early. You learn that you must decide to stay there, or to leave. Staying is not so hard. If you are a girl, you get C's in school, you get pregnant by the least detestable of your boyfriends. You marry, you buy a house. If you need extra money, you run the cash register at the local supermarket or you work as a secretary at the local EEOC office. It's not so bad.

But getting out takes some planning.

Now as far as I could figure, there were four ways to get out and stay out of a small southern town: (1) committing a crime, (2) joining the army, (3) becoming an entertainer, or (4) getting a scholarship to an out-of-state college.

Being from a good Christian home, my brother, sister, and myself were raised to be respectable colored people. Therefore, I never considered criminal offense. First, they would put my picture on the front page of the town newspaper. My mother would be mortified; my relatives scandalized; the whole town would be talking. In a sense, I'd never get out.

Now, I really loved uniforms. I wanted to be a Girl Scout and get to go to Girl Scout camp, but an integrated troop was not possible at that time and there was not enough money for an all-Black troop. But I still loved uniforms. My feelings were modified, however, when my younger sister came home crying one day from second grade. There had been a memorial service for one of her classmates' fathers. He had been blown to smithereens in Vietnam. I knew then that joining the army, wearing uniforms, could get you killed.

I couldn't sing. I could barely dance. People groaned at my performance in the ninth-grade play. No, I'd never get to wear six-inch-high wigs! I'd never get to wear sequined gowns with shoes dyed to match and be like Martha and the Vandellas and meet Ed Sullivan. Show business was not the key to my escape.

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Cinda Carr is making movies in LA, while in NYC Lenora Champagne continues performing and Patricia Jones is writing a book of poetry.

So I booked. I got straight A's. I took the usual abuse: egg-head, brain, walking encyclopedia. I went to the integrated school. I was always alone, studying. Often I felt like Julie Harris when she played Frankie in *A Member of the Wedding*. I just wanted to get out. To find solace in a stranger's face. I wanted to walk the boulevards of Bucharest, Paris, Rome, Katmandu. I was not meant to stay in Forrest City, a town named for the general who started the Ku Klux Klan.

College was my only recourse. So I took the Scholastic Aptitude Test. I did very well on my SAT's.

## CINDY

Well, the importance of getting in was obvious to me a long time ago. I was called "brain" and "egghead," too. I went through fifth and sixth grades in the advanced classes. But I wasn't happy. Joanne Mignona was happy, because she was curvy and cool, but I was just... weird. Weird and left out. Somehow, I had equated happiness with popularity, so my intelligence began to mean less to me. In seventh grade I still studied hard, and I still had a straight A record, but that's when things started to change.

Once I studied for a science test all weekend, so long that I was bleary-eyed with exhaustion, so hard that my mother worried that I was taking it too seriously. Monday came and I could have taken the test with my eyes closed. We were tested on about two percent of what I had memorized, and since I had a photographic memory, I felt silly, like I had wasted a lot of time. I realized that we weren't expected to know much at all.

That was one realization. The next one came soon after. Mr. Duncan told everyone for the third time in one period that they should try to be more like me. Can you believe it? He meant getting all the answers right and behaving in class, but I got answers right because of my memory and I behaved because I was shy. So I was really embarrassed. Real uncomfortable for being held up as an example to the cool kids. Everyone teased me for the rest of the day: "Teacher's pet! Teacher's pet!"—God, can you imagine?—and on the foot-

# WOMEN IN RESEARCH

In 1981-82 Cindy Carr, Lenora Champagne, and Patricia Jones collaborated on writing and performing a full-length theater/performance piece with songs and music. In *Women in Research* the characters have left their home towns for Manhattan. In New York each leads a double life: Cindy is a waitress/photographer who wants to be an actress, Patricia is an unemployed career woman and poet, Lenora is a Southern belle academic who moonlights as a waitress. These excerpts are the stories Patricia, Cindy, and Lenora tell about exploring roles and forming identities. Each monologue suggests limitations in the search for self-definition.

## Cindy Carr, Lenora Champagne, and Patricia Jones

bridge on the way home from school: "Hey, you're cool." I could have died.

I never made a conscious decision. I didn't have to. I wanted to be popular and cool more than anything. Being smart had stopped making me feel good. I felt like an alien, gangly with glasses and zero sex-appeal. Who needed it? I sure didn't.

So the next day when Mr. Duncan yelled at Joan Cecora in class and told her to stop bothering me, I said *I* had been talking to *her*. Mr. Duncan couldn't believe his ears. Neither could Joan Cecora. So I repeated that I had been talking to her. Mr. Duncan said, "Well, uh, then, could you both come outside with me?" I felt a surge of excitement! I was being reprimanded by a teacher for the first time, and I felt great. Scary, like I was floating away, but I wasn't alone. I was with Joan Cecora.

That night in detention I was the only girl with fifteen six-foot-tall boys wearing black leather and smacking gum. (Years later this scene would be duplicated at the Mudd Club, having the same effect on me.) It was great.

So, in eighth grade I got my first B. By ninth grade I had gotten two C+'s. I had completely lost my photographic memory. The school psychologist said it was due to some kind of trauma. But I felt so much better! I had contact lenses, so I felt pretty; I was popular; I was an average student. I was real neat. I was in.

### LENORA

This summer I was sailing along the Mississippi Gulf Coast with a girlfriend. As we drifted away from the shore, we looked back at the long line of Victorian mansions, those that hadn't been washed away by Hurricane Camille. And my friend turned to me and said, "A hundred years ago we would have been matriarchs by now, instead of aging adolescents."

There was some truth in that, I realized. We *would* have been. There would have been no choice, no denying those restrictions, obligations, and responsibilities. We wouldn't have been free to choose what to do, who to be, the way we are

now. But sometimes I feel a certain nostalgia. . . . I wouldn't want to have anything thrust upon me, but it's hard to choose something you don't have to.

When I was a little girl, there were always babies around—I was the eldest of nine children—so there was often a lot of crying and noise and confusion. But there would be the quiet, serene times, too. Mama used to let us feed the babies. You'd take the latest baby, go into her bedroom, sit in the rocker, and give it the bottle. You'd be holding the baby, and you'd just sit there, looking at each other, for the longest time. Sometimes the baby would stop sucking in the intensity of looking at you, and those bright, intelligent eyes would gaze at you as though they were really seeing something, as though they were *recognizing* you, and you'd feel—not like you were the mother, holding your child, but as though you were holding yourself.

I have never felt so close to anyone since. I have never had anyone else trust me so much.

Then there were those times when you'd get an earache in the middle of the night and you'd have to go wake up Mama. You'd go quietly into the bedroom to her side of the bed, and no matter how much your ear hurt, there would be this awesome silent moment when you'd just stand and look at her, wondering how lightly you'd have to touch her cheek before she'd wake up. Sometimes she'd sense your presence, and reach for you before you'd touched her.

My world requires that I be alert to possible violence. Assertive. Aggressive. Sharp. There is little time for tenderness and sensitivity.

We all know that people change as the times do. What if those qualities become extinct? Or useless, like an appendix? How will I know if I'm capable of them unless I have someone to care for? Someone who counts on me, the way we counted on her?

At the end of the summer, a friend returned from Turkey and told me that she believes having children is over for us, in this culture. What if she's right?



L to R: Cindy, Lenora, and Patricia. Photo: Hali Breindel.

Both female and male performance artists often use pop-culture artifacts to make strong political statements. But since the late '60s it is especially women who, in employing these artifacts to address large feminist issues, have altered the shape and texture of performance art.

Although unquestionably related to theater, performance art differs from conventional theater in important ways. Its roots lie, not in literary form, but in the collaborative efforts of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, who, in the early '50s, brought dancers, composers, and visual artists together to work on multimedia events. Unlike conventional theater, which is logical or illogical (absurd), these works were alogical and nonmatrixed—using what Yvonne Rainer called “a collage strategy,” in which various art forms impinged on each other. Non-actors worked out tasks either alone or collaboratively; there was no director or writer standing between the performer and the task. The commitment was to chance and indeterminacy rather than polished, fixed pieces.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Cage-Cunningham environment engaged the energies of many women artists, most had broken away by the late '60s. Rainer, for example, mentions her ultimate dissatisfaction with the strategy of indeterminacy, which went against her need for “selectivity and control” over her work. For Carolee Schneemann, the problem was not chance per se but Cagean intellectual conceptualizing: “I don’t work with ‘chance methods’ because ‘method’ does not assume evidence of the senses; chance is a depth run on intent, and I keep it open, ‘formless.’ ‘Chance method’ is... a semantic contradiction which carries seeds of its own exhaustion in its hand clasp of chance-to-method.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly at variance with Cagean conceptualizing, Rachel Rosenthal moved to California, where she created Instant Theatre. Its “whole premise... was that you could create theatre spontaneously... and I assure you that it didn’t come from theory. Because first of all I’m not a theoretical person; I’m an action person.”<sup>3</sup>

If Cage’s distrust of language was at first appealing, women artists began to find his purity sterile. Nonsymbolic representation went against the grain of what they wanted to do and say. According to Rainer, “The thing that pushed me toward narrative and ultimately into cinema was ‘emotional life.’... I was not only entering a new medium but was jettisoning a whole lexicon of formalized movement and behavior.”<sup>4</sup>

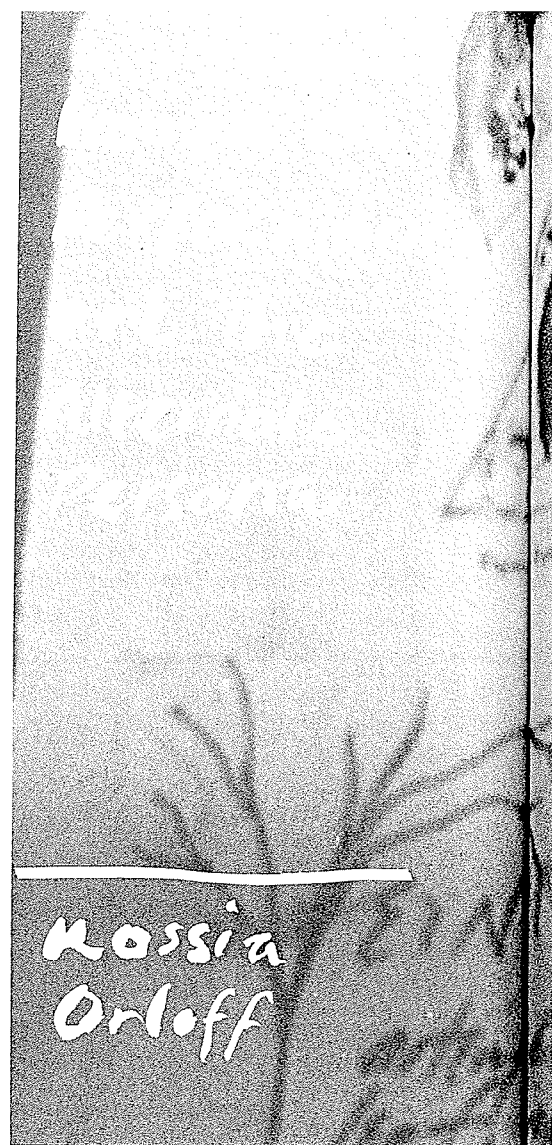
Kossia Orloff, writer of poetry, fiction, and articles about women, teaches in NYC.

Schneemann’s need for texts grew out of her long involvement with what she calls “double knowledge”: knowledge of both the received history of culture and the lost history of women’s image-making and artifacts. Her early sculptures and painting-constructions have “female talismans” embedded in them. Then, in the '70s, what she ironically labels her “crazy ideas” began to be supported by women social scientists who were reinterpreting language and cultural distortions. This helped her make the leap from covert to overt language in *Homerun Muse* (1977), an “information piece” about gynocratic culture.

Although both Rainer and Schneemann had used language before, their earlier works almost insisted on a disjunction between movement and speech. In contrast, now the words spoken were meant to be perceived as “belonging” to the performer speaking them. At the same time their use of language texts in no way implied an accession to linear narrative. Rather, by layering the languages of dreams, myths, everyday speech, and pop-culture slogans, they retained and explored in new ways the psychological purpose of collage strategy: to release the true language of the unconscious, to create new epistemologies.

The dissatisfactions with the Cagean approach suggest a larger disaffection and need: a disaffection with modes established by a male-centered consciousness and a need for a female-centered autonomy. Unquestionably, the women’s movement played an important role in both the disaffection and the need. Rosenthal points directly to her debt to the women’s movement: “Through the women’s movement... I was able to take a whole new appraisal of my work and change it around to work for me, instead of my being smothered. I got very involved in establishing a woman’s space... At that point I started doing performance which redeemed my life by turning it into art.”<sup>5</sup>

Schneemann found that “I was given certain permissions, help, regard, but it had always underneath it... these dichotomies of dominance and value, so my work would only be admitted into new kinds of aesthetic consciousness insofar as [it] conformed to male expectations and supported these... In re-examining this isolation and specialness, the trivialization of my own principles and energies—I had to develop a private culture. A culture based on an istory [sic] I devolved of lost women’s image-making and artifacts.” Underlining a difference in her work, Schneemann wrote: “the friendship of men, boys is involved with masteries; the friendship of girls, women with mysteries.”<sup>6</sup>



The feminist consciousness of which Rosenthal and Schneemann speak is central to the work of a “second generation” of women performance artists, including Eleanor Antin, Colette, Lynn Hershman, and Theodora Skipitares. Their work, without being propagandistic, is overtly political: whether they are addressing specific women’s issues or other cultural aberrations such as war, the center of consciousness is invariably feminist. Along with Schneemann, they have altered the dynamics of performance art in essentially feminist ways.

Central to Schneemann’s gynocentric performance pieces is her exploration of the primal energy of women; her sources are her archaeological studies and the archetypal imagery of her dreams; her essential image, her ritual exposure of her own body. The two works that most purely manifest these qualities, in my view, are *Eye Body* (1963) and *Interior Scroll* (1975).

Before *Eye Body*, the woman-as-nude had been used in performance pieces conceived by men, in which she was treated as object. *Eye Body* marked the first time a woman used her own body and thereby reclaimed her own





Carolee Schneemann, *Fresh Blood—A Dream Morphology*, 1983. Photo: Ginerva Portlock.

territory. According to Schneemann, "I was using the nude as myself—as artist—and as a primal, archaic force which could unify energies I discovered. I felt compelled to 'conceive' of my body in manifold aspects which had eluded the culture around me."<sup>7</sup>

Against an environment of broken mirrors and glass (symbolizing distorted images), her body at first appeared wrapped in plastic and covered with ropes (signifying suffocation and imprisonment within the patriarchy). Schneemann then transformed her self. Her face and her uncovered body were marked with floral and leaf patterns, identifying woman and nature. She extended the image to one of chthonic power by placing snakes on her body, thereby evoking the ancient double image of primal female energy and oracular knowledge embodied in the Earth Goddess.

*Interior Scroll* discovered the vulva and vagina as sacred spaces. Again the emphasis was on both the Goddess' chthonic primacy and the snake's original symbology of the female womb. Schneemann wrote: "I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model... a spi-

raled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries... This source of 'interior knowledge' would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship. I related womb and vagina to 'primary knowledge.'"<sup>8</sup>

At the start of the performance, Schneemann undressed and wrapped herself in a sheet, which she then dropped. As she read from her book *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1974), she outlined the contours of her face and body with paint. Then, dropping the book but still standing, she slowly extracted a scroll from her vagina and read from it. The act of extraction and reading symbolized the transformation of interior thought to external signification, the signification having the double valence of exposing woman's primary knowledge and "purifying" woman's space by cancelling out the traditional concept of her genitalia as obscene.

By concentrating on the primacy of female energy in these and other works, Schneemann has qualitatively altered the character of performance art. Her "task" of challenging patriarchal myths, of exposing and thereby exploding cul-

tural taboos, has encouraged and energized other women to create politically freighted performance work.

Although their performances are qualitatively different, Antin, Colette, Hershman, and Skipitares have taken a similar direction in their creation of alternate personae through whom they enact and thereby call into question the values of our society. Colette and Hershman have created one persona apiece (Justine and Roberta Breitmore respectively); Antin and Skipitares, multiple personae. Antin, Colette, and Hershman have "gone public" in the characters of their personae, appearing in non-structured performances in streets, restaurants, hotels, buses. Colette's and Hershman's personae have even invaded the commercial world. Another similarity is the use of dreams or myth: Colette and Hershman take their own dreams as a ground, against which they pitch societal dreams; Antin and Skipitares focus primarily on cultural dreams, which they often transcribe as living nightmares. All four invest their performances with pop-culture artifacts to call attention to the debased values

promulgated by the patriarchy.

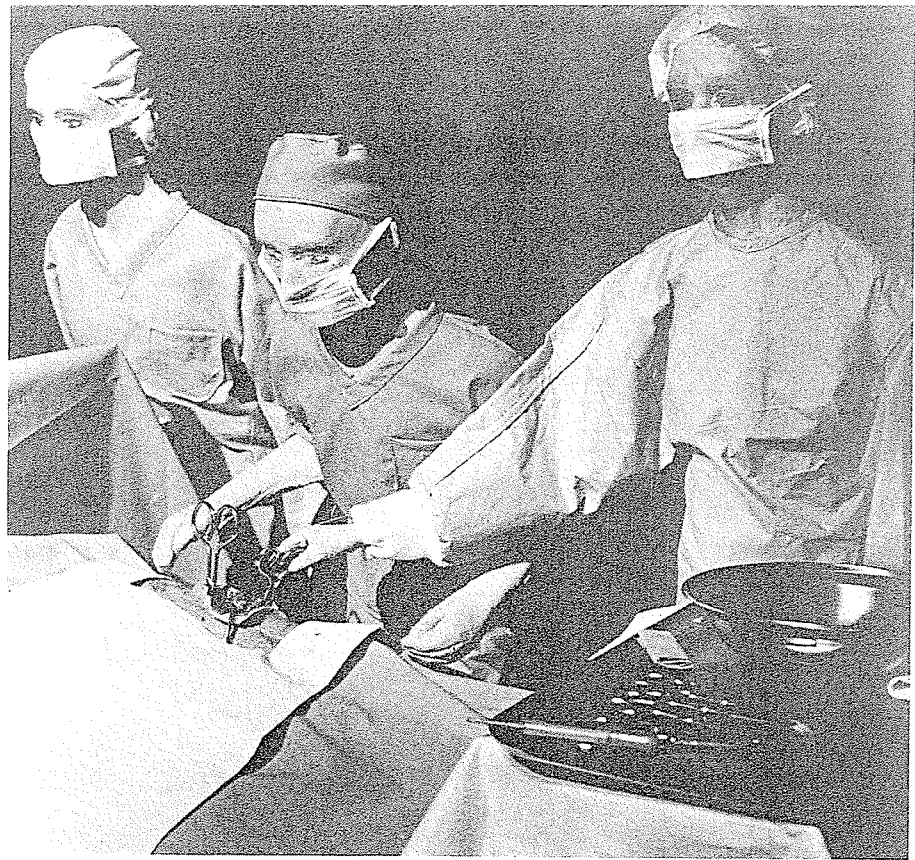
Before 1978, when Colette "gave birth" to Justine, her performances consisted primarily of evocations of nineteenth-century *tableaux vivants*. The environments were both exotic and erotic—composed of ruch'd silk dyed in a palette of pastels; evoking the multiple image of boudoir-womb-cave. Placing herself in static poses, with her body either confined in Victorian underwear or minimally draped in ruch'd silk, she conveyed woman's imprisonment in the deadly environment of Victorian values that continue to oppress women. She views her *tableaux* as both parodies of traditional male fantasies of the ideal woman and as statements about women entrapped by this stereotyped vision.

By the mid-'70s, Colette was frustrated over her work's being misunderstood and ignored. Noting that "only dead artists can be universally admired; only dead artists are truly respectable," she thought about "dying" and being "reincarnated" as another persona. In 1978, while installing *The Last Stitch* with a staple gun (which she calls "the modern woman's needle"), she accidentally stapled her hand. This, she realized, was the perfect moment for Justine (Little Miss Justice) to be born. During the performance she repeated the wounding, collapsed, and lay still for three hours. When she got up, she was Justine. (The reference to *Sleeping Beauty* is obvious, but she needed no Prince Charming to arouse her.)

As Justine, Colette created a wardrobe of ruch'd silk outfits that she wore everywhere, even to the supermarket. She also turned her living space (in a tiny, dilapidated building, tucked away in the Wall Street district) into a duplicate of her installations. Occupying a prominent position was a large lightbox, replicating *The Last Stitch*—the "dead" Colette in her coffin.

Justine, the inheritor of Colette's estate, duly registered the "Colette is Dead Company," under whose banner she created performances and installations, some for alternative art spaces, some for the commercial world. For "Justine and the Victorian Punks," a rock band, she wrote and sang songs in a vigorous, if not violent, antithesis of Colette's *tableaux*. "In our present culture," she explained, "a woman as pop singer with a rock group really made it, was really supported by the culture."<sup>9</sup> She also designed an outré, but commercially successful, line of ruch'd clothing for Fiorucci's—in this way commenting on women's enslavement to the whims of fashion.

Colette-Justine calls this body of work "Reversed Pop": instead of taking popular images into her studio and turning them into paintings and sculpture, she takes images from her own



Theodora Skipitares, "Portrait of a Surgeon," from *The Age of Invention, Part III: The 20th Century*, 1984. Photo: Eli Langner.

work, puts them into the commercial world, and then recycles them into art products by creating lightbox documentations, to be exhibited in galleries and museums. The result is a parody of both popular culture and an art work. Admittedly, because her pop-culture artifacts seem to repeat stereotypes rather than explode them, Colette is often regarded as a cultural phenomenon rather than as a serious artist, feminist or otherwise. Yet her work is revolutionary in its insistence on a deconstructive approach to the language of signs and to the way we read a work of art.

Roberta Breitmore, the alternate persona of San Francisco-based Lynn Hershman, was born from a complex of situations. The first was Hershman's installation (1973-74) at the Dante Hotel, a San Francisco flophouse. When she discovered that Room 47 had recently been occupied by two women, she decided to "re-create" their lives. In the minimally furnished, cockroach-infested room, she installed two exhausted (wax-cast) women lying under the crumpled sheets and blankets of the bed. The detritus of their lives littered the filthy sink and dresser top; their garish underwear spilled from half-open dresser drawers. On a table by the window were two female goldfish, trapped in a bowl of murky water.

One of Hershman's concerns was to blur distinctions between high and low culture. Popular magazines were juxta-

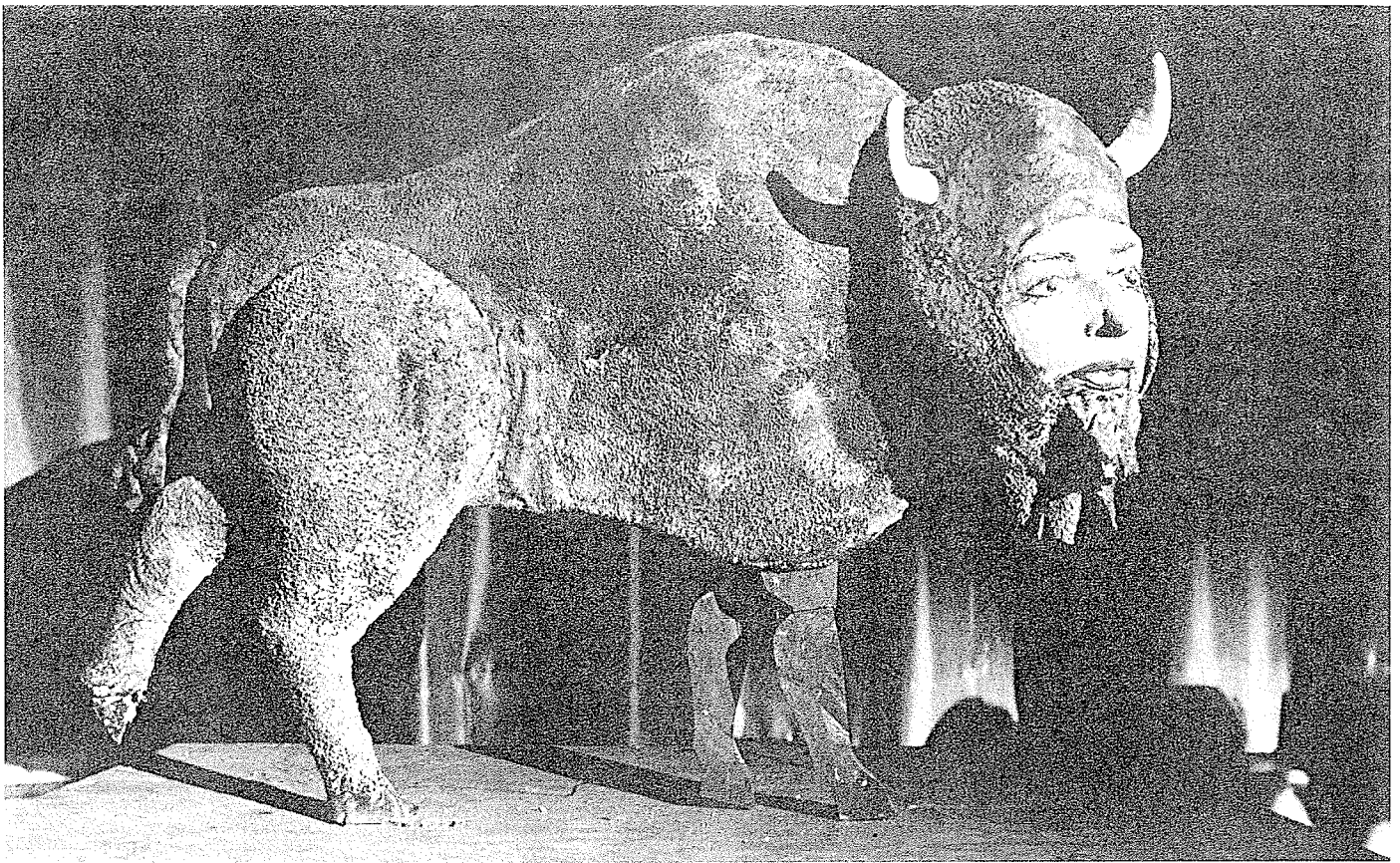
posed with pages from Hershman's journal, detailing her creation of the installations. In addition, a clearly audible tape of her own voice played against a tape of Siobhan McKenna reciting the Molly Bloom soliloquy from *Ulysses* and chance pop music from a radio (both at low volume so the messages were equally indiscernible). Overall, Hershman's collage strategy had an angst-producing effect: rationally, one knew that this was, after all, a work of art; still, one had the sense of actually invading a nightmarish private space.

After creating similar installations in New York and Las Vegas, Hershman felt the need to bring the woman-as-underclass-citizen into the public domain and thus make a more visible political statement. It was then, in 1975, that Roberta Breitmore was born.

Hershman carefully distinguishes between her own person and the persona of Roberta. Roberta has her own social security number, driver's license, checking accounts. Her handwriting, preserved in her journal, is totally unlike Hershman's, as is her wardrobe—a three-piece dress picked up at Goodwill for \$7.98. Roberta wears a great deal of makeup to disguise the natural contours of her face and a blonde wig because advertising has convinced her that "blondes have more fun."

She also has a room of her own. After spending her first two nights in the Dante Hotel, she moved into a room in Hershman's basement, from which she emerged periodically to ride buses,





Theodora Skipitares, "Buffalo Gal," from *The Age of Invention, Part I: The 18th Century*, 1984. Photo: Eli Langner.

walk the streets, attend art openings. (She had aspirations of being an artist and carried on a correspondence with art critic Jack Burnham, who considered her "one of the Bay area's legion of lost souls, a young woman of no obvious talent."<sup>10</sup>)

Roberta subjected herself to analysis to combat her depression, joined Weight Watchers in her hunger to become the sylphic ideal of the culture. Not only did she advertise herself to Burnham, she also placed an ad in the personals column of the local newspaper, drawing hundreds of replies. Roberta would leave her basement room and go to a designated meeting place to interview the responders, who then became part of the fiction, while Roberta became more "real."

All of her attempts are doomed to failure because her dream of self is, in fact, a dream of anonymity—to be like the vacuous models who stare out of fashion magazines and TV commercials. Joining Weight Watchers only causes her to gain weight. Her newspaper ad results in a near-abduction by a prostitution ring, from which she escapes only by going to the ladies room and disguising herself, that is, by taking off her wig and makeup and putting on jeans—in effect, by becoming Lynn Hershman. Thus, the tasks Hershman performs in the character of her persona make Roberta a trope of the woman victimized by pop-culture values.

Eleanor Antin's first performance,

*100 Boots* (1971-73), was a series of mailings dealing with the adventures—or misadventures—of a male antihero depicted only by his empty boots. It was the first time a woman had taken on a male persona, and it marked a considerable departure from the norm of performance art, employing narrative at a time when it was not considered appropriate to the genre. The work was also politically important for Antin, since she was rejecting the role of Woman as Patience and instead taking her professional life and work into her own hands. She refused to wait, passively, for the art world to recognize her.

*100 Boots* led Antin to wonder who she would be if she were male. The result was her performance as *The King of Solano Beach* (1972-73). When experiments with beards revealed her resemblance to Charles I, she saw other similarities: both were quite small and stubborn romantics; both were ostracized by their communities. Thus, bearded and in cavalier costume—jabot'd shirt, trousers, boots, large plumed hat—she would sortie out onto Solano Beach and make contact with members of the community.

Antin's success in this venture led her to explore other aspects of herself in two other personae: the Nurse and the Black Ballerina. According to Antin: "We women operate in a mad world of bizarre, often conflicting cultural stereotypes."<sup>11</sup> These are most apparent in the Nurse, whom Antin divided into two further personae: Little Nurse

Eleanor (the victim) and Nurse Eleanor Nightingale (the shaman). Little Nurse Eleanor specifies the stereotype of nurse as scapegoat and sex object; the frame of reference for her performances is soap opera. In contrast, the nineteenth-century Great Nurse Eleanor is a visionary figure. She speaks against the insane horror of war within a cultural milieu that can see only its glory. Through these two "characters"—victim and shaman—Antin examines both negative and positive values of the role, as well as complexities in her own nature.

A similar exploration occurs with her most fully realized persona to date: Eleanora Antinova, the Black Ballerina in Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. On the one hand, the image of the ballerina is not only glamorous, it is, as she says, "one of the few professions in the world when they say 'the artist,' they say 'she.'"<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, she is treated stereotypically by Diaghilev: she is allowed to dance only savage roles and those of great passion, as befits a woman of her race. In protest, Antinova creates her own ballet: she dances the role of Marie Antoinette in "Before the Revolution" (thus interplaying two revolutions, that of eighteenth-century France and contemporary feminist revulsion of the patriarchy). A subtext here is disenfranchisement. Antinova represents the black ballerina history forgot, which is to say that history always writes women out.

Antin's deep concern with "the nature of sexual identity [and] the struc-



tural binarisms of our culture" has led her recently to reconstitute both the King and Nurse as black personae. She explains: "My blackness [has become] the existential center of my work... she who is 'other' than herself... as women are 'the other,'... Black people, like women people, are invisible, embarrassing, disturbing, dangerous... But we blacks do not experience ourselves as 'the other,' as we women do not experience ourselves as 'the other,' as we artists do not experience ourselves as 'the other.'"<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Antin sees attitudes toward artists and sexism as paralleling racism. It should be noted, however, that although Antin perceives her black personae as positive images, there are those—both blacks and whites—who find in her work a covert, if unconscious, racism. For many of those who question her choices, her belief that a white woman artist suffers indignities of a weight equal to what blacks have endured is presumptuous.

A radical vision of the binarisms of our culture already belonged to Theodora Skipitares before she came to New York in the early '70s. Brought up in a strict Greek-Orthodox family in San Francisco, she early felt the conflict of her two cultures, Greek and American, and that she did not fit in either. As a performance artist, working from a center of feminist consciousness that embraces a large range of political issues, Skipitares has consistently dramatized her observations of the bizarre nature of accepted societal values in a complex of idiosyncratic collage strategies.

Trained as both a sculptor and theater designer, Skipitares has made a special contribution to performance art in her use of masking as a collage strategy. From its inception, masking—which duplicates her face, whether in actual masks or 2½-foot mannequins—seems to signify alternate personae. In confirmation, Skipitares has said, "As I look back now, I see that the masking was symbolic of my reluctance to really be out there performing unless I had my face covered."<sup>14</sup>

For *Mask Performance* (1976), Skipitares mounted on a wall 75 masks of her face in a wide range of expressions. As she covered her face with different ones, she chanted, moaned, intoned, making very eclectic sounds. The juxtaposition of the apparently unrelated visual and aural images, functioning as discrete compartments, resulted in unexpected significance, perhaps unable to be named but surely meant to be felt. The moaning and the masks very much implied that she needed alternate personae to "speak" the unspeakable that Skipitares in her own person was unable to say.

A similarly functioning mannequin appeared in *The Venus Cafe* (1977), a wickedly witty, collaged "reading" of the arcana she experienced as an American visiting Greece. The mannequin, replicating Skipitares, rested against the wall, with no apparent function except perhaps the suggestion of a Greek-doll artifact. In the last sequence Skipitares climbed a ladder, and, while slides of Greek ruins flashed on the wall behind her, she shouted through a megaphone the village gossip about the runaway wives of the Skipitares clan. At unpredictable moments the mannequin crazily banged her right arm against the wall, thereby "speaking" as a masked commentary on the bizarre events Skipitares was relating.

After two other autobiographical pieces, Skipitares found herself wanting to examine other issues and concomitantly wanting to remove herself as a central presence. The result was *Sky-saver* (1980-81). Combining pop-culture artifacts and beliefs stretching from ancient Hindu and Greek cultures to contemporary American disco-pop, the piece focused on the bizarre—and at times mad—perceptions of salvation by the supposedly normal world. Although Skipitares was still visibly present as performer, she was silent throughout. The texts were spoken by other, taped voices. She herself became a pointer in the hands of the invisible lecturer, used to punctuate the insane connections between apparently unrelated moments.

With Skipitares as silent witness and the lecturer simply relating events, the role of mediator-commentator was shared by two motorized mannequins—a talking lamb that periodically related the story of Icarus and an androgynous figure that made mantic statements. It was their "voices" that gave psychological significance to the tale.

With *Micropolis* (1981-83), we encounter a cast of motorized "microi" (little people), all wearing the face of Skipitares and some, particularly the women, manipulated by her and speaking in her voice. Each episode—Sylvia, Wild Ducks, Birdman, A Gathering of Shades, Hotel Room, Urban Landscape, and On the Road—is discrete, occurring on its own stage and disappearing into darkness at its end. The sense of discontinuity is increased as Skipitares plays off the ridiculous (the double funeral of a CIA operative and his dog in Gathering of Shades) against the poignant (the Birdman as a minimally effective sky-saver). The concept of alogical structure seems pushed to its extreme limits. At the same time it is this very discreteness that, by intensifying the immediacy of each moment, makes eminently clear the existential reality of the meaning-relationships between and among the apparently unrelated parts.

The political statement of *Micropolis* expresses Skipitares' committed feminism. A central theme is rape: of the mind (Sylvia), the natural environment (Wild Ducks), the social environment (Urban Landscape), all expressed in pop-culture clichés that serve to underscore the madness of our culture.

With her cast of alternate personae who speak for her or through whom she speaks, Skipitares remains a presence in her work. Although she is not "there," she is there. Like a fabulist in the tradition of Aesop, she is able to say through her personae what she might not be able to express so richly in her own person as a performance artist.

What joins all five women is their feminism. They work from the centers of their specialness of being women; the crux of their work has been the investigation and exploration of their own physical and psychological bodies. Each has made central to her art the playing off of the *mythos* of being (existential reality) against the myths (empirical reality) of our patriarchal culture. For Schneemann, this has meant asserting the primacy of her own gynocentricity by recovering the Goddess; for the others, the creation of alternate personae through whom they enact the schizoid characteristics they see in contemporary society. The often unsettling juxtapositions of their collage strategies, by evoking responses hidden in the subconscious, challenge audiences to re-value appearance and reality.

1. See Michael Kirby, "The New Theater," *Tulane Drama Review* 10 (Winter 1965), p. 43; Yvonne Rainer, "Looking Myself in the Mouth," *October* 17 (Summer 1981), pp. 67-68.

2. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy* (New Paltz: Documentext, 1979), p. 14.

3. Interview with Rachel Rosenthal, *Performance Art* 2 (1979), p. 28.

4. Rainer, p. 72.

5. Rosenthal, pp. 26, 31.

6. My interview with Schneemann; *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 14.

7. *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 52.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 234.

9. My conversation with Colette-Justine, 1981 (as are other quotes).

10. Lynn Hershman *Is Not Roberta Breitmere* (San Francisco: M.H. deYoung Memorial Museum, 1978), p. 10.

11. Letter to *Chrysalis* 10 (1979), p. 6.

12. Interview with Eleanor Antin, *Profile* 1 (July 1981), p. 12.

13. Letter to *Chrysalis*, p. 7. But see Michelle Cliff's letter (p. 6) protesting Antin's use of the black persona, to which Antin is responding.

14. My conversation with Skipitares, 1981. It should be noted that the concept of masking derives in good part from her deep and abiding interest in Greek theater.



**Linda Hartinian, Refrigerator Madness (Not the Movie) (Not about Drugs), with Bill Raymond (performer), Inroads, NYC, 1982. Photo: Ilaria Freccia. Linda Hartinian is a visual artist who frequently works in theater.**

# OUT/IN THE WORLD

Ellie Covan

*Out/In the World*—a multimedia production based on the life and work of Jane Bowles—focuses on the creative, emotional, and sexual struggles of a woman whose unconventional lifestyle resulted in some of the most original fiction of this century. The theme centers on the inability to face one's own identity for fear of failure and rejection. The dichotomy that existed in Jane Bowles' world was so strong that she could not choose her path. Though her writing was exceptional, the creative act was so painful for her that, had it not been for the tremendous pressure from the outside world, she might have stopped writing altogether.

Conceptually I wanted to present the *idea* of Jane Bowles' life and express the feelings of her inner struggle. I wanted to understand the pain that seems so necessary to an artist in order to create, and to examine the difference between support and pressure from one's audience. In doing this project I hoped to explore, through the use of the biographical genre, my own struggles—allowing the work to propel me to another level of creativity. As an artist, I felt I needed to learn to face my identity and accept my talents in order to gain the confidence and the momentum to go out in the world.

*As Jane settles into her room, and arranges her things, she approaches her typewriter. Every time she starts to sit down, she finds something else to do. (She gets a pencil, her glasses, asks Paul how to spell "insidious," then looks it up in the dictionary, then realizes her hat is still on, etc., etc.) Finally she admits:*

I know what I do. I try to distract myself from working. I can find lots of ways to do that. Mostly I do it by seeking out the company of other people. I call people, I visit people, I make plans. Lots of plans. I go out, here and there; I call up old friends and new acquaintances and talk, about things. I read things I've read before. I drink coffee and take naps. I kill time. I listen to music and watch the boats come and go and the trucks passing by and the stray dogs and lonely children and people with canes who walk funny and I watch the sunset when I'm not waiting for the sun to set. And I periodically check the temperature outside and occasionally someone sees me and wonders who I am, why I have my head out the window.

The same record plays over and over and I'm embarrassed. But not embarrassed enough to change it. . . .

I have so much trouble going out in the world. I spend a lot of time inside, looking out. I take so long, all day sometimes, to get myself out of the house. I watch out the window, waiting for some sign, some signal that will send me out in the world.

I don't want to be alone, no I can't be alone, I cannot be alone cuz I'm scared. I'm scared to be alone, I don't wanna be scared, but I'm always scared to be alone. So I'm scared all the time, cuz I'm alone all the time and I'm alone all the time cuz I'm scared.

Ellie Covan has acted on stage, film, and TV, and worked in numerous off-Broadway productions.



Roselee Blooston as Edna St. Vincent Millay in *A Phrase in Air* and Ellie Covan as Jane Bowles in *Out/In the World*, Theatre on Board Borgeusic, NYC, 1983.



# CRAYON BONDAGE

Jessica Hagedorn

*Crayon Bondage is a two-character theater piece which explores the fantasies, illusions, and hardships of a mother and daughter who come to America from the Philippines, a culture steeped in the Hollywood cinema. . . . In this scene, the mother and daughter are in an area which combines several parts of their "house": a white kitchen with white table and two white chairs, a counter piled with bowls and miscellaneous kitchen utensils, and a white altar with white candles burning. They have been discussing, off and on, an absent character referred to simply as "the brother who has gone off to war."*

## THE MOTHER

I danced on tables in nightclubs. I got drunk in nightclubs and when the orchestra got hot and crazy and I got hot and crazy I jumped up on tables and danced. Everyone would stop talking to watch me. . . . Their cigarettes poised in mid-air, drinks held in jeweled hands, mouths open in half-smiles. . . . I danced on top of tables, the straps of my dress slipping past my perfumed shoulders, in danger of slipping past my elbows as I shook in time to the blazing music, the straps of my dress in danger of ripping as I flailed my arms to the blazing music. . . . the thin straps straining against my flesh, my shimmering evening dress in danger of tearing and falling away, revealing my dress. . . .

## THE DAUGHTER

You play Rita Hayworth in my dreams and you dye your hair auburn, leaping on cafe tables, tempting men with your fiery flamenco— in Hollywood, some kind of ethnic mix-up between Mexico and Spain. . . . Oh, those Latin lovers!!! They all sigh— but only the dagger in your thigh never lies. . . .

## THE MOTHER

WHAT'RE YOU COOKING?

## THE DAUGHTER

*Sinigang.* Short ribs of beef, tamarind juice, radish. . . . bok choy, shrimp, fish sauce, onions! Salt and pepper—

## THE MOTHER

[*Interrupting.*] You forgot tomatoes. . . . [To Audience:] I taught her to cook. I could dance, and I could cook. When she was a child, she would watch me do all these things. . . . I did them well. I did them with a flourish. Then one day, I just stopped.

## THE DAUGHTER

You mean you refuse to have any guilt about it.

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*Crayon Bondage* was first performed in 1982 with Laurie Carlos (Mother), Jessica Hagedorn (Daughter), and music by Butch Morris. Jessica Hagedorn's most recent book is *Petfood and Tropical Apparitions* (Momo's Press).

## THE MOTHER

It's the same thing. . . . [Takes over cooking from Daughter.] I love cooking because it's focused. I concentrate on the vegetables: how they change color. Shrimps turn from gray to pink. [To Audience:] My daughter works too hard at this— isn't really interested. But she tries, from time to time. [To Daughter:] WHAT'RE YOU DOING IN THERE SO LONG? ARE YOU ALL RIGHT? ARE YOU SICK?

## THE DAUGHTER

[Ignoring Mother, talking to Audience:] It was only a few months later, after his eighteenth birthday, that my brother went off to war and disappeared. I was glad to see him go— his silence gnawed at me and terrified my mother. . . . After he disappeared, she started cooking fancy six-course dinners, inviting virtual strangers to the house every other night to keep us occupied and entertained. My brother sent me a letter once, saying the war was making other people crazy, but it was "making a man out of him. . . ." He send a polaroid— he had grown a moustache, a cigarette was dangling from his mouth, and a rifle was slung over his shoulder. He quoted from the Bible— "Deuteronomy," "Ecclesiastes." I showed my mother the photograph. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She tried laughing.

## THE MOTHER

I am the mother, Estrella, Star. . . . the question they asked me over and over again when I arrived was: DID I MISS THE HEAT? The food? The servants? The questions they asked my daughter were: DID SHE MISS THE NUNS? How did she feel about public school? The sudden availability of all those bright-eyed boys? Did she care about being a wallflower or a prom queen? [Pause.] The only question they asked my beautiful son was: WHY ARE YOU SO ANGRY? [Pause.] They should've asked my daughter about the movies. That's all she ever did, to pass the time. . . . YOU'RE IN AMERICA NOW, I told her— YOU CAN GO TO ALL THE MOVIES YOU WANT. . . . I don't care! "Just be home in time for dinner, and lock the door behind you when you go in or out. . . ." [Laughs.] At night, my daughter listened to AM radio; the voices, the music, the static put her to sleep. They should've asked my son about the women who loved him with a desperation beyond his seventeen years. . . . As for me— I didn't miss any of it. Not the house, the man on fire, the sullen servants with their bloated bellies, not the stifling tropical heat that devours you like a crocodile. . . . [Pause.] It was me, me all the time! They got it all confused and asked the wrong questions. If they had only known it was Estrella, the Star, the Mother— sitting on her suitcases on a pier in America, surrounded by all her belongings: parasols, birdcages, photographs, ballgowns, and children— all of us fresh off the boat, and swallowed up by rage.

**ELIZABETH LE COMPTE**  
**Artistic Director, Wooster Group**

*When you assumed the role of artistic director of the Wooster Group, you assumed a double function as director and artistic director. Did people's attitudes change toward you?*

Outside, I'll tell you, it doesn't seem to me that they did. But I think [until recently] I was quite invisible as artistic director. I like being hidden, and I tend to use other people to mask my powers, so that I don't think a lot of people perceived the power I have in this group, and it was the same when the group was the Performance Group.

*So you've created a buffer.*

... I want to protect myself from a lot of work that I'm not interested in—fundraising, office work, and busy work on a day-to-day basis. I like the larger issues, and I like to deal with big plans and then watch them implemented and then direct them. So this structure of me being behind, makes that possible, and also gives people within the organization a great deal of real power, next to me or in relationship to me, to act and to promote things.

*Do you enjoy negotiating deals in the business arena?*

I'm terrible, that's where our administrator comes in. I can speak in the abstract; it's very difficult for me to concretely deal in business.

*I think women generally take business too personally. I think it's a matter of reeducating ourselves, to separate business from self.*

I agree, it's too late for me for that. What I've done is create a system where I don't have to reeducate myself, but I want to encourage everybody who does not have a system to reeducate themselves. What I want to see is women who are in their twenties who don't have to do this, who don't have to bulwark themselves so much.

*How is your funding going [in 1983]?*

For us, I don't think it's going to get worse. It's probably going to stabilize in a way, because I think we are getting to a place now—we've had a history, and a stable organization with pieces that stand the test of time. But if funding stabilizes, our needs continue to increase; so the overall situation is not good.

*Has this made you look to other funding sources with more rigor?*

Sure, [but] really I don't see that we're going to ever be viable for any kind of corporate funding because of the kind of work we do. For all of my talk about structure, our work is extremely socially

oriented, we deal with our social views. As soon as you get involved with social views, it's a hop, skip, and a jump to the political. And for that reason, I don't think there's any corporate funding person who would ever give us money.

*How will you heighten your accessibility and visibility to your audience?*

I want to make a theater language that is translatable to other people—a way of working that can influence other people outside of the traditional theater. I want to make some kind of structural imprint by the body of work that I make... an amount of work that can be made that's not inner-directed and therefore will not suffocate itself—it is an outer-directed mode of making theater, not making drama. Making theater in a large sense... a polyphonic way of making theater that can be translated not through scripts but through structure.

*How will this be translated?*

By developing a way of notating the performances—not so much [to be] translated, because I don't want people to go out and redo *Route 1 & 9*. I want them to then be able to read structure and see structure so they can get an idea of proceeding to make work—that I can give them a map of how to go about making theater. I also have a counter-feeling that wants to destroy the structure as fast as I make it. At the same time I'm paving my road behind me, I'm digging it up with a jack hammer in front of me, and that has a tendency to disrupt and sometimes alienate the audiences I've made with the last work.

*How do you think women are faring in directorial/producing positions?*

As far as inside that structure, I don't know much about it. I've heard that it's terrible. It's really interesting for me to watch... with my increasing visibility, people's knowledge of what I do more extended, I never—maybe once a year I get a slight offer of some other kind of work. Someone might call and say, "Would you be interested in directing?" I think that's amazing that I haven't got many, many offers to direct elsewhere. I think that that's a sign of how bad it is. It gets more and more apparent to me as I get older—just how groomed we are to succeed, and how lacking in any of that I was... and I was very ambitious. I think in a way I've created a place that is protective from a certain kind of competition and ambition where I can function within the work extremely ambitiously.

**MARGOT LEWITIN**  
**Executive Director,**  
**Women's Interart Center**

*What do you think the status is of women who are now directing?*

We have to make a distinction between women who are involved in their own companies and those who are freelancing, because nothing falls the same way. The League of Professional Theatre Women designed a questionnaire for the people in the league to address. What we found was there were about 50 women who were self-described as directors; of those women, at least half were involved in companies. Women in this area felt the need to align themselves with an organization, because they sure as hell weren't going to get work on a freelance basis. The women who are getting work on a freelance basis are not moving through the system in the same way that men are. What we anticipate the producers in the league to say to all this is that they can't bankroll a woman director. If you look at the women who are freelancing in New York City, most of them have directed at Women's Interart, and most of them received decent credits, and that's what we are attempting to do.

*What about the women directors who are aligned with an organization; are they able to go outside of their theaters to direct?*

We are asking that question at the league: I have only directed outside of Women's Interart once and that was at BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music]. I said to myself, the reason I'm not being asked to direct is because I'm so associated with the Women's Interart Theatre that nobody would think about asking. It's not true. Because if you look at our male compatriots, it's not true. So clearly the network is not working the same way. I've been asked in the past, "Is there discrimination in the theater?" My response is: there is de facto discrimination, but there's probably not philosophical discrimination. I think very few people would acknowledge to themselves that they are being discriminatory. I think the theater, like almost every other venture in life, is based on networks—on the wonderful concept of the "old boy" network, which in fact works. To the extent that Women's Interart could, it has succeeded in getting women positioned at the lower echelon of that network, but it hasn't had—at least until now—the clout to be able to position them anywhere except the lower level of that network. The fact of the matter is that you hire people based on what you hear about them, and men tend to know men. I think in the commercial theater there is still a sense of not being willing to risk that much money on a woman.

*Is there another problem you would like to address?*

I think there is a perception among a large number of women that to the extent that they are encountering difficulties—it's their fault. And the only thing that is their fault is that they think that. It took me a while to figure that one out. I'm so far beyond that issue—that's the issue we faced when we founded the center. It took us a long time to understand that it was neither a correct nor a useful position to start from. But when I became involved in the league and read the responses to our questionnaires, [I found] a lot of women still questioned if there was something wrong in the way they were presenting or interacting that was causing them not to move forward as quickly as their male colleagues. To the extent that they feel faulty in the way in which they are doing something they may, by dint of feeling that, bring a certain degree of tentativeness to what they are doing. To the extent that it is possible for us to come together to explore what's going on, that's probably, ultimately, the only route out. Because we really have to develop our own network; we have to have at least a network that is functioning for all of us to be able to take the steps to really get into a network and move as easily as our male colleagues.

**MARY OVERLIE**  
**Choreographer and Founder,**  
**School for Movement Research**

*You're in a double role, being both artist and producer of your work. Do you have an appetite for doing business and negotiating?*

I think that the confusion for me in negotiating money always comes—not on the internal level—it comes from the external thing of: Who are these people? What do they want? What is their world money circuit? . . . And, what do I have? Those are like two separate questions: Do I really have *something*? Internally I know I do, but who are they and what do they want? That's been the struggle for me—trying to figure out what world am I in. I think that if I were in a more commercially cut-and-dried world, it would be easier for me. But it is never clear what the performance market is . . . so it makes me shy. It's traditionally, no matter who's doing it, male or female, a situation of tremendous bargaining and psyching out how much the traffic will bear.

*Do you find it difficult to put a price tag on your work?*

This is how I deal with money often now, and it works very well for me. I probably will always keep this system on some level, especially as an interim way of dealing with money and an unknown market. I have a heart price, and the heart price is almost always terrifically

accurate. How much do I want in my heart to do this concert? How much do I want to get out of it? Somehow that heart price takes in and does all the accounting about what I'm going to gain artistically and balances that against what I feel I need in terms of respect—which money does represent to me . . . a respect for having put something out. That took me a while to understand—that I could psychologically undermine myself by underselling my work, and it was very important for me not to do that. So this heart price seems to come up really accurately. It weighs a lot at this point, and it's a way for me to have a very direct internal dialogue with money.

*What's your survival strategy?*

Movement Research is like a branch of that. It's a whole branch of my personality that's living there to try to deal with that problem. One of our great dreams is to try to establish an American touring circuit—to actually manufacture a structure, a financial structure that people can plug into and set their prices. . . . I've found that the funding structure of vaudeville theater was definitely one of the most successful funding structures this country has ever had for performing artists. A huge number of performing artists worked in vaudeville and sustained themselves year in and year out and performed regularly. Those people were earning their money in the box office. It was a funding structure which has died. Why? And could it be revived?

*Do you feel that you're part of a network?*

Movement Research is in a fascinating position funding-wise, in that we represent a group of artists of the alternative society, whose lives are also alternative lives. There is a positive feeling about the intersocial support of each other and of networks. There is a social network of contact improvisation people throughout this country that's big enough to support a wonderful magazine and a touring structure. With a

great deal of nurturing, this network could turn into a vaudeville circuit of a different era. Part of that has to do with the development of an audience, which has to do with education about form, which has to do with your perfection of understanding of what the forms are.

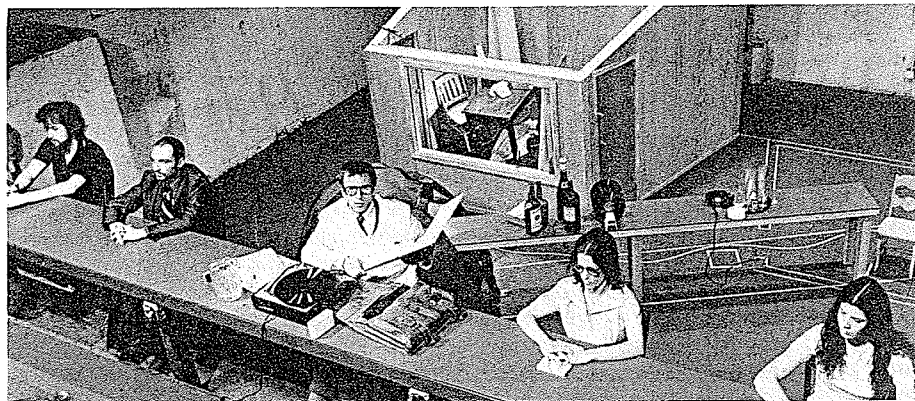
*How do you think the funding looks for the next generation of choreographers?*

I don't know any of those younger people on a personal basis. I don't know the struggles they're having. The dance world is in a very twisted state—in some ways it's harder for them than it is for people who have preceded them by 10 years or a generation. In that, their version of the dance world is what we constructed . . . which is like a shantytown. But they don't see that. We know it's a shantytown, and that it's got to fall down, that it doesn't support anyone. But they don't know that, so they don't have their minds working on the other steps, the next step—so we can burn this thing. These are my suspicions about what's going on. There's a lot of competition inside of shantytown that really is heartbreaking because—my God, what are you pouring out your lifeblood for in that place? Whereas, our pouring out lifeblood into shantytown reeked of pioneerism, you do it 'cause you gotta do it. If this network could be developed so we could burn this shantytown, that would be great.

**CYNTHIA HEDSTROM**  
**Director, St. Mark's Danspace**

*Do you find there is a built-in credibility gap in the role of producer/director?*

In the circle I function in I don't think there is a problem, but it really depends on specific situations. I've been in positions where I was definitely challenged. It had something to do with the fact that I was a woman, and it had something to do with the fact that I was small, and also it had something to do with the fact that I didn't have a lot of experience. I was easily affected by



Spalding Gray and Elizabeth LeCompte, *Nayatt School* (1978), from *Three Places in Rhode Island* (trilogy). Photo: Clem Fiori. L to R: B. Porter, R. Vauter, S. Gray, J. Jonas, L. Howes.



someone coming on to me that way, so there it was. There are times when I can cut through it, so it really depends on how assertive and confident I am about my position.

*What's your strategy for funding?*

Our strategy at this point is to tap as many sources as possible: individuals, corporations, and foundations. I think what's disturbing at this point is: so much of the money is going into maintaining the status quo sort of dance and there is a real hesitancy to support an organization that maybe doesn't have a seal of approval of either national impact or longevity or a kind of commercial success. I think that what Danspace has to do is convince people how important it is to support work that maybe is controversial, that's maybe not successful, popularly successful, and also at the same time nurture a situation where artists feel they can experiment and investigate.

*When you're looking for funds, do you find it easy to put a price tag on your proposed projects?*

I work with real budgets. I don't propose something that I don't know the reality of. But it is and continues to be very difficult for me to develop a budget to include things I need for my salary and my materials. I think it's partly because of being a woman, coupled with the fact of trying to build something out of so little material... I will take the burden of it and it's the way you build an organization.

*I think that as money tightens, the not-for-profit world is growing more concerned with packaging, marketing the work.*

It's very clear, if you can swing a media hype, the work makes it. It's a reality that we're dealing with and it's hard to figure out how to strike a balance when you want to inform everyone and you want the press to cover what you're doing... But I don't feel that it's appropriate at least for what Danspace is doing—to get into some kind of media hype, because then the rug is pulled out from under your feet by people's expectations going haywire.

*What do you think about independent choreographers who have not aligned themselves with a company or an organization? Do you think they can survive without an institution?*

You're sort of saying that it makes more sense for individual artists to band together to make an organization under which they can function. I agree with that up to a point... [But] I find that artists who are doing that are also having great difficulty maintaining their organization and often explaining to the outside world what their connection

is—that sometimes is a strain for the artist....

*Is there another topic you'd like to address?*

The only thing I'd like to say is: How many of these women have children? Because I'm a mother, this brings in a whole other area of what it is to be a working woman; also someone working in the arts. It's a struggle financially, and it's a struggle in terms of time—the fact that in the kind of work that I'm doing, there's no way in which to have regular office hours. It has to do with having a daughter, but also having personal relationships with other people. Seems like it's almost impossible unless you see that person between midnight and 8 o'clock the next morning, which is fine, but is not exactly... I'm not complaining about those hours....

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#### **TISA CHANG**

**Artistic Director and Founder,  
Pan Asian Rep**

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*Do you think there's a credibility gap when women assume the role of producer/director?*

Probably at the beginning, particularly in the '70s, but I think that's beginning to disappear now. I think now it's a very individual case. That's because personally I know too many women who are in top-echelon jobs, in jobs as producers, as story editors; who are in charge of casting, in authority to move.

*Do you direct outside of Pan Asian?*

Very little. I think one reason is that I don't pursue it that much. Two, is because it's hard in this business all over. Again, I think that it's less of a gender thing, though I have no doubt that there's some lingering prejudice against women... I switched over from performing to directing; then I found that I wanted more say, so I went into producing. Producing is where it's at. If one has an individual way of thinking, a desire to implement a certain vision, it comes down to finding the money, getting the people, getting the space; it means making the things happen.

*Was it ever a problem, putting a price tag on your work?*

I know what the real market is worth because I belong to four unions. I'd worked in it 15 years before I founded my own company. Which means I know all the rules. I think it's knowing your own worth and knowing the market value and then knowing how to fuse the elements together. Also, being responsible enough to come up with a real budget, a budget that you know can work, and then knowing how to get the financing. Knowing what is ultimately going to create disaster; whether you're going to compromise your art. I've always said I don't want to do a project at

all if I can't take risks. There is something called creative juggling... Artists all live hand-to-mouth, but you can't live hand-to-mouth for too long. You have to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I'm the only one who uses so many Asian actors consistently; I don't mean a one-shot deal every three or five years. You know, we can't hold our breath for another *Pacific Overture*. Most people don't get the job anyway. There are just too many of us in the business. In America there is not enough funding for it, so we are kind of extraneous beings in a society that says it's not that important. I stick with the realities and what we can do about it.

*What's your marketing strategy?*

Artistic definition has always been very strong in this company and has been strengthened by the works we do. Visibility and all that goes with it is helped when you get acceptable reviews. The *New York Times* is a very big help; having that over the years strengthens one's image, the outside acceptance. It bothers me that I haven't got further ahead faster, because if I had the real support of my own people—the Asians, the Chinese-Americans—I think I'd be twice as far, budget-wise. The artistic product of this company is very clear. I think a problem for some theater companies is not having an identifying trademark or a credo or a product. It's not enough just to do new American playwrights, or women playwrights; I think it requires a very coherent artistic concept.

*Is there another problem you would like to address?*

I do feel there has to be solidarity. We should start coming together in serious groups, ongoing ones, because the funding is going to get more and more difficult from the government. We are really going to have to combine together to be supportive theater companies, dance companies, performance groups, service organizations—pooling resources or sharing space, sharing mailing lists. Because we're not going to do it individually. It wasn't feasible in the '70s when 200 theater companies were setting up shop in different spaces. But it's no longer fashionable to work out of dives, firetraps; it's not fashionable for actors to starve. Artists should get paid. People need that legitimacy to make them feel that they are not weekend actors, that they are professionals. I think it's very important that people get paid, that we all start raising the standards. However, let's be smart about it. Where's the money going to come from? Let's pool resources. Because then we can afford better lawyers, get longer leases, and protect ourselves better.

# AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN: ASHES, ASHES, WE ALL FALL DOWN

A RITUAL DRAMA ABOUT NUCLEAR  
MADNESS AND THE DENIAL OF DEATH

CREATED BY  
MARTHA BOESING  
IN COLLABORATION WITH  
THE COMPANY



At the Foot of the Mountain, a women's theater company in Minneapolis, produces plays, community events, and rituals.

# Theater as Community Ritual: An Interview With Terry Wolverton

## Bia Lowe

This piece is excerpted from a much longer interview conducted by Bia Lowe (*italic*) with Terry Wolverton (*roman*). Terry has worked in alternative women's theater since 1973, when she co-founded the Toronto Feminist Theater Troupe. Since 1976 she has lived in Los Angeles, where she does performance art.

*How do you define your role in theater?*

Theater began as community ritual. Dramas were enacted that sprang from daily, lived experience, from the feelings, the dreams of the people in the community. It was meant to bring about transformation for all who participated, and everyone participated in making the magic happen.

I expect the cast to work with me on developing the script for the piece, using experiences from our own lives. Through creating out of our own experience and making it public, the performers are going through a process of transformation, not just representing the transformation of some character dreamed up by somebody else. Doing the piece becomes a ritual for us, transforming experience, emotions, points of view.

*An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, for instance, was a collaboration between myself and 12 other lesbian artists, most of whom worked in other media and had not acted before. The basic idea

Bia Lowe is a Los Angeles poet, designer of graphic art and installations, and active organizer in the women's art movement. She also plays drums for the Love Machine, a feminist garage band.

Terry Wolverton, Me and My Shadow.  
Photo: Mary-Linn Hughes.

was this: most of the history and traditions of lesbians have been lost, erased, or misinterpreted. Lesbians today need to record and make public our experience. So I devised a 10-week series of workshops, which consisted of a lot of different kinds of exercises aimed at generating material for the performance. Some were commonly used improvisation exercises, but also journal writing, guided meditation, and consciousness raising. Then we looked at everything we had generated, and tried to figure out how to shape it into a whole.

*Given the silence around lesbian experience, given homophobia, it must have had a profound effect on the performers to bring their personal stories into a public setting.*

Sure. The act of looking at our lives and telling our stories gives us a different awareness of how we live. Figuring out how to present them as art, in a way that is both dynamic and accessible, pushes us to reevaluate our experience. For example, how much truth do you want to tell, how much do you want to expose yourself or other people, and how much does the art suffer if you don't tell the whole truth?

Also, since we worked collaboratively, everyone had the opportunity to give input into each other's stories. I remember one woman had improvised an interaction between herself and her mother, and one of us said to her later, "You know, you're really cold to her, you're really unkind to your mother, or at least that's what I saw when you were performing that bit." That was something this woman hadn't been aware of



before. We each got to see our lives from a number of different vantage points.

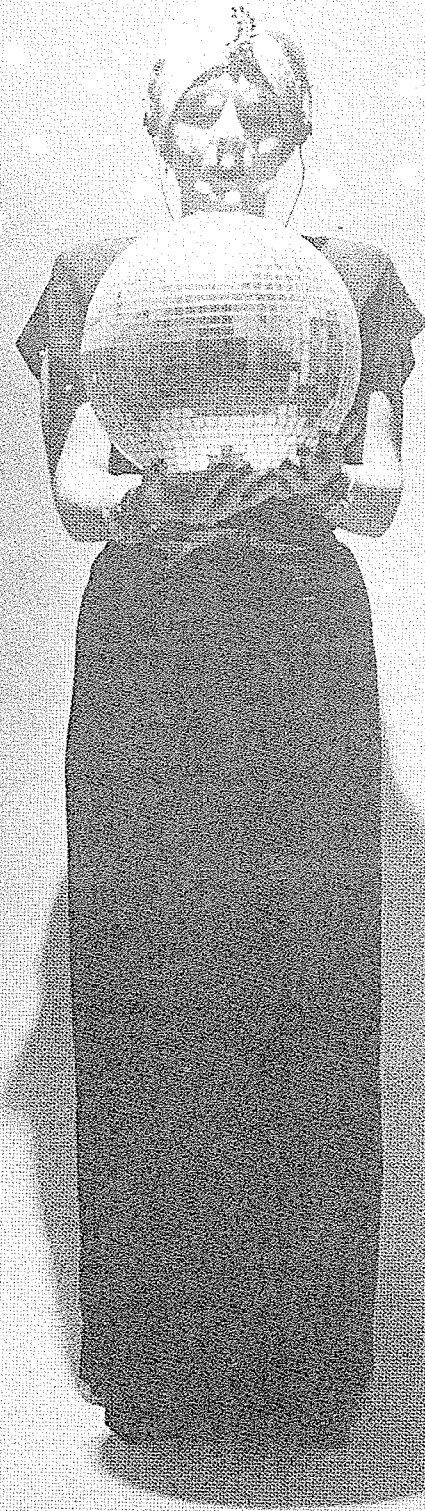
*I think that playing to women-only audiences made it really special. To be in a room full of women laughing about "Coming Out to Mother" or nodding in painful recognition of "Sexual Shut-down" diffused a lot of the isolation. Oral was a ritual of building community. But besides the elation, what were the raw spots? I know that in working with lesbians, particularly in a situation where you're challenging homophobia, there can be a tremendous amount of antagonism, power struggles, etc.*

Before getting any participants, I had the concept, a timeline, a budget, a performance space, and a fundraising plan. So women were presented with a very solid structure. There was no audition process. Basically any woman who was willing to commit to the structure could be part of the project. Then I had everyone sign a contract, making very specific agreements like, "I'll come to every workshop and rehearsal. I'll participate in all the exercises, I'll stay involved with the project up until this date." I also asked each woman to donate \$100 to the project, with the understanding that each would receive an equal share of any profits we made. These contracts provided a solid basis for trust—women were not just accountable to me but to each other as well.

During the workshop process I structured in a lot of exercises for the purposes of group bonding—movement games requiring trust, exchanging information about ourselves and sharing our perceptions of one another. During the first 10 weeks we established a strong basis of goodwill, which helped later when we worked on shaping the production. That's when the power struggles came up—around what kind of context we wanted the show to have, what material we wanted to present and how, what point of view we wanted to take on certain issues. We had differences in our politics and differences in our aesthetics.

*You've obviously worked hard to develop a methodology for collaboration. I'm wondering how it was for you to work alone on In Silence Secrets Turn to Lies/Secrets Shared Become Sacred Truth.*

Where *Oral* was inspired by wanting to meet a community need, *In Silence* came from a very personal need to deal with my incest experience. It did happen in the context of a community—a group of feminist artists in L.A. started the Incest Awareness Project, which was intended to make the public aware of the problem of incest from a feminist perspective. They emphasized the im-



**Terry Wolverton, Medium: Memory/Muse.  
Photo: Mary-Linn Hughes.**

portance of breaking the silence which surrounds incest. I was asked to do a performance for an exhibition called "Bedtime Stories: Women Speak Out about Incest," and I was both excited and terrified. I began with an image—a canopy hanging over my head, from which dripped dozens of streamers. On these blood-red streamers were written all the things I had kept silent about as a child. I started by trying to examine what had kept me silent about what was happening to me.

As I began to write these things they sounded so familiar to me, and all of a sudden I realized that I *had* spoken up, I had protested when I was a kid, but that I hadn't been believed, or else what I said didn't count. This added a whole other layer to the performance, and also made the piece doubly transformative for me. I was not only speaking out publicly about a taboo experience, but I was able to reclaim my own integrity. Before I did the performance, I went back home and told my mother about what I was doing, and confronted her for the first time about the experience. Then I included in the piece her reactions to my telling her. Doing the performance was an important ritual for me.

*The piece itself includes a kind of ritual. Yes, there's a point when I cast a circle of salt around the environment and call out the names of women—friends, my lover, my therapist—who were supportive of me coming to terms with the issue. I wanted to evoke their spirits, recognize them, draw them into a protective circle.*

*Also, I imagine, to reaffirm the context, which was your community. How could the audience participate in this piece?*

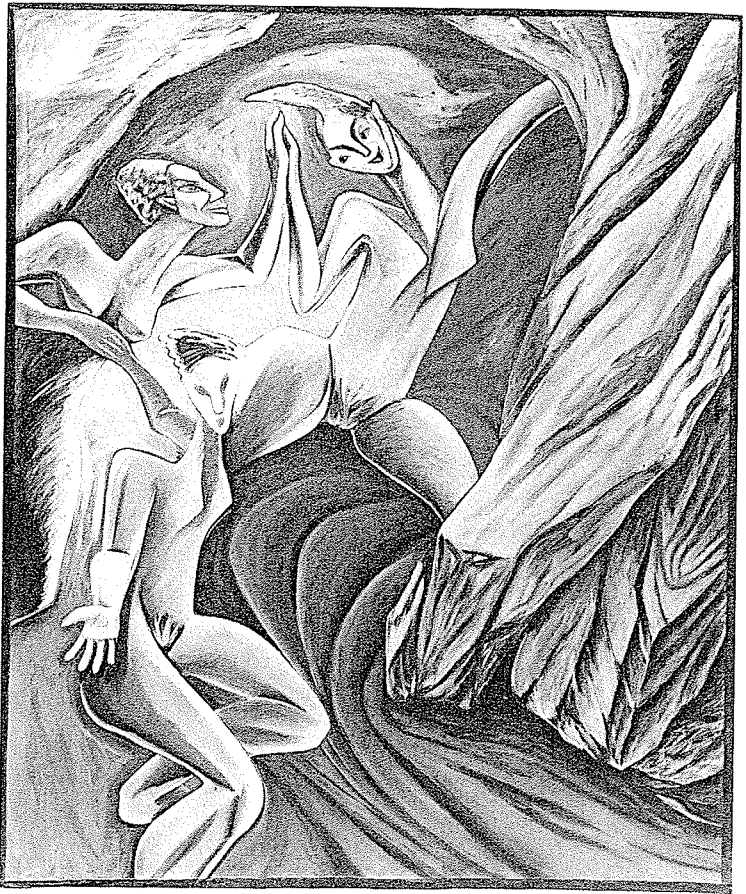
The piece was performed in a gallery, and the environment was a permanent installation in the exhibition. Once I had finished performing, I invited my audience—which was composed of men and women—to enter the environment and write their own stories or else their reactions to my story in a notebook provided for that purpose. Many people did that, either right after the performance or later, and a number of them wrote that it was the first time they had felt safe to talk about their experience.

I always try to include some audience participation in my work. In *Oral* the audience was invited to dance with the cast during a bar scene. I want the audience to have a real experience of the work, not just sit back and passively take it in. I want them to know that they are an important part of what happens, of whether the energy gets raised and the ritual is successful. The performers can only do it *with* them, not *for* them.

# Lilith and the Hired Help

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## Kitty Tsui



Mary Beth Edelson, *To Dance: With Performance in Mind*, 1984, oil on

Imagine my delight. There I was, a month past my last unemployment check, waiting for news of an NEH grant with the word out about the administration's proposed 50% cut-back in both NEA and NEH funds, when I was told of a paying acting gig.

Lilith, a Women's Theatre, was auditioning for their next production, a musical about maids.

I am a writer. I had played the conventional role of an actor only once, in *Paper Angels*, a play produced by the Asian-American Theatre Company in 1980. Prior to that I was on stage as one of Unbound Feet, a collective of six Chinese-American women writers who perform original material.

But a musical for one who only sings privately in the shower or to her lover would be a challenge!

For my audition pieces I chose a dialogue from our Unbound Feet material and "Soaring," a song by Cris Williamson.

In a dream that night I was my grandmother embracing my grandmother. We were mirror images of the way she looked at fifty, beautiful, strong and full of dignity. In "Soaring" are the lines: meeting myself/ in the mirror,/ finding myself/ getting much clearer.

In mid-February I started working with a company that has a following and reputation in the women's community. It advertises itself as "the voice of today's woman" and states as one of its goals "to define the responsibilities of the liberated woman and affirm the power of every woman to make our world a better place."

Great. A job. Getting paid to create and act and sing. A play at the end of the road. And with a women's theater company.

As yet the play had no script. The four actors were to do First published in *City Arts Monthly* (San Francisco, 1981). Kitty Tsui, author of *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire* (Spinster's Ink, 1983), juggles writing, acting, weight training, and driving a truck.

improv to create the characters and the play. One of the actors was to write a script from the improv work. When it was clear she was unable to produce one, the director took on the role of writer. To her credit she turned out a script in four days. However, it was an ordeal for me to read through it. My character, Jenny, the "quiet one" had minimal lines. When she did speak it was to tell fortunes from the wrinkles of a sheet. Speaking in verse likee dis: these wrinkle mean new beginning from old roots.

Sound familiar? Heard it before? Charlie Chan or Fu Man-chu? Fortune cookie say, Confucius say trinkets lining the shelves of shops in Chinatown, the Japanese Trade Center, Fisherman's Wharf. But in the Women's Building rehearsing for a feminist play about the lives of four maids?

Instead of exploring the issues of why women and women of color, foreign-born and American, are often forced into work as maids, a figment of fantasy that distorts, trivializes and makes a mockery of a woman's work is presented. I tried to explain my objections but the assistant director shrugged them off with a flippant, "Gypsies tell fortunes, not Asians." Rather than attempt to understand my criticism and struggle with it, she insisted on her own narrow view.

Outside of the Asian-American Theatre Company, there are few roles for Asian-American actors in the theater. Therefore it is of crucial importance, especially for a company that boasts of "the development of non-stereotypic characters" that they be characterized as real people, not ludicrous caricatures. And it is our responsibility as artists, as activists, as feminists to put a stop to racism, sexism, class oppression, and homophobia whenever and wherever the monster rears its head. Especially when it is in our midst. The show cannot just go on.

The writer/director maintained that the sheets were a technique to show Jenny as a spiritual/wise woman/shaman





canvas, 10' x 26' (two panels). Photo: Linda Impastato. Mary Beth Edelson is a NYC artist at large.

(reading wrinkles in sheets = spirituality?) and it was not until after a lengthy discussion and further explanation that she reluctantly agreed to give Jenny, a veteran maid of twenty-five years, other work. They were so insistent on keeping this "exotic activity" that it was written in later with a Cuban maid doing the honors.

Anxieties and emotions were high. There was rewriting, reworking, cutting, and shaping to be done. It was not an easy road. From the first when I spoke out against the racist characterization, I had been alienated from the rest of the cast. I was branded a "critical writer." They wanted to sing and dance and get on with the show. Though they felt my politics were "right on," they resented having to take the time and energy to make the needed changes.

As a feminist activist I am committed to doing art with a message and working in a group with democratic principles. Clearly to have stuck with the play through hell and high water demonstrated my dedication. But to speak out against majority opinion was seen as threatening, hostile, and subversive to their interests.

Stereotyping has long been used by mainstream media as a tool to oppress and exploit on the basis of race, sex, class, and sexuality. But to find stereotypes perpetrated and people so resistant to change in a "women's theater" in our midst is alarming. As feminist activists we must take the responsibility of speaking out against images that abuse and distort who we are even at the risk of being silenced.

Later a meeting was called to hand down a "core group decision based on feedback from the cast." It concerned "Kitty's personal problems." It was stated that because of my "problems" it would not be "right" for me to go on a scheduled tour.

I was in a state of shock. The show had opened to good reviews. I had not let personalities hinder my performances.

After two and a half months of working on my character and contributing to ensure that the play had content of substance as well as songs and one-liners, I had been fired. But fired for what? Even hired help have the right to know.

Problems? I was fired because of whose problems? I had spoken out against the unreasonable characterization of a working-class immigrant. If this is seen as having "personal problems" let me quote poet Mitsuye Yamada: "As a child of immigrants, as a woman of color in a white society and as a woman in a patriarchal society, what is personal to me is political."

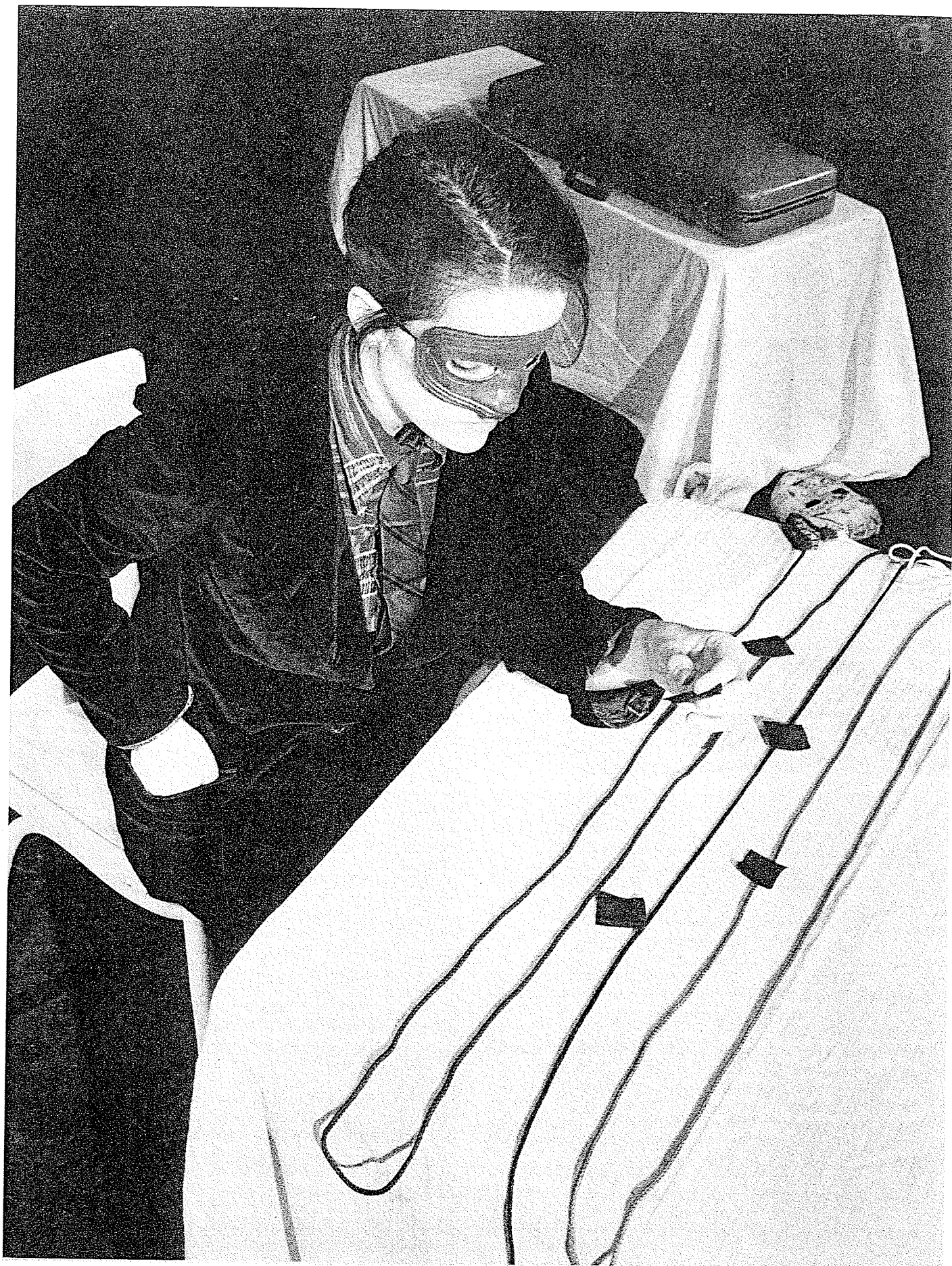
But to get back to the basic issue, why was I not told that people were having "problems" with me? Surely it is the responsibility of those working in a closely knit group who see problems to bring them to the floor so that issues of concern can be addressed. The group conveniently dismissed me to avoid confrontation and debate.

This article documents some of the behind-the-scenes events at a "feminist" theater production. The show must go on. Yes, we performed to capacity audiences in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Sacramento. But at what cost?

We live in too precarious a time to not speak out or take action in our personal or political lives. As women we have been oppressed because of our sex, as women of color we have been oppressed because of our sex and our race, as lesbians of color we have been oppressed because of our sex, our race and our sexuality; we cannot afford to isolate issues or each other. We must understand and act from a multi-issue base. Equality, growth and achievement can only come about by all oppressed groups working together to break down stereotypes, challenge traditional roles and activities, begin dialogue and promote understanding.

My countryman, Mao Zedong, wrote: "Dare to struggle, dare to win."





Lynn Swanson, *Devil's Dream*, 1981. Photo: Scott Berkobein. Lynn Swanson, based in NYC, explores musical perceptions within ruminations on life as a female.



## MAKE ART OF YOUR DAILY LIFE

### PREPARATION:

Determine what part of your life/day you want to call art;  
i.e., your job  
eating lunch  
talking on the phone  
holding a baby  
etc.

Decide how long you want to make art of this activity.  
(Making art means being attentive.)

### EVENT:

Write down or mentally note your resolution to make art of your daily life.  
When your chosen activity becomes conscious, make art of something else.  
Continue.

### COMMENTS:

Feel free to inform The Art/Life Institute of your own art/life experiences. Send a postcard to:

Linda Montano  
The Art/Life Institute  
9 John Street  
Saugerties, NY 12477

Linda Montano, Performance: Making Peace with the Past. "On May 20, 1983, I intended to let go of everything about Catholicism that is/was not beneficial to me." Linda Montano uses her life as performance material.



Beth Lapidès, Having Fun in the Dark, PS 122, NYC. Photo: © 1984 Dona Ann McAdams. Beth Lapidès is a visual and performance artist in NYC.

# THE DAUGHTERS CYCLE

## The Women's Experimental Theatre

### Clare Coss, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar

Every woman is a daughter. The Daughters Cycle trilogy articulates and challenges the meaning of that universal truth. *Daughters* reveals the primary, but culturally denied, relationship between mother and daughter. *Sister/Sister* examines the shifting patterns of alliance and betrayal in which women are enmeshed within the family, and their impact on adult "sisterhood." *Electra Speaks* is a feminist confrontation with one of the major myths of Western culture. We look at the experience of the women in this archetypal family of the House of Atreus—Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Electra as mothers, daughters, sisters—and give each woman voice. The Daughters Cycle trilogy explores the deeply held desire to merge, the urgent struggle to separate, and the hopes and wishes of so many women for some better love between us.

from DAUGHTERS

*The Writing of the Contract*  
Setting: The mother/daughter relationship

Two women are washing and drying the supper dishes—an icon of the mother/daughter relationship. As the women work, sounds accompany the scene from the actual use of a dishpan filled with water, plates, silverware, and glasses. Both women speak as daughters.

Every day of my life  
when I was growing up  
I saw my mother working  
with water  
and with fire.  
My mother works with fire.  
My mother works with water.  
My mother works with fire and water.  
And with knives.  
My mother works with fire and water and knives.  
And with air.

My mother works with fire and water and knives and air.  
And with earth.  
My mother's body is not dust.  
It is the early feast that fed my dust.  
My mother works with fire and water and knives and air  
and earth.  
My mother works with mysteries that cannot be explained.  
And I as a woman have my hands in fire and water and  
knives and air and earth.  
And I as a woman have my hands inside my mother.

My mother works with mysteries that cannot be explained.  
And I as a woman have my hands in fire and water and  
knives and air and earth.  
And I as a woman have my hands inside my mother.

from SISTER/SISTER

Why do I weep before I see you?  
And after I see you?  
Who am I weeping for?  
Daddy's Girl? Mother's?  
What was? or what never was?

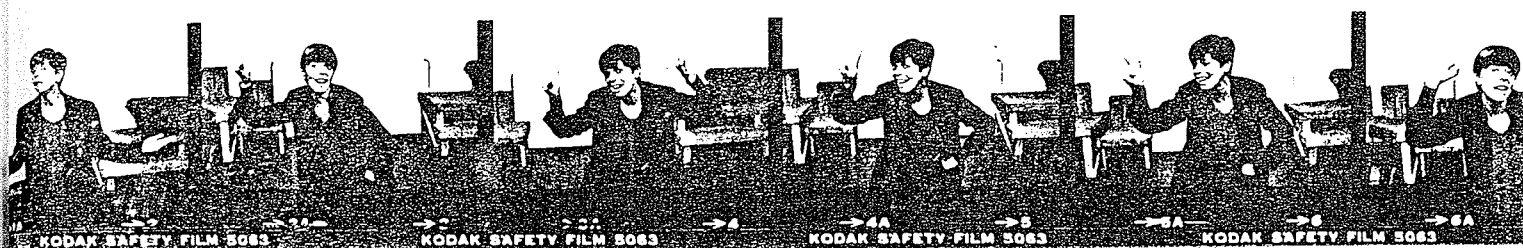
The past is like sun in our eyes  
it is light  
but light that keeps us from seeing  
and oh how hard we work to see sister  
to see each other.

I want you to see me  
separate  
see my shape  
because I am in space  
see my form  
because there is light around me  
see me changing  
because there is room for movement  
see me as figure  
not on the field of family  
not on the field of the past  
or at least not only those ways  
but also separate  
from you  
separate  
from them  
close  
but with space and light between us  
so that you can see me  
and I can see you.



from **ELECTRA SPEAKS**

*ELECTRA is speaking about herself in the third person, about an Electra in the audience, about all the women in the audience. There is a driving beat underlying the entire search for speech. SHE doesn't illustrate the content but embodies it. SHE embodies the hesitancy, the shriek, the over-talking, the voices of her family. SHE trips through rapid changes in dynamics, intentions, emotions, that express the struggle for speech.*



"ELECTRA tries to speak."

Sondra Segal. Photos: P. Krupenye.

*SHE prepares for the event, pulls on a sweatshirt, straightens her clothing, clears her throat, takes a deep breath and begins.*

**ELECTRA**

Electra is trying to speak  
 She's not a speaker  
 She knows she's not a speaker  
 but she has something she wants to say  
 She thinks she has something she wants to say

Electra is trying to speak

*begins to speak on Electra's behalf*

she's trying to speak  
 she is looking down and playing with her hands  
 she's starting  
 she is stammering  
 she is changing the subject and stammering  
 she is saying it  
 she is saying it twice  
 she is saying it twice  
 she is saying it many times  
 she doesn't know what she is saying  
 and she's saying it many times.  
 she doesn't know what she wants to say  
 and she's saying it

*stalling*

she averts her eyes  
 she looks down  
 she fixes her hair  
 she is straightening her skirt  
 she is biting her lip  
 she is picking her fingernails  
 she is clearing her throat  
 she is smiling  
 no  
 she is smoking

she is angry

*takes on the emotions named in rapid changes:  
 angry/sad/laughing/shrieking*

she is looking very angry  
 but she's really sad  
 she's looking very angry  
 very very angry  
 but she's really sad  
 she's averting her eyes  
 she's turning away  
 she laughs  
 she laughs at herself  
 she's making a joke  
 she's making a joke at her own expense  
 she's laughing  
 she's laughing and giggling  
 and sputtering and chuckling  
 she's guffawing  
 she's guffawing at her own expense

*becomes the laugh—rises to hysterical shriek—  
 bites her hand to stop herself*

she's beating around the bush

Electra is trying to listen  
 she's trying to appear to be listening  
 she appears to be listening  
 she appears to be comprehending  
 she appears to be comprehending  
 she's trying to comprehend  
 and she appears to be comprehending  
 she's winking  
 and smiling  
 and grimacing  
 and mugging  
 she raises her eyebrows  
 she nods  
 she gasps

she is disappearing  
*a plea*  
 she is trying to listen  
 she is trying to appear to be listening  
 she is trying to comprehend  
 she is trying to appear to be comprehending  
 and she's disappearing  
 she is disappearing

she is in a daze

*she becomes "the daze"*

she's spaced out  
 she doesn't get it  
 she's lost the thread  
 she's lost the train of thought

*SHE panics*

she can't follow  
 she doesn't get it  
 she doesn't get it  
 she gets it

do you get it?

*urgent rushing to individual audience members*

do you get it?  
 you know what I mean

she says she doesn't know what she wants to say

*she's lost self-respect*

she says she doesn't know what she wants to say  
 she knows what she wants to say  
 don't be ridiculous  
 she doesn't know how to say what she wants to say  
 and who's listening to her anyway?

she's trying to get it together

*a plea for empathy*

she's trying to speak  
 she's trying to speak for herself  
 she can't speak for herself  
 she's speaking in voices

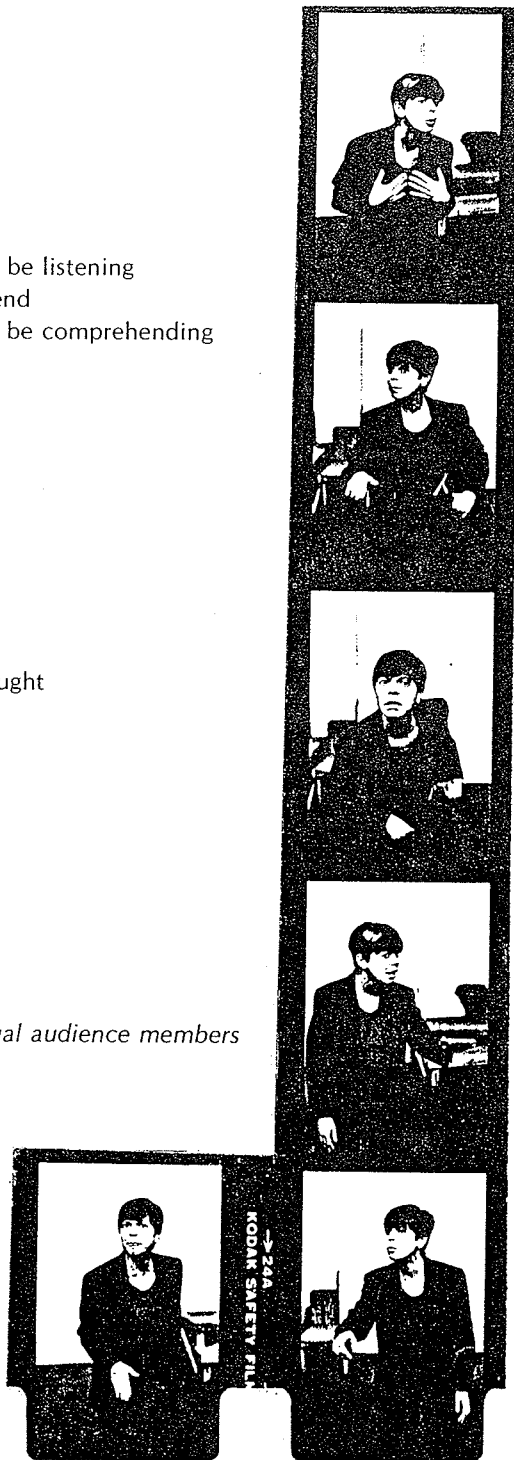
she's trying to hold her own  
 but she's speaking in voices

*SHE embodies fully each family member*

she's appearing as her father  
 Electra is appearing as her father  
 she's blustering and blurting and talking loud  
 she's quacking she's quacking  
 she's smacking her lips  
 she's snorting and quacking  
 she's slapping  
 she's slapping her knee  
 she's slapping her thigh  
 she's slapping and smacking  
 and snorting and quacking  
 she's talking like she knows what she thinks  
 she's talking like she knows what she's talking  
 about

now she's appearing as her sister  
 she's batting her eyes  
 she's winking  
 she's blinking  
 she's flirting  
 she's mincing  
 she's mincing and flirting  
 and deserting herself

now she's appearing as her mother  
 she's uh hesitating  
 she's just thinking out loud  
 she's covering her mouth  
 she's averting her gaze  
 she's ending everything with a question  
 she's appearing as her mother  
 and she's ending everything with a question  
 do you know what I mean?



she's repeating what she hears  
 she's repeating what she hears



she is nodding

she can't speak

she is smiling  
 she is winking  
 she is mugging  
 she is nodding  
 she is smiling  
 swallowing  
 gulping  
 gasping  
 panting  
 humming  
 drumming  
 hemming  
 hawing  
 simpering  
 whimpering  
 moaning  
 groaning  
 droning  
 poking  
 stroking  
 joking  
 jesting  
 kidding  
 quipping  
 trying  
 crying  
 sighing  
 lying, lying  
 she's lying  
 blaming  
 defaming  
 harranguing  
 trashing  
 kvetching  
 chuckling  
 chirping  
 twittering  
 snickering  
 giggling  
 gurgling  
 gagging  
 gagging  
 she's gagging

she can't stand the sound of her own voice  
 she can't stand her stammering  
 she can't stand her stuttering  
 she can't stand her smiling  
 she can't stand herself  
 she can't stand herself  
 she can't think

she doesn't know what she wants to say

*SHE gags*

she's gagging  
 get a glass of water  
 get a glass of water quick

but she has something she wants to say



Electra is keeping the conversation going

she's shooting off her mouth  
she's going on and on  
she doesn't know how to stop  
she's speed rapping  
she's dragging it out  
she's lost in detail  
she's off on a tangent  
she's lost her focus  
she can't stay on the subject  
the girl has no focus  
she doesn't know how to speak  
and she doesn't know how to stop

*a frantic call for help*

she's playing with her hands  
she averts her eyes  
she's biding time  
she's buying time  
she's cracking her knuckles  
she looks at her hands  
she bites  
she bites her lip  
she bites her fingernails  
she looks away  
she shrieks  
she is trying to say  
but she is shrieking instead  
they don't know that she knows  
what she wants to say

she is holding her breath

*SHE is immobilized*

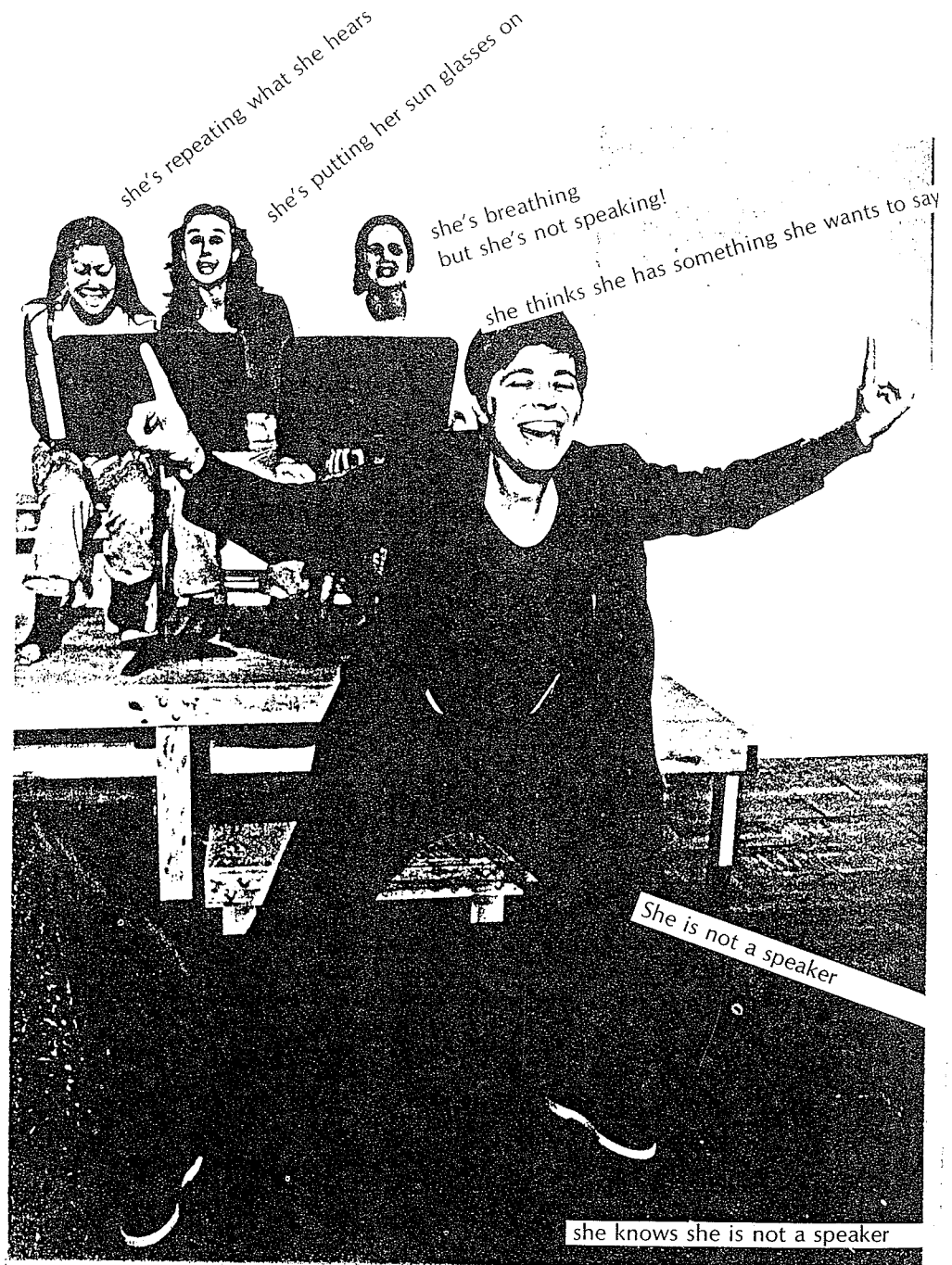
she is very very still  
she is so still  
she is almost not breathing  
so uh hmm uh oh okay  
huh she gasps  
she gasps  
she's holding her breath  
she can't speak  
she can't breathe

*SHE addresses the audience directly and clearly*

there's probably more she could say.

*SHE smiles*

BLACK OUT



Electra tries to speak.

Clare Coss, Sondra Segal, and Roberta Sklar are the founders and artistic directors of the Women's Experimental Theatre. *The Daughters Cycle* was first produced at the Interart Theatre, NYC. Mary Lum and Mary Lyon participated in the improvisational research and performance of all three plays, along with Sondra Segal. Other performers included Sharon Dennis, Barbara George, Amy Lerner, Debbie Nitzberg, and Liz Walber.

Mary Lum, Mary Lyon, Liz Walber, Sondra Segal. Photo: P. Krupenye.

# The Future of an ILLUSIONISM

a panel organized by Daryl Chin

*The Future of an Illusionism*, a multimedia theater piece, was presented by Daryl Chin at Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery in January 1983. The piece attempted to investigate historical, economic, and aesthetic issues related to "performance" in American culture since 1900. The following are excerpts from the second part—a panel on funding and alternative performance. The five panelists are Simone Forti (choreographer-dancer, who inaugurated "task performance" and

"dance constructions"), Alison Knowles (graphic artist, composer, and participant in the Fluxus movement), Charlotte Moorman (cellist and organizer of the Annual Avant-Garde Festivals in NYC), Carolee Schneemann (visual artist, who helped create Happenings, underground movies, etc.), and Elaine Summers (choreographer-filmmaker, who developed the Experimental Intermedia Foundation). The moderator is Michael Kirby (editor of *The Drama Review*).

**Michael:** Were there problems in the '60s that don't exist today?

**Simone:** Oh, I think the main situation that I see between the '60s and reading the last question—what we may be moving into, with the funding getting less available—is that in the '60s it was easy to survive on a part-time job, it was easy to find a part-time job, and it was easy to live on very little, so that you could support your own work and your own self in a way that right now is very difficult to do and to have enough time. And it's hard for a young person just to break into any kind of work that'll support them with a three-day-a-week schedule and leave them enough time and money to also be supporting their art.

**Michael:** Thinking back just to the spaces that you performed in in the '60s... was it easier to find space then, or was it more difficult?

**Simone:** Well, I think we were more satisfied with less... So we were happy to find a cooperative space such as the Reuben Gallery and to dance on a broken-up, tiled—you know, like a really grubby situation. We were very happy to do our work in that situation; so, in a sense, I'd say yes, it didn't seem difficult.

**Elaine:** I remember that the East End Theater offered us space—it was free; the Gramercy Arts Theater offered us space, that was free; Woodstock, there was a little playhouse up there, that was free....

This piece by Daryl Chin, NYC artist, was made possible by a CAPS grant in multimedia; the tape was transcribed by Larry Qualls.

**Alison:** The first performances I ever did of any of my work as a performance artist were in Europe, to large concert hall audiences in major museums. Then I came back to this country and did—in a loft on Canal Street—a series of very interesting performances with a Fluxus group.... So it moved from a very high culture context, where this thing began, into a situation of Canal Street, somebody's low-rent space which was simply donated once a week and we did pieces there for very little money. And we did whatever we wanted for seven, eight, ten, twelve people. Then Yoko had a series—it moved a little bit to her loft—but it still had a very underground, noneconomic base.

**Michael:** But you are comparing spaces in Europe with spaces in New York.... Is there a difference?

**Alison:** Oh, I think that Europe has a cultural base to consider new movements, new ideas, because it's an older culture. They simply take the shock better; they want it more, they can use it more. We accept it; we don't seem to have a fundament for it to sit on. For a newer country we don't shock as much, we take it as we take a new anything, because we are used to exploring new spaces that are existing in this country. We take art with a little less history than the rest of Europe. Europe has all this backup for anything that happens. We have this kind of separateness of what happens, and art is simply one of the things that happens. And when it happened on Canal Street in New York, it was just extremely different from when the same piece was done three months before in Wiesbaden....

**Carolee:** I'd like to think about my first space, because art seemed to be some form of economic excrement. It was

expendable, and the space I found was an excrement and was also expendable. And that gave me a sense of processing a unique psychic territory—that I, transgressing everything I should do, could use this open potential right in the middle of New York City (I could even see the Empire State Building out of my window). It was \$68 a month, which I had a hard time getting together.... I was a dog dryer; I did porno films; I taught Sunday school. And I could also plead with the landlord, you know, when I couldn't get \$68 together. I could go there in tears. And he had no idea of what I was doing up there.

It had DC current; when you walked sparks came out. There was a tub and a sink in the hall that I shared with a derelict; he had been there before me, so I did not think it was my place to completely kick him out. We had a sort of tacit arrangement where he would usually disappear early in the morning. Only my lovers had to adjust to him as well; that was all right. But the thing about the space was that it was left with debris—fur debris—it was a very haunted space. Someone had been chopping up fur collars for 40 years there, and when you walked the walls went [*gesture of walls caving in*—vibrating with fur dust. So I immediately began to work with all this fur debris; and I still use the cutting boards for my constructions, but with that sense then of a totally "other" space that corresponded somehow to the unconscious mind.

**Michael:** Comparing that to the present day: you're no longer transgressing, is that right?

**Carolee:** Yes, I am, because the co-op is trying to get me out. I'm still there.

**Charlotte:** Well, space is always a crisis for me, and it still is today just as much

as it was in 1963. . . . Always crisis, always difficult. For the festival that I do, I always want a place that is very tough to get. Anybody would have trouble getting it, so I know ahead of time that it's going to be trouble. . . .

I wanted public spaces, and I asked for Central Park in 1966, and the man in charge of the city then was Mayor Wagner. He wrote me back that my work wasn't art; and so I was offended by that. So I wasn't particularly thrilled about him as a mayor either. I didn't really consider him a good politician. But, in any case, that wasn't the issue. I wanted Central Park. Well, then Hoving took over as the commissioner and Lindsay came in, and he gave me Central Park. Then I wasn't content with that; I wanted the Staten Island Ferry. Now, to rent the Staten Island Ferry is like 40, 50, 60 thousand dollars for 24 hours. And it didn't have the proper electricity; I had to have Con Ed come and rewire it. . . . And here are all these artists donating their artwork and the printer donating the poster, and the city wanted 40, 50, 60 thousand dollars for their ferry boat—which was absurd. So we ended up getting it for free. That's my problem. There's so many artists; and if we're not getting money, then how on earth can any building get money or any landlord get money? So, since I've chosen to do it this way, since you can't pay 600 people, it would take an incredible budget. . . . the thing is, every year, it's a big crisis.

Then, as far as my performance spaces, just on my own playing cello or TV cello or any of those pieces, people have heard about some of the pieces I've done. And that scares them; they mix them all up: they say I was nude going in an oil drum playing the TV cello. They mix everything all up, and then when I go to ask someone for the performance space, they're terrified; they're afraid I'm going to burn their house down or something. If they knew the pieces, they wouldn't be afraid. They might not like them, but at least they'd feel safe. So, either way, whether it's for me or whether it's for the festival, always difficult.

**Michael:** You seem more or less to be speaking for everyone in saying that things have changed, but they are still the same. And that there were difficulties in the old days and there are difficulties today. I'm going to skip to the fifth question. . . . [which] says: "With the current recession, arts funding has been steadily on the decrease. What are the prospects in terms of funding for noncommercial performance? . . . What do you think will happen to the arts with the current recession?"

**Simone:** Well, I think it is good to have fat times and lean times. And I think



Elaine Summers (choreographer), Malcolm Goldstein (composer), *Invitation to Secret*

that as funding gets harder, people will think their lives over in a different way. . . . I think that certain individual people work much better when they have a lot of support and other individual people work much better when they're really up against the wall. I think that when things get hard, it's really time to look into oneself. And so in terms of having a real spiritual backbone, maybe hard times bring a backbone into the conceptual part of the art. . . .

**Michael:** Have you benefited from grants personally?

**Simone:** Yes, well. . . . the last five years I did a series of large pieces. The first one I did because I was applying for a grant, and I felt, well, if they think I'm going to pay a lot of people, they'll probably give me the money. And I got the money and I paid a lot of people. And then the next year, I really had launched it and I needed to do another big piece, and I didn't have a grant. So I hustled up the money. So then I went ahead and I did four big pieces in a period of five years, and I hustled it up one way or the other. The only grant I got was that first year.

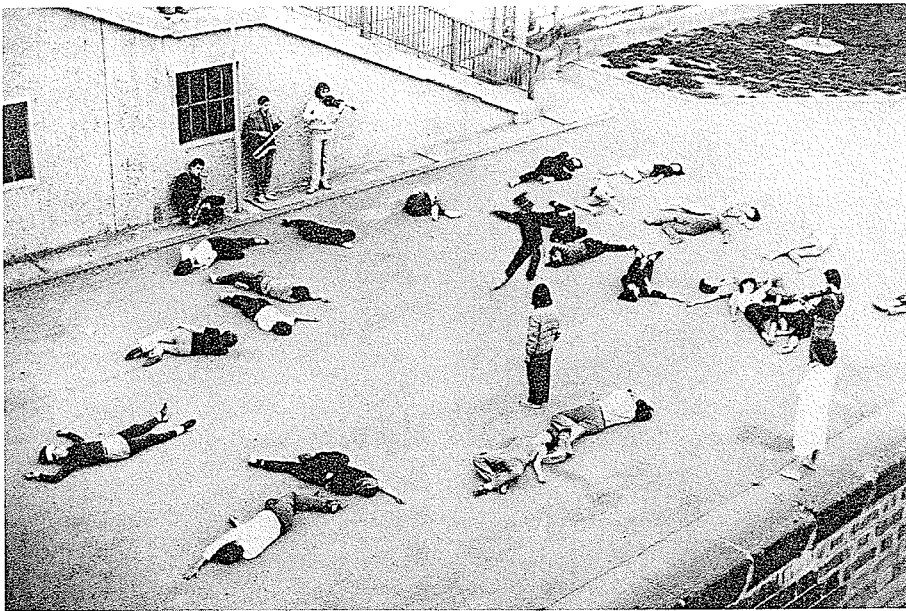
**Michael:** Elaine, what about the Intermedia Foundation and grants?

**Elaine:** Well, the Intermedia Foundation came about when. . . . I had financially stumbled into a job where they paid me a lot of money to do a Bell Telephone Hour with Donald O'Connor and 20 dancers. I had just borrowed a lot of money to do *Fantastic Gardens*, and somebody met me on the street afterwards, and they said, "Oh, you've done this wonderful work; when are

you going to do your next piece?" And I said, "When I pay back the \$3,000 I owe for doing this one," which had taken three years to do. So, here was this job, \$500 a week; so I fancied that I would go into commercial work and I would work six months and I would be able to afford my dance company. I could pay them salaries and everything. But then that wasn't the way it is, I discovered. And so then, I was talking to this lawyer who was representing me, and he said, "Well, you know, you should do what you want to do and you should have a foundation." And then he explained to me that a foundation is a tool for artists so that people can give them money. And then they'll get it off their taxes. And I thought that sounded wonderful.

You know, I had had so much help financially in the '60s from friends who lent me their equipment and were my gurus, that I'm very into trading. Like I had a friend who taught me how to use a 16mm camera and how to edit 16mm movies so I didn't have to go to school to learn. So whenever I did something bad with my filmmaking, I could always cross it off as—well, I didn't go to school, see, so I lost that \$100 or \$10 or whatever it was, and that's part of my schooling. There was always a sharing kind of thing going on, and I think that's still going on. And I think that what happened is that the foundation thing became a way of formalizing that, of making it work within this new system that they were setting up. But the problem that happened with it is that—I think that the [New York State] Council and people who do business looked at





Dancers, Vienna, 1983. Sponsored by Grita Insam Art Gallery. Photos: Ben Ben Yakou.

us as possibly—well, they used to say it—they were going to give us seed money to start a business. And then, after they had given us a grant for two or three years, then Simone would go out and be a successful choreographer-businesswoman. They just couldn't see that there is no such thing as money for dancing or choreographing or whatever; there just isn't any. Nothing that you can do, no amount of money that you beg or plead from Citibank or corporations that will give you anything (which mostly they won't) is going to get you money. And if you're a choreographer, you have to pay. Like every \$100 your dancers make is \$800 (because you have eight dancers) that you have to raise.

So, on the one hand, I'm very in conflict. I like to see dancers paid; I don't like lean times ever. And I guess that comes from always working and, you know, having very lean times. So I don't like them. I want money to do my work, I want to pay my dancers, I want to buy City Center, I want full-page ads in *The New York Times*. . . . [But] what the New York State Council wants to see is that I can raise money. That's what you're really being trained to do, is raise money. . . .

I guess what I'm saying is that I feel that we need grants. I hear people coming from Holland who do get paid money to be artists. It sounds great to me. And I don't know anybody more practical than artists about money. I really don't. I think we're much more practical than businessmen, because we really have to watch it very, very carefully, and we have to earn the money usually,

or most of it, that we spend on our art.

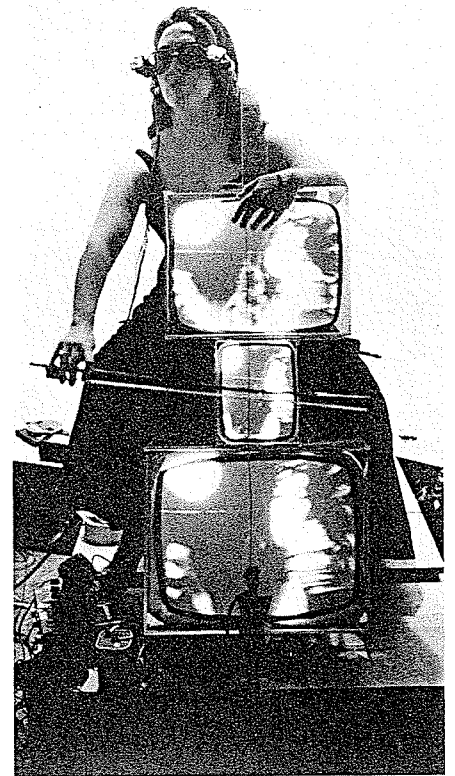
**Alison:** Well, I'll just pick up right there about Holland. . . . I went from Cal Arts back to New York City via Vermont with two students leaving for Holland. One of them was Barbara Bloom, who since made an excellent film career. And the second year that she was there scored a wonderful grant for something like \$23,000 (I don't know how much). They regularly pay their artists—once you're established as an artist and have done your work, sort of the way a shoemaker turns out. There's this quality in Europe of simply doing your work; if you keep at it, you'll finally be paid, and it will scale up. We don't quite have that sense in this country. It's all right; we have other things. . . .

I think that a country that, per se, funds artists is a good thing, but it does not necessarily mean there'll be better art. But it's a good thing for that individual artist, because, to talk to Simone's point, we're all very different kinds of artists—some that suffer best and have lean times and do wonderful work behind the struggle. Some really have to have a certain level of support; they want five or six people in their environment or in their performance piece. They have to have that. They should have the funding to be able to get it, and if they don't and they have a lean, hard time, they simply don't get their work done. . . .

I think we don't any of us really want hard times, but when they come, because of the people that we are or the times that we are in, there are ways to deal with them which can be absolutely

remarkable. I was in Warsaw, I was in Poland, and I did a show there, and I walked on the main street and saw some galleries dealing with things like Picasso and Miro. I wondered what they were doing dealing with Picasso and Miro. I went into the Picasso gallery because I had been given a card that said, "Go to the second floor, go to the third level down—find your way into that space, and you'll be amazed at what you find." Someone showed up at the door and escorted me through the Picasso to the second floor, where there was a women's and children's blouse exhibition, which was facing onto some children's drawings, which began a sort of circular labyrinth which you walked through, looking at little tee shirts and printed shirts and children's drawings. Finally, you came into something the size of two phone booths, which was a very fine conceptual artist's exhibition involving a chair, a couple of apples, and a little radio, which had been put up behind three subterfuges. And it was their third show and was beautiful.

**Michael:** I hope you burned the card. Carolee, do you have any anecdotes for us about grants?



Charlotte Moorman, *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes* by Nam June Paik, 1971. Photo: Peter Moore.

**Carolee:** I'm concerned, I'm confused, I think, about the institutionalization of funding and the fact that the alternative spaces of the '70s had a tremendous amount of vitality. And the early granting seemed to help people who were just at the point where it made an appreciable difference in what they were able to accomplish. Right now it looks like a morass out there to me. Younger artists, who are struggling to find space and funding, are also all into marketing strategies. Or many of them are. They talk to me about being too sloppy and idealistic and having leftover attitudes from the '60s, because I haven't gotten together my networking. It's a lot of cruddy, more money terms; and they come to discuss it with me. And they're bitterly, bitterly disillusioned by the credulity and the sameness of my situation, which is pretty much the same for me now as it's always been.

I put it together piecemeal, a little bit of teaching here. The grants have been enormously helpful and made work possible. I was slow to realize that they meant what they said, coming out of all that independence of the '60s. When I heard that there were grants being given, I didn't believe it for a long time. Then I started to apply, and I never got them. And it seemed that the work was too complicated. And one year I was just so enraged, I wrote to one of the funding sources and described an all-white piece in which the film would be white, the installation would be different white materials, the performers would be all drenched in whiteness, and I needed as much money as they could give me. They liked that one; that was the one grant I did get. It was called *Blizzard*.

**Charlotte:** Well, when I started out all these things that I'm involved in, I was so thrilled when I heard about the National Endowment, that they were going to give money to artists and organizations. So I wrote them that I wanted money to do the festival in Central Park, and they wrote me back that there was no such category as "art in public spaces." Then I wanted an individual grant to do cello and performance pieces. And they wrote me back—this was in 1966—they wrote me back that they didn't have a category of performance art. Then I thought, well, okay, I'll do video, because [Nam June] Paik had made me the TV bra in '69. So, I thought, this is great; now I'll write them and ask them for a grant to do video art. And they wrote me back that they had no category for video artists. This was all before; now they have these categories. So I really didn't fit into anything, and I was getting annoyed and offended and frustrated. Because if I'm doing something so impor-

tant, why can't they find a name for it or place for it or something? Anyway, I did succeed in getting some small grants for the festival. . . .

Then I tried to get, I wanted a Guggenheim more than anything. I remember when Alison got hers—oh, that's fantastic—and Allan Kaprow got his—oh, this is fabulous—I'm going to get one. So I wrote them and got everything together. And it was just such a handsome package—color photos—I mean, I would have hired me if. . . I mean, seriously. Yeah, I've been on a panel; I was on the CAPS panel; that's what gave me cancer is trying to give 300 artists, trying to decide which 12 of those 300 artists were going to get money. I couldn't stand it. I'd go home and cry and cry; and then I'd see these incredible artists and I'd just—oh my God, we didn't give them a CAPS grant. And I couldn't stand it. . . .

Oh, so, the Guggenheim. I was so impressed with the package I sent them, and then I found the one thing we all dream of, that I had a friend on the selecting panel. And I have a lot of enemies, as you probably know. But I have a lot of friends too, and it balances itself off. And my friends have such love and give me such support and such love in every way that it's okay, the enemies just don't stand a chance. But the thing is, just to have one of those friends on the panel giving away all that money—oh my, I just knew I had it. And they wrote me back; I didn't fit into any of their categories. I'm not a painter, I'm not a sculptor; I wasn't any of those things, and that was in 1979. And I'm really annoyed, you know, that I don't seem to belong.

But anyway, we have gotten some grants and one very important thing that the grants have helped to do: when you go to the New York Telephone Company. . . well, when you go to them and they see on your poster that the National Endowment funded you, the New York State Council on the Arts funded you. . . it gives you prestige and it makes other people willing to give you a small grant. So I think it's very, very important for that reason, no matter what the National Endowment gives you or the New York State Council, just to be able to use their name is helpful with a lot of business people.

And there's one last point: I think we're the greatest, what Elaine says, the greatest business people in the world. Can you imagine a poor, helpless businessman printing up 20,000 posters for my festival, like I do, without having a penny to mail them out? They would never do that. But I have to; I've got to—while the printer has agreed to print the posters for free, I have to get them printed, and then I go out and worry and, sure enough, Metropolitan

Life and, sure enough, the Port Authority let me sneak a few thousand into their machines and their meters. And some other people I can't mention because they're sitting here and they're involved with some foundations—they let me sneak a few thousand of the posters through their mailing machines; they don't know they helped us, but they did: thank you. . . . I mean, so you show me a businessman that can get those kinds of things accomplished. I think we get so much done on very little money, and no businessmen in their right minds would begin to go ahead with something they didn't have a little money for.

**Michael:** Okay, just when we're getting to the practical aspects of things, I'm afraid that we're going to run out of time [so] I'm going to read the three remaining questions [which he does]. . . . People were laughing at the question about [performance becoming] self-supporting. Is that funny?

**Elaine:** That's funny because there has never been a moment in my life when I haven't taken most of the money I earned teaching and put it towards my choreography. I have never had a time when anything that I did was paid for by grants. I think, in relation to the business thing, that it is important for artists to realize something. It always has a circular effect. . . you get something going that pays for something, then it seems as if something is more expensive all the time. And artists are always working from never being paid for what they do. So you always have to have at least two jobs, full-time jobs: the job you work at for love and the job you work at to get paid for. Whereas businessmen, they have—the rent is paid where they work, their telephone is paid, their paper is paid, their stationery is paid, they often have somebody to do secretarial work.

And I loved what Carolee was saying about networking and all those things, and I feel like it is just such an enormous, overwhelming thing, all of this. You've got to let everybody know what you are doing. Spiritually I think it's fine; it's just communication. That's all it is, and we can call it dirty words like advertising and PR, but it's just letting people know what you're doing. But we don't have the resources; we have to do it ourselves or not do it at all. And if you don't do it at all, then it doesn't count. So it becomes huge; I feel like I'm under this enormous barrage of obligations that I have to meet, you know—and it's huge. And, in a way, it's huge, because in the '60s, it's true [BELL], it was easier to get a part-time job, and it supported you. You lived on less; the inflation has made that huge a change. . . .

# SOME KIND OF DANCE

Stephanie Skura

## In the dark; beginning the performance.

*Female Voice* (fades in): collaborative venture, at least this section of it—

*Male Voice*: Stephanie, it's collaborative already just by our being here together. The point is, is that it's your piece.

*Female*: Yeah, but I can't tell you what to do. This is an improvisation. How can I tell you what to do?

*Male*: I'm not asking you to tell me what to do. No no, don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that you tell me what to do, or I even tell you what to do. The point is, is that we're doing a piece about an argument, right?

*Female*: Right—

*Male*: Now I don't want to start it off by arguing. What's the point of that?

*Female*: Well, why don't we start it off—

*Male*: Let's first—

*Female*: just by talking. We're bound to come to some minor disagreement sooner or later.

*Male*: Well, why don't we just start, OK?

*Female*: OK.

*Male*: So, go ahead, let's start.

*Female*: So I just wanted to have these in front of me—

*Male*: Do you want the light on?

*Female*: No, I'd actually rather not have it on.

*Male*: Well, I think I'm going to need to have it on, because it's so dark in here, even with the light from the studio.

*Female*: Oh.

*Male*: How's that? That doesn't affect you—

*Female*: Oh, that's OK.

*Male*: I mean that doesn't bother you or anything—

*Female*: No.

*Male*: OK, so let's start.

*Female*: OK.

*Male*: You want the window open?

*Female*: Uh, well, maybe a little bit. How do you feel about it?

*Male*: No, we can open it—

*Female*: This is really a problem with starting. You have to have certain things. Do you want to clean the house before we start? Oh, you already did that this morning.

*Male*: The only problem is that if I open the window, we're going to get a lot of ambient sound.

*Female*: No, we probably should leave it closed.

*Male*: But do you know what I can do? I can open up the windows in the back— No no, then we'll get the noise from the back. OK, forget it, let's not open up the windows.

*Female*: I feel OK.

*Male*: OK, well, let's not open up the windows—

*Female*: I have the same problems. I can't start until everything is—

*Male*: Are you sure you want to do this at the table?

*Female*: I think it's nice at the table. It's a little formal, but I feel sort of comfortable here.

*Male*: You sure you don't want to move into the living room?

*Female*: Because I know I'm sitting in the chair, and there's really no possibility of being anyplace else. I'm not going to climb on the table or anything.

*Male*: All right, so let's get started.

*Female*: OK.

*Male*: All right, you start.

*Female*: OK.

*Male*: All right, you start.

*Female*: Well, it seems to me we already have started. Why don't we just continue?

*Male*: All right, let's continue getting started.

**Music and lights on; performance proceeds.**



Stephanie Skura, a dancer, composer, and performer, is co-founder of the Redwing Performing Group in NYC.

© 1984 Stephanie Skura

These excerpts are from the recorded soundtrack of *Some Kind of Dance*, a performance by Stephanie Skura.





### MIDDLE SECTION

**Space very dimly lit. Lights occasionally flash on and off. Skura is dancing in the dark. Music: one note repeats and begins to build momentum and overtones.**

*Female Voice:* Well, where do you get your subjects from? Do you turn on the TV or read a book?

**Music continues.**

*Male Voice:* But you don't want to deal with structure here, so let's not deal with structure. It's all right with me. Hey, I'm easy.

*Female Voice:* It's not that—

**Music builds more.**

*Female:* See, that's a problem, this is dangerous.

*Male:* What's dangerous?

**Music goes on.**

*Female:* Maybe it's just my way of working. Maybe my way of working isn't— Maybe I need to change. Maybe I've become very rigid in my ways. I think of myself as totally free and experimental and all this stuff, and here's Steven, from the commercial world, having very specific ideas—

**Violent music.**

*Male:* So who do you think you're kidding? You're a bourgeois, upper-middle-class, spoiled little white girl, who doesn't want to work for a living

**Increasing violence in the music.**

*Female:* Your problem is you say half-truths. That's the problem.

*Male:* And what do you say, half-lies?

**High reckless notes.**

*Male* (mumbles unclear words in Spanish).

**A low maelstrom begins to swirl.**

*Female* (he is meanwhile slurping coffee): You do the typical male thing of pursuing a course of distraction. Anything that comes up that's the slightest bit of a problem, you distract yourself. You distract yourself with drugs, you distract yourself with sex, you distract yourself with food, you distract yourself with alcohol, you distract yourself with the movies, you distract yourself with TV—

**Maelstrom continues.**

*Male:* Come on, Stephanie—

**Maelstrom goes on.**

*Female:* I think you're deliberately trying to sabotage this

**Maelstrom goes to upper register.**

*Female:* I was afraid this would happen.

*Male:* Oh, what is that supposed to mean?

*Female:* I mean, before we even get to be friends, we start arguing with each other. We're going to develop very hostile attitudes, and there's a friendship down the drain.

*Male* (shouting): WE'RE NOT TALKING ABOUT HOSTILITY!

**Maelstrom develops into chaos.**

*Male* (sobbing the words almost unintelligibly): I'm not feeling sorry for myself, I'm feeling sorry for you and for everything. Jesus Christ Almighty—

**Maelstrom gets to a peak of violence, then subsides.**

*Spoken as if calling to someone a great distance away:*

I am making my way through unknown suburbs.

A friendly animal comes along. He has a long torso, medium-length fur, and short legs. He is very low to the ground and looks a little like a pig. He can talk, and offers to let me ride on his back. He knows his way around here, and he says he will take me wherever I need to goooooooooo

**Piano music.**

*Mother's Voice:* It's nice, but you're not getting any money

*Male:* We want to virtually overthrow this civilization, I mean—

*Mother:* Well, what does your income amount to? It must be very little.

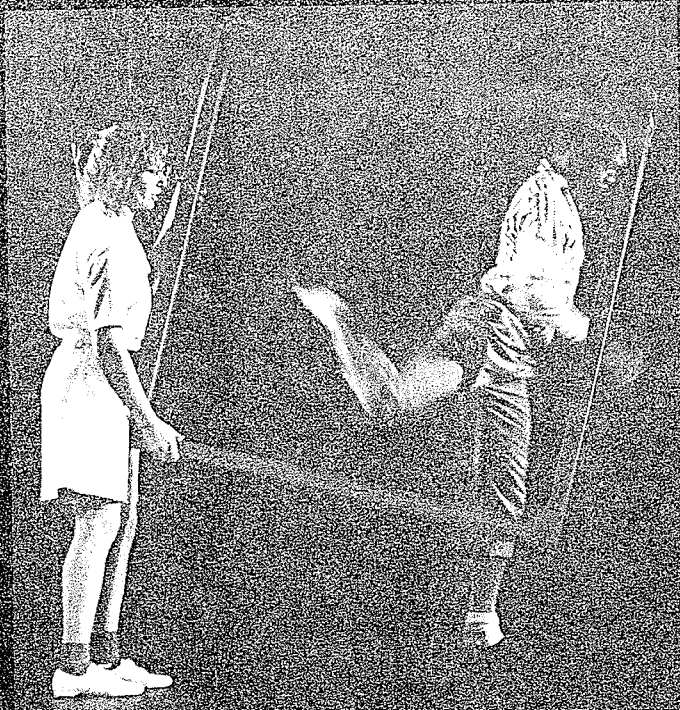
*Male:* I have a book out called *Blueprint for a Higher Civilization*.

*Mother:* The inflation is really impossible.

*Male:* People turning to a different world-view because it is more gratifying, or because it is less dehumanizing.

*Mother:* She bought me more than I could use, actually. I told





her I need a couple of bottom quarters of chicken, so she bought me two packages of bottom quarters.

**Male:** We're sort of very desperate people. I mean this is a form of liberation which is very necessary to us.

**Music:**

**A man in a bar laughs uproariously for one minute.**

**More music:**

**A dog growls somewhere between pleasure and pain.**

**Female:** You know, sometimes I tape-record conversations I have over the phone?

**Male:** Yeah.

**Female:** What do you think about doing something tonight, like playing ping-pong? Do you play ping-pong? I couldn't remember.

**Female:** I do play ping-pong (laughing).

**Female:** You do? Do you like to?

**More of the dog between pleasure and pain.**

**Piano music, sounds like ocean waves.**

**Female:** In the whole generation, on the whole earth, there are these twelve men who are considered to be just, which means that they're really wise and really virtuous and really—

**Female:** Fair and strong?

**Female:** Yeah. And they're not necessarily well known, and one might be the village idiot.

**More ocean music.**

**Short growl.**

**Female** (laughing slightly): My father thought he was one.

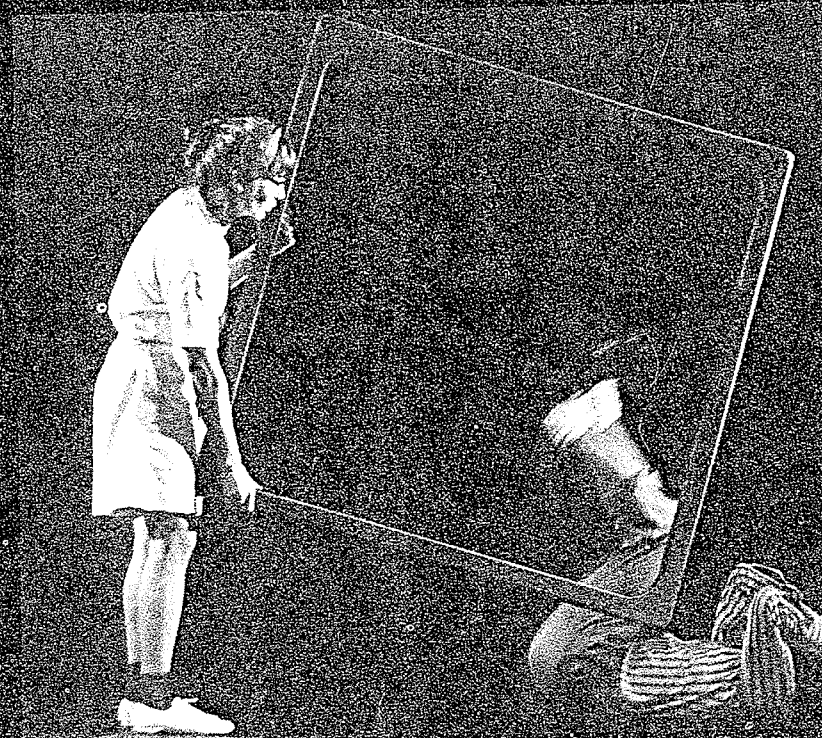
**Female:** Oh my God.

**Ocean music.**

**Female:** I mean this critic— I could only just open and close my mouth like a fish.

**A man and a woman hum jazz calmly and crudely in counter-point.**

**Female:** When I was four years old, my image of God was that he sat on the floor on one hip and ate a salami sandwich on rye bread.



All photos from Stephanie Skura, *It's Either Now or Later*, Dance Theater Workshop, NYC, 1983. Photos: Dona Ann McAdams. On p. 63: Stephanie; pp. 64-65 top to bottom: Ishmael Houston-Jones and Yvonne Meier; Stephanie and Ishmael; Stephanie and Ishmael.

**MARTHA WILSON**  
**Executive Director, Franklin Furnace**

*There is a point where the making of art and the marketing of it fuse, and they become part of one process—the appetite for doing the work goes hand in hand with the business of promoting the work. Do you see this as a problem?*

Artists have really not grappled with this sufficiently. There are no agents for artists. There are agents for every other group. For artists there are dealers, but dealers are not agents; you go to the dealer to try and sell your work and that is not the same thing. In the art world, we have this weird system going on where you do everything—it's a cottage industry. You produce it, and then you go sell it, and then you package it, and then you invoice it, and the check bounces, and then you go to the bank, and you write back. The whole thing is done by the artist. I don't have any solutions to this problem. I do know that this is what my job is at Franklin Furnace. I first had to start the organization and to get the purpose of the organization clear. Now we know what we're doing, but does the public know

what we're doing? No. We have to tell them. And then we have a choice of going corporate image (and this is a very big decision), or should we project a more funky image of a very small museum, which we in fact are, in the lower Manhattan alternative space community? It's difficult to figure out the venues... how do you get your work out to the world? One thing you do is remain optimistic, and I think it's very hard for women to remain optimistic. They have been crushed and mutilated in every possible way along this road. My job is to remain optimistic.

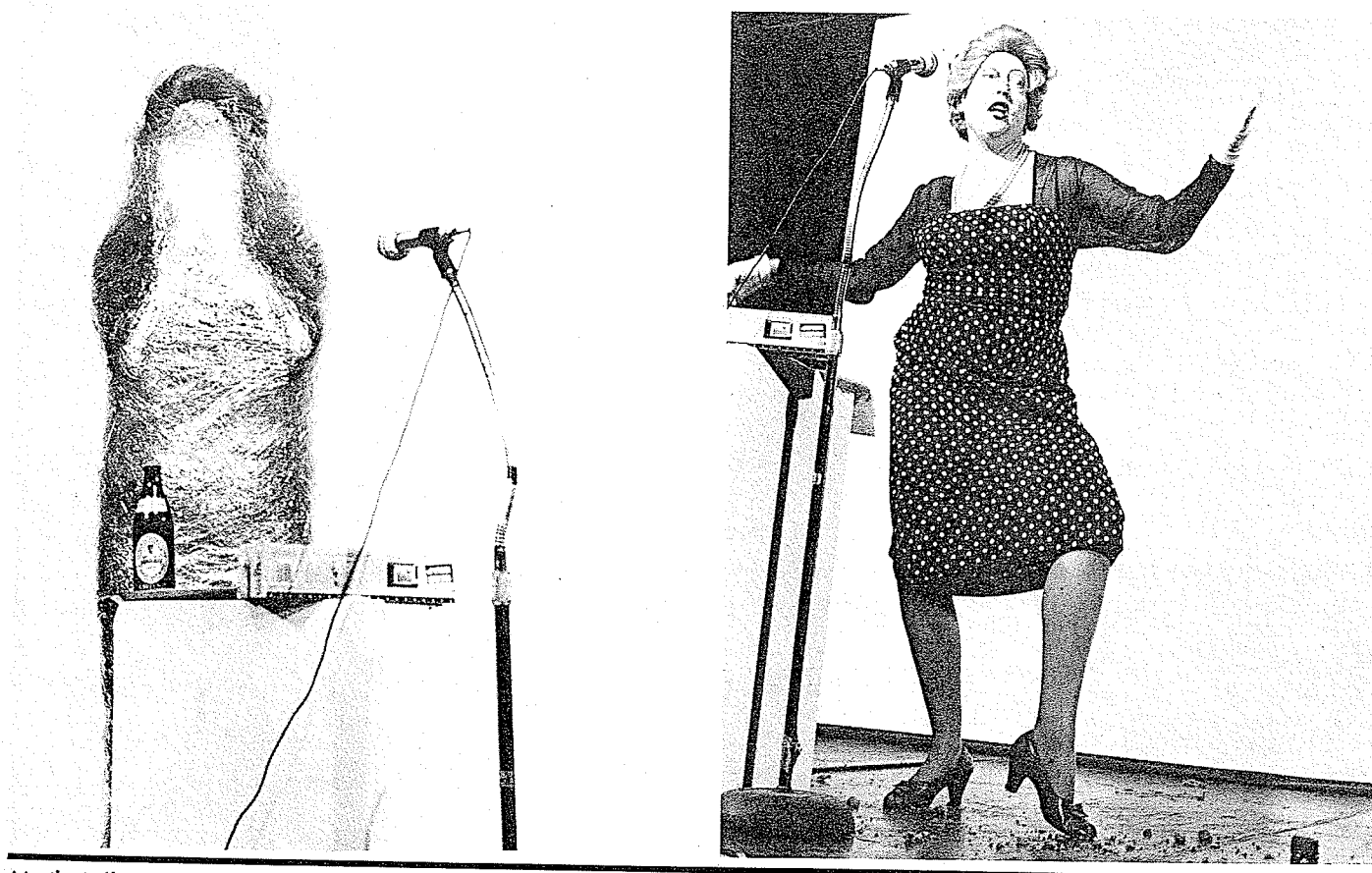
*What happens when you enter the corporate business world?*

You have to do a performance to get money so you can support your performance program... And the performance as it relates to the stuff going on in Washington, D.C., is standup comedy... a version of standup comedy—very well dressed, where these matters are not that serious. (Actually we're talking about life and death issues, but you don't talk about them as life and death issues. On the contrary, you want to fit into their world.) So the first performance is passage into the corporate world and the second performance is somehow conveying the urgency of your situation without freaking them out and making them feel that you are

urgent. Then they will buy the message — if you are flip and comic and still able to get the message across. Makes a lot of sense, right?

*You seem to have put the world of corporate funding into a performance concept... and are approaching it with a certain degree of sport.*

Yes, it's very important to change the attitude of me taking money from the corporations... to one of working with them to do something that I want to do. In other words, what is in it for them, considering their needs, and then considering my needs as they relate and if there's some kind of match that can be made. Then I approach the corporation with an idea. That has been very hard, to bring about a psychological shift from the adversary position to the collaborative position. But I'm getting better at it. I notice that I can turn a liability into an advantage, which is a good business technique that hasn't been taught to artists... And many times, rather than make a deal, they walk away from a potential source of money or support because they may not be able to stomach the fact that they are not in an adversary position. Artists are so righteous about their adversary stance that they'll walk away from money because they don't want to deal with cooperating with someone.



Martha Wilson as Nancy Reagan (performance for Artists Call vs. U.S. Intervention in Central America). Photo: Lona Foote.



This brings in the morality of corporate money.

There's a philosophical mistake of holding an individual accountable for the morals of a corporation. Also it is to the art world's advantage to apply for money from Exxon. Is this dirty money? No.

...If you can take their dirty money and give it to an artist, then you're changing it into gold. With the aegis of the nonprofit magic trick, you're taking this dirty money that was taken out of poor people's pockets and out of gas tanks and giving it to the artist. I don't see anything immoral about going to the dirtiest corporations in the world, and that is a moral problem among many artists.

*Besides being the director of an organization that supports artists, you are a performance artist. How did your work start?*

I'm surprised that performance art and theater don't have more to do with each other, because the conventions that are being used and disrupted by theater and performance art are similar, but the audiences are different. Also, the intent of the artist is perhaps different from the intent of the producer or the director or actor. I'm interested in performance myself because I'm interested in the fact that artists want to speak to the audience—they have been frustrated. I'm frustrated myself with painting. Painting—you do a painting for \$30,000—who can buy it? Nobody you know can buy it. Where does it hang? It hangs in somebody's house; nobody sees it. I don't want to be hawking a product and making objects that I have to store.

*What are the producing problems you have in terms of your work?*

Performance is cheap and I like it because it's cheap...and I'll never be a painter—I'm not interested in it, and I'm also not interested in the materialistic gain that art can offer to an individual. I'd rather have a job and then be able to do my art—whatever I damned well pleased. Whatever the exigencies of my life are, I would rather have the art autonomous. It bothers me that the painters and the sculptors have not only these material things, but they also have quotas. You have to come out with a new line every year and that's insane. That idea is totally stupid—it has no relationship to how art is done. Art is done in the bathroom, on the subway...the ideas come and then the ideas are done whenever the body gets around to producing what the mind has thought of. That always made me angry—to think that I should be commercial in that way or that I should be responding to that kind of commercial impulse.

## THE BLUE PERIOD OF THE NEO-EXPRESSIONIST POST AVANT-GARDE

### faye ran

**"ADMINISTER"?** Isn't that what Mother Theresa does for the poor in India? We see that "administer" means that which adds energy, sorts details, creates strange admixtures, and is derived from a sense of mission—slightly less adamant than divine purpose but sometimes erroneously confused with the divine right of kings.

Yes, let us look at the life and times of a Woman Artist and Administrator by default. As my Theater Ensemble crossed the chronological Rubicon and the majority spilled into their thirties, we were determined to have a resident home base. The word "home" apparently triggered an atavistic reaction, and the men thought the women should run what became Inroads Multimedia Art Center. As the principal writer/director of our theater and film works, I became Artistic Director, CEO, secretary, treasurer, receptionist, maintenance staff, etc., till I remembered what my grandmother told me when I was a child: "Divide and Conquer!"

#### Qualifications

1. **Independence:** Oh Virginia was so right: money and a space of one's own. You can't be a director without a place to direct a theater group—hell, you can't do anything without a minimum of \$\$\$\$\$\$. Poverty is not ennobling. Working at a job to do your art and then working to do your art and then working to get your art out to the public will certainly make you think twice, excuse me, three times about being an artist. As Nietzsche said, "What doesn't kill me, strengthens me." Unfortunately, it killed Nietzsche. An administrator must first have confidence in her ability to survive. She must also see to it that the organization can function independently, meaning independently of any one individual, herself included.

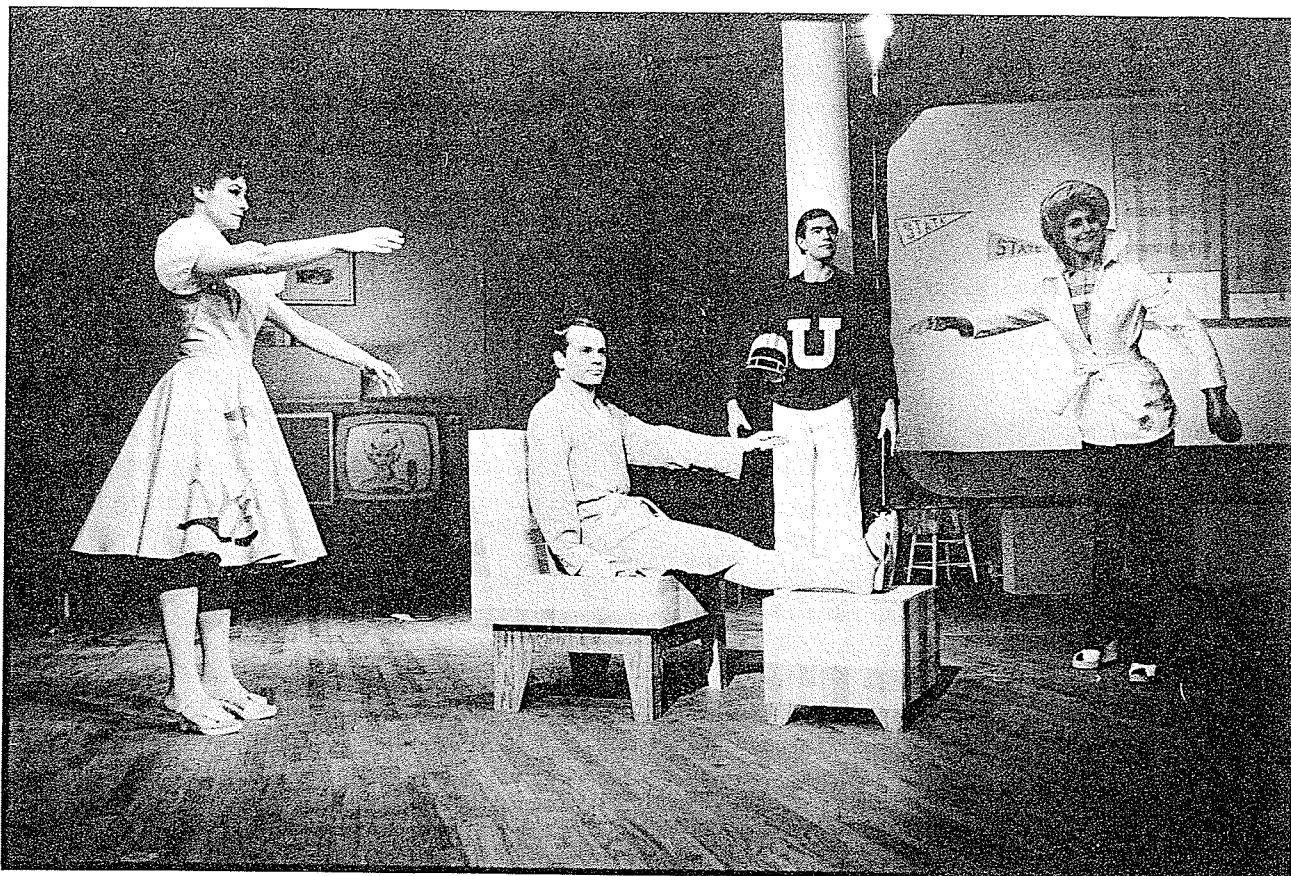
2. **Resourcefulness:** An administrator

Faye Ran perseveres in her administration of Inroads Multimedia Art Center in NYC.

needs a real sense of do-it-yourselfness. The art of improvisation is essential: prior resourcefulness training should include time spent as a performer, slave, assistant, dreamer, and revolutionary. If you are asking yourself: "Do the ends justify the means?," you are in danger of contracting liberal paralysis—it strikes the young and well-intended especially. As administrator, consolidate your power base and develop clear lines of responsibility and accountability. Yes, we know that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. When you've got it, then worry about it. In the meantime, for every one possible way of doing something, you should have four back-up solutions. Women are ineffective by over-understanding and overempathizing; you can't afford to lose your temper, but you can't afford not to have one.

3. **Mentoring:** Bursting the myth of the "Guardian Angel": Don't be surprised if people test your boundaries and limits or if you want to do the same. "Mentoring" is just a fashionable word for "alliance"; back to algebra: equalities and inequalities. The two variables—ego and territory—are always in the equation. Try to build a support system, and remember integrity is not getting off the seesaw when another person is in the air. And from the other viewpoint, "watch your ass before it hit da grass."

Inroads and my administration of it, is approaching its fourth anniversary. The terrible twos are over; I am bracing myself for an unresolved Electra complex vis-à-vis the Public Theatre. I look forward to puberty but hope I won't be too old to enjoy it. I've expanded the staff to include divisional administrators (the Music Department, the Art Gallery, and the Performance Art Division). Two company members (serious working artists) have decided to go for their MBAs to improve the quality of our Artist-Run Management. Is this the beginning of the end?



Barbara Allen and Carol Clements, *Barbie 'n Barbie, The Kitchen*, NYC, 1981. Photo: Paula Court. Barbara and Carol have also created video shorts of Barbie and her friends with episodes in the Barbie universe.



Robin Epstein and Dorothy Cantwell, *Junk Love*, 1981 (a story of two women who will do anything to be in love). Robin and Dorothy are co-founders of More Fire! Productions, a women's experimental theater company in NYC.



Madeline Keller and Janet Ziff, "Money Apron," from *The Fine Art of Waitressing*, NYC, 1981. Photo: Teresa Liszka. Madeline (a poet) and Janet (a painter) have worked as waitresses by day and performed as waitresses by night.



*Hard to Swallow* (a play about anorexia, bulimia, advertising, and social contexts), written and performed by Jenny Ponting, Susan McCarn, and Laure Solet, all members of Cinderella Stepsisters in NYC. Photo: Alex Cohen.



# SAGA OF THEM

One night in the Promised Land of the North of the Americas, four women meet. Onstage, they gallop; they sit and rock; they descend from the heavens like angels; they menstruate, sing, bake bread, say Mass, recite poetry; they share their dreams and private terrors; they look into history, write; they become hens; they support and give birth to each other. Their names are Laure Conan, Germaine Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert—four Quebec women writers. Here are some excerpts:

GABRIELLE

Mmmmmmm, it smells good. (She takes a small leap, a bit like LAURE, and beats her chest.) I'm as hungry as a she-wolf. Famished as a cow moose. As Ursa Major, the Great Mother Bear.

LAURE

Your words are balm to my furry ear.

GABRIELLE

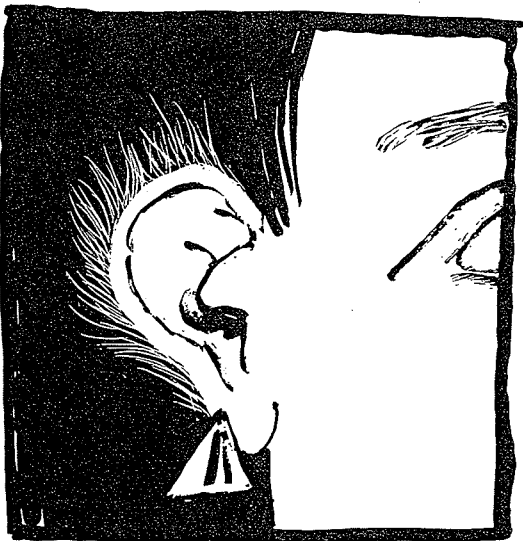
Furry ear? This I gotta see!

GERMAINE

It's our password! Mention the word "fur" and Laure Conan goes into orbit. A tale of fur and constellations.

GABRIELLE

Speaking of tales of fur... For a brief time in my life, the password was Le Prix Fémina." Competition for the prize had literary circles in a tizzy. Every day I'd read in the Parisian papers that I was this one's favorite filly, or the pick of that one's stable; I was in the lead, lengths ahead of the others. There I was, the longshot suddenly become the sure bet, the choice of the Prix Fémina studfarm. Bucking, bridling, and snorting, I made history in the bookies' charts. I went to collect my prize wearing my muskrat coat. After eight years' ser-



The above is excerpted by permission from the publisher, Talonbooks (201/1019 East Cordova Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1M8). The play is dedicated to Gloria Orenstein, co-founder of the Woman's Salon in NYC, and Michelle Rossignol, director of the play in Montreal. Jovette Marchessault is a writer living in Montreal.



vice in buses and streetcars, it looked more like sewer rat. When I pranced into the ring stomping and neighing, I heard them murmur. . . . "Ahhh! She's wearing her Canadian mink!"

GABRIELLE

I feel aroused... rapturous... tantalizing tastes, nourishing colors, palpitating palates, arteries... My saliva copulates with life. It takes me back several years.

ANNE

To the Prix Fémina banquet?

GABRIELLE

Long before that. I had my first full-course meal when I was five days old.

LAURE

You were a precocious little thing.

ANNE

Five days before or after your birth?

GERMAINE

Really!

GABRIELLE

Before my birth, of course. At the height of my embryonic phase. Ah! My mother's nourishing body. Some day I'll write a sonnet to celebrate its wonders. I must admit my mother was a helluva piece of meat.

ANNE

You sound like a cannibal.

GERMAINE

Or a sensual woman.

GABRIELLE

It still makes me lick my chops. Just remembering how warm, and tender, how moist, no gristle, no rind. A prime cut, perfectly rare.

# WET HENS

Jovette Marchessault  
translated by  
Linda Gaboriau

ANNE

(Shocked.) Little Crow!

GABRIELLE

You can't forget your first fine meal!

LAURE

You're going a bit far!

GERMAINE

Perhaps our hearts are still secretly there.

LAURE

Not mine!

ANNE

Not mine!

GABRIELLE

I could eat you up, just like my vegetable pie. (She eats). Yum. I could eat all the mothers on earth and the grandmothers too. Relish them, savor them, incorporate all their strength.

GERMAINE

(Raising her glass.) To our meeting at last! (To Little Crow.) You're really letting go tonight?

ANNE

She's going through her extravagant period.

LAURE

It reminds me of the bloodthirsty appetite of martyrs and mystics.

GERMAINE, ANNE, AND GABRIELLE  
(All together.) Just like your book on Maisonneuve!

GERMAINE

I think she is magnificent, inspired...

ANNE

...and menstruating.

GABRIELLE

Bloodlines among women?

ANNE

Yes, specifically among women.

GABRIELLE

It's our invisible genetic heritage... (She takes a loaf of bread, raises it above her head and breaks it.) Take, eat, this is my body! (She offers half to GERMAINE, but LAURE leaps in to prevent the exchange.)

LAURE

Little Crow, that's a sacrilege!

GERMAINE

Perhaps you are going too far.

LAURE

You're making me mad! Frightening me.

GABRIELLE

But Most Reverend Mother Superior, isn't this your bread, your sweat, the work of your hands in their mission of love, your energy kneaded into the flour and the yeast? Who bakes bread in the Promised Land? For century after century, from the Far North to the Far South, from the first dawn of time, who has bent over our food, who has communed with the fire in the ovens?

GERMAINE

Women, mothers...

LAURE

I don't deny it... but to parody a sacred ceremony, the Last Supper!

GABRIELLE

To me, it's not sacred. Scandalous, vampiric, maybe. Yes. Necrophilic, too.

GERMAINE

The Last Supper... it's true... we were the ones who prepared it.

LAURE

No. I won't stand for it! No! No! No!

GABRIELLE

Fiat! Fiat! Fiat! So be it. Fiat!

GERMAINE

(Fatalistic.) We've reached a point of no return.

LAURE

No! No! No!

GABRIELLE

Fiat, fiat, and bullshit! I have two hands, Ancestress, and in them I hold everything and all of us. Here in this bread that I eat and swallow. Hail to you, mothers of angel food cake, mother bakers, mothers of the manna in the desert, of the wheat on the moonlit Prairies. I take you and I eat you, humble mothers, mothers erased from the maps of history! Mothers of the tundra, mothers of the floating isles, mothers of all the children on this earth, I partake of you, I swallow you, for this is your body, Laure, Germaine, Anne, and Gabrielle. Amen!



Drawing by Nicky Lindeman.



Photos: Mathew Price.



# TRICK OR DRINK

My mother died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1976 and my father died of heart failure related to his alcoholism in 1981. I became preoccupied with the past after their deaths. I walked around in a starry-eyed daze, fragments of previously repressed memories surfacing unexpectedly as I walked to my job in rush-hour traffic, cleaned up around the house, or lay in bed before getting up in the morning. Why now, now that they were both finally gone, did I obsess about their lives? Hadn't I already been in therapy for several years, attempting to carve an adult world of my own, unspoiled by alcoholism, bars, family scenes? Wasn't it true I hadn't even seen my father for two years before his death? Wasn't it in fact a time to feel relief, now that their slow self-destructive suicides were ended? But no. So I went back into therapy. I attended meetings for children of alcoholics. And I went into my studio. Out of these enterprises emerged the script for a performance that traces the development of addictive behavior in a daughter raised by alcoholic parents.

I learned that contrary to my self-image as someone "who would never let that happen to me," that I had followed directly in my parents' footsteps. I was an addict. Not to alcohol, but to food, crisis, and relationships that seemed to promise the care I didn't feel as a teenager. My background in the feminist art movement politicized me sufficiently to see this situation was not one story, but one variation of an experience shared by 28 million people in the United States. Although I was aware that it would probably be "healing" to construct artwork about my family, I also thought in the back of my mind that it was important for people like me to craft a public voice with words and images. I would like to hear from other artists who are doing work about alcoholism and/or addiction.

Mathew. My friend and lover. We met just as I started getting involved with Overeaters Anonymous. "Hi, my name is Vanalyne and I'm a compulsive overeater." "Welcome Vanalyne." Needless to say, I was discreet about my background in the beginning. I didn't need an expert to tell me that recounting episodes of binge eating lacked sex appeal. And anyway, I was losing my appetite as we got more involved. I would count the months of abstinence since our first date and pride myself on liberation from compulsive behavior. Mathew. But it wasn't over yet. I so expected to count myself as one more statistic for recidivism that I overlooked the obvious and devious nature of addiction.

Mathew. It all started when I found myself seriously considering purchasing the beeper for his telephone answering machine. I could call his number, I calculated, and listen to his messages without his knowledge. I could discern the various intentions of any woman calling him: business, flirtation, or worse. I would know the truth.

Sometimes I'm convinced that all my problems would be solved if I could just lock him in a cellar. I would bring him his food three times a day. I would wash his beautiful body carefully and tenderly. Then when I had free time, I would release him for our pleasure. We could go out to movies, openings, or out to eat. He would read interesting articles in his chained-up time. Then in the evenings he would talk to me of all he had read that day. I would consume lots of interesting facts. We would talk critical theory, Marxism, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. It would be wonderful, and he would be mine. All mine.

Vanalyne Green is a performance/video artist who also writes fiction.

## Vanalyne Green





Judith Ren-Lay as "Ivy Mouse." Photo: ©1984 Mariette Pathy Allen. Judith Ren-Lay has been performing her work in NYC since 1980.

# narratives: a dramatic event

## Cheryl Clarke, Breena Clarke, Gwendolen Hardwick, and Linda Powell

*Narratives: a dramatic event* originated, as have many black feminist ideas and projects, in a kitchen, where in March 1982 Cheryl Clarke showed the manuscript of *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* to her sister, Breena Clarke. Breena said, "Cheryl, we can make theater of these poems." Cheryl immediately phoned her old friend Linda Powell and asked, "Linda, do you want to make theater of the narratives?" Breena called her veteran-actress friend Freda Scott and asked the same thing. *Narratives* premiered to an enthusiastic audience on June 20, 1982, at Linda's loft in Manhattan. Gwendolen Hardwick joined the company, replacing Freda Scott, in December. Since then, *Narratives* has been performed at community centers and union halls, on college campuses, and in theaters from Long Island to California.

### CHERYL CLARKE

*Women excite me and move me  
in the way those old midnite conferences  
with my rebel sister Ruby  
made my childhood bearable.\**

If I were asked, "Who am I as an educator?" or "Who am I as a social worker?" I wouldn't pause in the answering. I'm just beginning to accept my identity as a writer, although I've been writing poetry for a long time. At this point I believe identifying myself as an artist is crucial. It speaks a commitment seldom celebrated in Western art—that of black women.

Creating and re-creating images of black lesbians is the most challenging part of my work as an artist. *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* is the fulfillment of my yearning to tell a good black woman's story. So that not only do Flaxie and Althea ("Of Flaxie and Althea"), Rachel's friend ("The moon in cancer"), or Mavis ("Mavis writes in her journal") render literal black lesbians, but Gail ("Gail"), Grace's sister ("Fathers"), or Leora and Leona ("A mother's story") might also be said to be lesbians.

I regard my art as political—in the progressive, radical, lesbian-feminist sense. I use it as an instrument to pay tribute to the tradition of African-American writing as it influences my poetry, as it expands to accommodate revolutionary visions of black people. I use my poetry as resistance against the destructive, dishonest, stereotyped images projected of black people, particularly black women, particularly black women who are lesbians.

*Narratives: a dramatic event* is a fusion of several artistic processes: poetry, adaptation, and performance. Breena, Gwen, and Linda have made me conscious of movement, sound, and picture. Words make room for action, and a fuller repertoire of voice and song is evoked.

### BREENA CLARKE

*I struggled to be liberated from the supremacy  
of straight hair.\**

Of all the lines in all the poems that comprise *Narratives: a dramatic event*, this line for me must be heard. With our hair draped, dreaded, curled, plaited, and framing our faces, we must be sure they all hear that—that this new freedom from the tyranny of the American media and our own hereditary fears has been dearly won.

And still we show our toothpaste smiles and our mothers' mothers' high cheekbones, which the photographer says perfectly reflect the light, but the agent suggests straight hair sells more orange juice. And Amiri Baraka wrote a wonderful play and created a great role for Shirley Knight. Well... seduction has straight hair anyway. And I complain that black male playwrights just want me to be a prostitute, a Mammy, or simply set dressing. Sometimes they can't even manage to give my character a name.

I realize I am not a figment of any imagination but my own.

And a sister can't get her play produced because they think another play about black women "getting it off their chests" will not attract a house.

Packing my things, getting my token, and asking the inevitable actress question: "What are you doing? Are you working?" She tells me:

*I'm running/ got two auditions/ a go-see/ an EPI/ and a  
photo call coming up in two days/ my rent is due/ but I  
need to pick my pictures up before Friday/ how important  
do you think it is to use a straight-haired look/ my check  
from the last job where they said they'd send it out in a  
week two weeks ago hasn't got there and I was counting  
on it/ and my agent says he didn't submit me for a com-  
mercial because I'm not the type they're looking for/  
what type am I?*

And I look at the "honest-to-goodness moxie" all over her face and think: THIS WOMAN COULD SELL ICEBOXES TO ES-KIMOS!

Then comes *Narratives*, and we can portray women we know, women we are. A male colleague tells me I've grown in *Narratives* as an actress and director, and I try to explain that it's the difference between playing a girl/mother/bitch and portraying black women's real lives. That's me up there with my lips, my hair, my hips, my inflections, my sense memory. Gwen and Linda are my aunts, my mother, my grandmother. And Cheryl is my sister. And since I can't turn down any job if there's a chance Woodie King will come, and Audelco will surely be there, I need *Narratives* to come home to.

Straight hair can be bought. And anything that can be bought, can be conquered. I put my eye shadow on in the bathroom at Penn Station, sharing the mirror with a woman of color who works at night. I commit her to memory and figure out my day's itinerary. And I know I'll be perfect for that part in someone's play where they want this black woman to play... well... you know... "streetwise." Sure... I can play a prostitute.

I struggle to be liberated from the supremacy of straight, from big tits, slim hips, and whatever else someone thinks I am that keeps me from making a living. I struggle.

I have one child to feed. My sister has many children of imagination. Hers are as real as mine and as much in need of nurturing as mine. Together we have raised them in *Narratives*, as is the tradition of black women.



L to R: Breena, Gwen, and Linda in performance at Basement Workshop, NYC, 1982. Photo: Mary Lum.

## LINDA POWELL

*Grace is amazing.  
She is lean and tight in her flesh.  
A gymnast and a dancer.  
She is my sister.\**

The question has changed many times, but the answer has remained: When in doubt, create.

I fled Chicago for New York seven years ago. At that time everything was driven by my feminist politics. My commitment to women was the only thing that made sense in an otherwise incoherent existence. With no previous theater experience, I began work in 1979 with the Women's Experimental Theatre on *FOOD: A Theatrical Event for Actors and Audience*. It was a desperate and fortuitous connection!

*FOOD* was an explosive combination of process and content. The experience of working improvisationally with hundreds of women and the three-week run of performances raised key questions: How could I deal with the feelings that were overwhelming me? What good were "intellectual" politics in the face of such overwhelming emotional and physical sensations? How could I hold on to the things I was learning? (Performing *FOOD* in front of my own mother was a radical act for me!)

I was introduced for the first time to my instrument: my voice, my body, my presence. I discovered an energy and intuition and joy that resided naturally in my body: *sexuality*. And this was a new-found source of power that didn't immediately replace, but certainly began to challenge the intellectual reins on my life.

By 1982 the questions changed. There were far larger issues: How can I fight the despair and hopelessness—my own and the pain in the world? At this point *Narratives: a dramatic event* made a special kind of common sense. Cheryl Clarke was the first poet whose voice I could recognize in some visceral way; her words made me feel hopeful.

*Narratives* has been a rare, sustained effort. We have developed, rehearsed, performed, and toured consistently since June 1982. It's important for me to keep perspective on what a gift *Narratives* is. How many black women in theater today work regularly, for pay, with other black women who stimulate them, in a production they believe in?

The essence of Clarke's feminist vision is that she creates women we are forced to respect. We may not agree with their choices. But we sense they are prepared to live with the consequences. There are no willing victims in *Narratives*. And the *Narratives* Performing Company is about this creation, whether we perform Clarke's work or the work of other black women writers.

## GWENDOLEN HARDWICK

*Joe sat a hostage in his den  
swilling a martini  
oiling a rifle  
staring blankly at the T.V. screen which  
relayed images of flames, firehoses, police,  
black folk running and milling on the streets  
some whose dwellings had already been razed  
others who editorialized on how the King had  
been about peace. . . .\**

It was the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., that widened my political consciousness beyond school politics and stimulated the painstaking struggle to integrate politics and art. My life in school then became twofold: one, the "star" of the honor English drama class; the other, the militant Black spokesperson for the Black students. I was the only student in the United Federation of Teachers contingent sent to walk in the King Memorial March in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1968.

In college during the late '60s and early '70s, I was chosen one of four leaders of the campus Black student organization (Black Unity) and editor of its newspaper, and I taught drama for the college's summer activities program. When Black Unity aligned itself with the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party, I presented a proposal for the formation of the Black Panther Party Revolutionary Peoples Theatre. But the factional split of the party soon aborted that idea.

Three years later I joined the newly formed 127th Street Repertory Ensemble for a weekly salary of \$100. The company finally fulfilled my need to merge political consciousness with a viable theater involvement. It was not in the commercial mainstream and its director was committed to depicting the life of the Black community. The company did not get refunded and its pursestrings snapped. I landed on the unemployment line and half-heartedly went the traditional path to various auditions and cattle calls in search of acting jobs. The parts for Black women were appalling. Almost always written by men depicting women merely as ornaments, backdrops, or objects of their frustration.

From these pivotal events and experiences, I was to emerge the artist-cultural worker—a vehicle through which African culture is portrayed, criticized, celebrated, and elevated to the stage—from the Black woman's center or point of view. What is of value to me is the preservation of African history and culture. I have no desire to prop up the lie that all things "universal" are European and male and that other cultures and the other gender is "sub" or "lesser." It is an insult to the oldest civilization of humanity, which is African and half of which is Woman. *Narratives: a dramatic event* contributes to my artistic objectives because Cheryl Clarke dares to pull our secret torments, passions, and taboos from under the rug, out of the kitchen and bedroom, and allows the Black woman to tell her version of life!

\*The introductory excerpts are, respectively, from "Ruby the runaway," "Hair: a narrative," "Fathers," and "April 4, 1968: Washington, D.C." *Narratives: poems in the tradition of black women* can be obtained from Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, PO Box 2753, New York, NY 10185.



hair: a narrative

it is passing strange to be in the company  
of black women  
and be the only one who does not worry about  
not being with a man  
and even more passing strange  
is to be among black women  
and be the only one wearing her hair natural  
or be the only one who has used a straightening  
iron

An early childhood memory:

me: sitting in the kitchen  
holding down onto my chair  
shoulders hunching  
toes curling in my sneakers.

my mother: standing behind me  
bracing herself against the stove  
greasing the edges of my scalp  
and the roots of my hair violently  
heating the straightening comb alternately  
and asking between jerking and pulling:

"why couldn't you have *good* hair?"

by the time mother finished pressing my virgin wool  
to patent leather,  
I was asking why I had to have hair at all.

(the first time I heard a straightening iron crackle  
through my greased kitchen, I thought a rattlesnake  
had got loose in the room.)

so much pain to be black, heterosexual, and female  
to be trained for some *Ebony* magazine mail-order man  
wanting a woman with long hair, big legs, and able  
to bear him five sons.  
hardly any man came to be worth the risk of nappy edges.

the straightening iron: sado-masochistic artifact  
salvaged from some chamber of the Inquisition  
and given new purpose in the new world.

what was there  
about straight hair  
that made me want to suffer  
the mythical anguish of hell  
to have it?

made me a recluse  
on any rainy, snowy, windy, hot, or humid day,  
away from any activity that produced the least  
moisture to the scalp.  
most of all sex.

(keeping the moisture from my scalp  
always meant more to me  
than fucking some dude.)

there was not  
a bergamot  
or a plastic cap  
that could stop  
water  
from undoing  
in a matter of minutes  
what it had taken hours of torture  
to almost perfect.  
I learned to hate water.

I am virgo and pragmatic  
at fifteen I made up my mind  
if I had to sweat my hair back with anyone  
it would be my beautician.  
she made the pretense bearable.

once a month I would wait several hours  
in that realm of intimacy  
for my turn in her magical chair  
for my four vigorous shampoos  
for her nimble fingers to massage  
my hair follicles to arousal  
for her full bosom to embrace  
my willing head  
against the war of tangles  
against the burning metamorphosis  
she touched me naked  
taught me art  
gave me good advice  
gave me language  
made me love something bout myself.

Willie Mays' wife thought integration  
meant she could get a permanent in a  
white woman's beauty salon.  
and my beautician telling me to love myself  
applying the chemical  
careful of the time  
soothing me with endearments  
and cool water to stop the burning  
then the bristle rollers  
to let me dry forever  
under stacks of *Jet*, *Tan*, and *Sepia*.  
and then the magnificence of the comb-out.

"au naturel" and the promise of  
black revolutionary cock à la fanon  
made our relationship suspect.  
I asked for tight curls.  
my beautician gave me a pick  
and told me no cock was worth so drastic a change.  
I struggled to be liberated from the supremacy  
of straight hair,  
stopped hating water  
gave up the desire for the convertible sports coupe  
and applied the lessons of my beautician  
who never agreed with my choice  
and who nevertheless still gives me language, art,  
intimacy, good advice,  
and four vigorous shampoos per visit. —Cheryl Clarke





Janet Olivia Henry, two details from *Ritual*, 1981-83, mixed media, largest item 7". Janet Henry is an artist living and working in NY.

# THE CONTINUING SAGA OF SCARLOT HARLOT

You found this card  
in his wallet?!  
(gulp!)

This poem is dedicated to the safety and wellbeing of the women who work at Hong Kong, Aiko's, Yoko's, and Lilac Saigon in the Tenderloin.

GOOD LUCK, AND I HOPE YOU MAKE  
ALOTTA MONEY

If there's one thing I know, it's that I definitely don't wanna go back to work in the Tenderloin.

I don't care how good the money is.

I don't care that the tourist customers pay over a hundred for a half and half.

I don't care if I could be making three hundred a night.

I won't work at night. Night girls fight. I'm a day girl.

I don't wanna go back and work at 467 O'Farrell Street where I was raped on August 7, 1979, by two black punks with a knife and couldn't bring myself to call the police.

I don't wanna suppress my fear.

I don't wanna be a victim.

I don't wanna be raped again.

I don't wanna live the fast life.

I don't care how much you paid at Magnin's for your creme-colored high-heeled boots. They make you look like you're gonna fall down.

I don't wanna spend my money on last year's shoplifted silk blouses and slit skirts that the junkie booster brings around.

I don't wanna cook chicken in the sauna and rice in the electric pressure cooker and eat on the floor anymore, even though it was good and we came to know and love each other.

I don't wanna avoid discussing anything too personal.

I don't wanna lie about how much I make.

I don't wanna be ashamed of doing twenty dollar blow jobs.

I don't wanna refer to myself as a masseuse.

I don't wanna smoke dope and watch you return from the bathroom stumbling on junk.

I don't wanna pretend I don't see the bruises your boyfriend gives you.

I don't wanna be the one who never gets picked.

I don't wanna know what I'm worth.

I don't like it when cockroaches crawl on my customers.

I don't wanna fuck poor men with antisocial looks on their faces.

I don't care how much money you say you make.

I like you. I mean, I like some of you.

But I don't feel safe. Don't blame me for leaving.

I have to move up. I'm going to work in the financial district.

In my show "The Continuing Saga of Scarlot Harlot," I dramatize the issues that arise in my life as a prostitute. I'm a comedian; Scarlot Harlot is a caricature of me. It seems bizarre to me that I'm going around town telling everyone I'm a prostitute. But I just do it. Besides, I realize that we have never had a thorough description of prostitution from a prostitute's point of view. I welcome the opportunity to be original and informative. I went from being a stay-at-home-at-my-typewriter poet to becoming an actress and producer.

My objectives as a performance artist and as a prostitute are similar. I yearn to satisfy. I want to educate. It's important for people to know that I'm a real prostitute because they have to understand that prostitutes can do more than lie in bed all day and fuck.

For years I struggled to develop alternative images of women. As a prostitute I explore other ways to describe our sexual nature. I'd like to see more erotic images of not-so-pretty women over 35 because that's more honest.

Right now I'm dealing with the issue of rape. One of the reasons prostitution has to be decriminalized is that it's almost impossible to protect ourselves from the police and the rapists at the same time.

Of course, there's still a taboo around sex. . . . I think women feel cheated sexually. We need to communicate with each other about sex, about what we do and don't want from sex. A lot of what we want has been money, status, and security. Many women can identify with a prostitute's point of view.

Scarlot Harlot has an M.A. in creative writing and is a member of the National Task Force on Prostitution.

© 1984 Scarlot Harlot



# HARPIES COMPLEX

## Joannie Fritz



A WOMAN OF 38, DEPRESSED ALL HER LIFE...  
Joannie Fritz, Harpies Complex, Women's One World (W.O.W.) Cafe, NYC 1983.

You want to be heard? You must find a common language. Not a language composed entirely of words. You need to find the common denominators. Air, shelter, food. Everyone knows how to eat. In *Harpies Complex*, one of the sections I enjoy the most is the sharing of a bowl of grapes. It's fraught with biblical connotations—seed of knowledge, spill the wine. It's very moving for me to interact with each member of the public (needless to say, this is an intimate piece which is only performed in a small space). This is a safe opportunity to touch the public, literally and figuratively. Always the contact is really vital, unique, very humanly true. A shared act of ritual greeting. Can anyone view the offering of a bowl of grapes as threatening?

"SOMETIMES WHEN YOU SMILE AT SOMEONE ON THE STREET/ THEY ACT AS IF YOU HAD JUST SHOT THEM IN THE CHEST."

There are so many obstacles to transcend. When Artaud spoke of people not needing culture when they are yet hungry, I cannot believe he was referring only to food.

I've thought a great deal about the film *My Dinner with Andre*, which shows playwright Wally Shawn and director Andre Gregory dining in a très chic restaurant, serviced by an old dinosaur of a waiter. They discuss their profound personal pain, and place it in a greater social context. But what I'd like to know is, where did Andre get the bucks to go galavanting around in order to suffer so aesthetically?

---

The text above is excerpted from a commentary on *Harpies Complex*.  
Joannie Fritz is a writer and actor living in NYC.

# NUDES IN

*The HOST is asleep in a bed. Apart from the bed the play requires no other set pieces; however, the imagined environment is one of quaint destitution.*

*We hear a glass fall—an offstage gasp and sigh of relief—but no stirrings from the bed. A few more lone sounds of pattering in the “kitchen.” An arm strays from under the bed coverings and rests toward the floor.*

*The GUEST enters, wearing only a shirt (not her own) and undies, and carrying a coffee mug (with spoon) and a wad of toilet paper. She has, evidently, only just awakened, slowly brightening to her surroundings. She steps cautiously and looks about curiously—not yet critical as a warm glow still comes from within. She stands over the figure in bed. The exposed hand twitches slightly. The figure undulates, stretches, and rolls over. The GUEST sits neatly alongside.*

GUEST

*(Speaking softly.)* Morning. Good morning. *(Touches figure.)* Hey, sleepy-head.

*(Startled, the HOST sits up—they stare for a second—then the HOST with a groan falls back into the bed coverings.)*

GUEST

Gosh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you like that.

*(Mutterings of dismissal from under the covers. The GUEST sits alongside the HOST again.)*

GUEST

Are you all right? *(A slight response.)* Are you awake now? *(Pause—touches her.)* Hullo?

*(The HOST emits a warmly receptive sigh. The GUEST continues to touch her affectionately. The gentle play of bodies and sounds becomes more sensual. The HOST finally shows her sleepy head.)*

HOST

Hi.

GUEST

Good morning. *(Leans down to kiss her but stops.)* You want some coffee? I helped myself. Hope you don’t mind. *(Pause.)* Tired still?

HOST

*(Yawning.)* Yeah. I’m kinda lazy in the morning.

GUEST

*(Naughtily.)* A tigress in the eve and a pussycat on the morrow, eh?

HOST

Yeah. *(Meows—they laugh.)*

GUEST

I had a good time. I hardly remember a thing, but I know I had a good time. *(Pause.)* Did you enjoy yourself?

HOST

*(Laughs.)* Yeah. I always do.

GUEST

You do this a lot? I mean, go home with strangers?

HOST

No. Not a lot. Hardly ever.

GUEST

I don’t remember who started it, do you? I don’t remember saying, uh, “My place or yours?” Well, I wouldn’t have said my place. I live in New Jersey.

HOST

Right, you live in Jersey.

GUEST

I don’t remember how we ended up together. It just happened. I remember leaving. I remember getting my sleeve caught on the door and you said the Good Faerie was trying to tell me something and I said, “Well, fuck that friggin’ faerie!” I was so wasted. *(Pause.)* I lost my friends somehow, back there.

HOST

*(Making small bodily contortions—trying to reach an itch on her back.)* Would you... I can’t.

GUEST

*(Happy to oblige.)* Sure.

HOST

Ah. Thanks.

GUEST

You’ve got wonderful muscles. I remember thinking what a strong back she has.

HOST

You told me so.

---

Jacqueline Allen is a playwright and director living in NYC.

# REPOSE

Jacqueline Allen

GUEST  
Did I?

HOST  
Yeah. Last night.

GUEST  
Did I? I remember thinking it, but I don't remember saying it.

HOST  
You said it. Out loud. I was pretty straight. I remember everything.

GUEST  
(Offering mug.) You want some coffee? There was only one cup. (Disappointed.) It's instant. Hope you don't mind that I was snooping around. I gotta have coffee first thing in the morning—especially after a night like last night.

HOST  
Yeah. I'll have a sip.

GUEST  
There wasn't any cream either.

HOST  
I'm not used to having company.

GUEST  
Yeah? You don't, hunh? (Looking around.) It's an interesting place. Very bohemian.

HOST  
(Rises—crosses to "bathroom" offstage.) Oh yeah? You think so? (Exits.)

GUEST  
You must be some sort of an artist. (Thoughtful.) Did you tell me what you do? (Silence.) Can you hear me in there?

HOST  
(Offstage—yawning.) Yeah, I can hear you.

GUEST  
I'll wait for you to come out. (Pause.) I'm sorry. I talk too much, I guess.

(The HOST returns from the bathroom—slips back into bed.)

GUEST  
You tired still?

HOST  
I don't get out of bed till I absolutely have to. I'm happiest in bed.

GUEST  
You've got lovely hands. (Embarrassed laugh.) They're very creative. Are you an artist, then?

HOST  
(Touching the GUEST as if clay.) I used to be a sculptor. I used to "sculpt." But I don't "sculpt" anymore.

GUEST  
Why'd you give it up?

HOST  
I don't know. I just stopped.

GUEST  
What happened to the sculptures? I don't see any here. There's not much of anything here.

HOST  
They disappeared. Faeries came one day while I lay sleeping and stole my sculptures and stole my memories of my sculptures. Great works of art gone from my mind and my room.

GUEST  
(Pause.) Did I tell you what I do?

HOST  
(Mimicking a bit.) What is it that you do? Yeah. You work for IBM.

GUEST  
No. No, I'm training at IBM. I'm learning how to operate a word processor. But I work for a clothing manufacturer: I.B. Snazz. You've heard of Snazz? (The HOST shakes her head.) Did I say I worked for IBM?

HOST  
No. I just didn't hear right.

GUEST  
We've got our head office in Edison. We: I.B. Snazz. That's why I still live in Jersey. (Pause.) I ought to work for a company in New York. Then it could be a regular thing—going to bars and dances and all—meeting interesting women. Not sure I'd want to live here, though. (Pause.) You must not pay much rent.

HOST  
Enough. (Fingering the GUEST's shirt.) Is this an I.B. Snazz shirt you're wearing?

GUEST  
It's your shirt, silly. Hope you don't mind. I like to wear other people's clothes. It makes me feel close to them. It's kind of sexual, I guess. Isn't that perverse?!

HOST  
No. Funny, I didn't recognize my shirt.

GUEST  
You had it on last night. This shirt and brown corduroys and a dark, shiny vest. That's one thing I always remember. The way people dress. Heck, it's my business!



HOST

You type for them?

GUEST

Yeah. Well, I'm a secretary. *(Rises.)* You want to go out for breakfast? I didn't notice much to eat in your kitchen. I'm used to eating soon as I get up. It's routine.

HOST

I don't develop much of an appetite just lying around in bed.

*(The HOST makes seductive moves on the GUEST, who is uneasy and, finally, firmly resists.)*

GUEST

I'm sorry. I don't want to...

HOST

*(Nicely.)* What's the matter?

GUEST

I just don't want to. Not in the morning. It makes me depressed. *(Pause.)* Hey, you want to go back to Jersey with me? We could have breakfast, then go to my house. I live with my mother, but she's cool. I mean, she doesn't know. I've had friends stay over—she doesn't think anything of it. We've got a small garden, too. We could futz in the garden. Or go for a drive. Jersey's got lots of country. I've got a car. Might be a nice change from the city, huh? *(Pause—looking around.)* You don't even have plants.

HOST

*(Turning away.)* They died.

GUEST

I'd really like you to see my house. It would be different for you. You could even stay over. *(Pause.)* We could get really high and... have some fun. Then we could come back to the city for brunch and maybe go to a museum or something... Look at the sculptures.

HOST

I don't want to go to New Jersey. I don't want to spend the weekend... Hey, listen. You have fun last night?

GUEST

Yeah, I told you. It was great. It was exotic.

HOST

The sex?!

GUEST

The whole evening.

HOST

Exotic, huh?

GUEST

Yeah. Well, I don't get to the city much. *(Pause.)* So what is it that you do?

HOST

I'm a poet.

GUEST

*(Attempting interest.)* Oh, yeah?!

HOST

I was a poet. I don't write anymore.

GUEST

*(Exasperated.)* Well, how do you make a living? I mean, what do you do?

HOST

Anything. Nothing. Does it matter?

GUEST

No. No. It's none of my business.

HOST

*(Sitting up—attempting another seduction.)* Hey, listen. I really enjoyed last night, too. We seem to hit it off. You're a gas when you're stoned. We got started and pheeewww. Up, up, all the way. Pheeewww. *(Laughs.)* Maybe you don't remember... I'll tell you, I wasn't thinking much, either. It was not a thinking experience. It was heat and sweat and all sorts of fine sensations. *(Pause.)* I've slept with a lot of women. I'm not bragging. It's simply a fact. But you were something special. We were something together, ya know. That's rare. *(Touching her.)* You've got nice legs. The sweetest thighs I've ever known. Smooth but strong. Strong and soft and warm... *(Kissing her.)*

GUEST

Please. I don't...

HOST

*(Softly.)* You do. You do. *(Gently forcing her down.)* Just lie down.

GUEST

No. I can't. I feel so trashy. *(The HOST continues making love to her—whispering encouragements.)* I want to be home. I don't want to... We could work in my garden. We could have some wine and sit in my garden and I'll make soup—I'm a good cook—and we could sit in my garden and talk. We could get to know each other. Please. This makes me feel like shit.

HOST

Sssh, you're beautiful. You are a beautiful woman. Just relax. Let me make love to you.

GUEST

No. Nooooo. Please, stop it. Stop it! *(Screaming.)* Damn it, will you get off me!

HOST

OK. Okay. *(Pause.)* You're really weird.

GUEST

*(Sobbing.)* I am not. It's hard for me, that's all. I'm not casual about these things.

HOST

Well, I don't have any grass or alcohol or whatever.

GUEST

I want us to be friends. We could go to movies together and out to restaurants and dances. We could share things and then sex would be like that, too.

HOST

I'm not interested in a "relationship" if that's what you mean.

GUEST

I wasn't... I'm lonely. It's not enough to come to the city, get zonked out of my mind, then go to bed with the first girl who offers. It's trashy and it makes me feel like shit. *(Pleading.)* I like you. We had some magic together. We could help each other. *(Pause.)* You shouldn't have to live like this.

HOST

*(Pause.)* Why don't you go home.

GUEST

*(Rises.)* It's hard meeting women—living in New Jersey.

HOST

*(Lying back.)* Bullshit.

GUEST

*(Crossing toward exit.)* If only I got into the city more. There're lots of women in the city. I'd meet someone.

HOST

*(Deliberately.)* This is it, sweetheart. I am it.

In February 1983 we lost a generous and talented writer and friend, Jane Chambers. Currently her plays *A Late Snow* and *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* are being produced throughout the United States. *Bluefish Cove*, slated for a major motion picture, has been enjoying long runs in Los Angeles and San Francisco. JH Press has republished her novel, *Burning*, and a collection of her poetry, *Warrior at Rest*, will appear next year.

Jane Chambers was a proponent of what she liked to call "the new girls' network." She was active with the American Theatre Association network for women, and worked on "Action for Women," the first study on employment discrimination against women playwrights and directors in 1976. She was also one of the founding directors of the Women's Interart Center.

At the time of her death from cancer, a disease she fought with great determination, her work had begun evolving in new directions. In March 1983 I spent an evening with Beth Allen, Jane Chambers' life companion, and Jane's long-time friend, actress Jere Jacob. We talked about Jane's work in the theater and the changes she had gone through.

—Clare Coss

**Clare:** Jane once told me how she had wanted to study playwrighting but at the time that was a career open only to men, so she studied acting.

**Beth:** That was at the Pasadena Playhouse in 1957 when she was 20 years old. She wanted to go into the playwright's unit: No, not allowed. Directing: No, not allowed. Playwrights and directors were male. Actors and designers were female. So she studied acting there, and later in New York with Piscator. In the early '60s she went to Maine, where she became a staff writer with WMTW-TV in Poland Spring. Jane wrote, produced, and acted in a children's show called "Mary Witch." She also had her own talk show. In 1967 she left Maine for New York and really settled down to do a lot of heavy-duty writing.

**Clare:** When did Jane start writing plays?

**Beth:** She was an only child and would create imaginary friends to entertain herself. She would make cutouts of different characters, sit them around in various chairs in her house and have dialogues. She began writing down these scenes and shaping them into little plays.

**Clare:** *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* [produced at the Actor's Playhouse in 1981] earned Jane a great deal of recognition. She said she was so pleased that

# ON JANE CHAMBERS:

## An Interview with Beth Allen and Jere Jacob

Clare Coss



Photo: Beth Allen.

Original company of *Bluefish Cove* with Jane Chambers (back row, second from right).

a play about lesbians was receiving enthusiastic attention. There was a great deal of interest in her work: speaking engagements, panels, projected productions. She said she was so happy she had lived to see that kind of turn-about where she could actually be in demand on her own terms.

**Jere:** She had a large part in making the turn-about happen. Jane was extremely bold about who she was and who she was going to present to the world. When I first met her she was working for the Job Corps and was very involved in the civil rights movement. Then she became involved with women's liberation, as reflected in *Random Violence* [produced at the Interart Theatre, 1971].

**Beth:** It's a feminist play, a multimedia show with something like 370 cues for the stage manager. *Random Violence* is about a woman who is so angry she can look at someone and blow him up. She performs what seem to be acts of random violence, when actually she is avenging women who have been abused.

**Jere:** Then, after that, she made a deep commitment to gay liberation. As long as she was representing something or espousing something she believed in, Jane would take any risk at all. She was very timid about her private life, but when it was a political matter, beyond

herself, something for others, she went full force.

**Clare:** What was it like for Jane to come out as a lesbian in 1974 with *A Late Snow* [produced at Clark Center, now Playwrights Horizons]?

**Beth:** *A Late Snow* was the first mainstream play with positive images of lesbian characters. Reviews were good and the excitement about it in the gay community was tremendous. Jane did have some fear as to what the repercussions might be to her personally and to her career.

**Jere:** She was frightened. She finished revising *A Late Snow* right before it went into production. By the time she talked about her fears, she had already made a decision. Jane did this quite often. She made the decision and then bounced off you the whole process that had gotten her there, as confirmation more than anything. She was one of the first people I knew who came out of the closet and said, "I am a lesbian and am proud of being a lesbian. I believe lesbians have rights and are creative wonderful people and here's why." And she did it over and over again. *A Late Snow* was one more coming out for Jane. This time it was a matter of whether she could survive financially or never be produced again. That was a big question mark, but she decided to take the risk.

**Beth:** She was writing about something that was terribly important to her—the event and the people were important to her. As a result of *A Late Snow*, she lost her writing job on a soap that had been her basic source of income. Subsequently, she was called “politically undesirable” by the networks and black-listed. They have their ugly little book about people in town. You weren’t supposed to write gay plays. Not in the mainstream theater. You kept them in basements.

**Clare:** 1974, the year of *A Late Snow*, was quite a time of triumph and struggle in the gay rights movement. The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. And Elaine Noble won her seat in the Massachusetts legislature. It was also the year of the first defeat of the New York City Homosexual Rights Bill.

**Beth:** In 1981 there was a radio talk show on which Jane and David Rothenberg of the Fortune Society were interviewed. They had open phone call-ins, and listeners were just hysterical about the homosexual issue being discussed on the radio. I think they expect it from a man more than from a woman. Men called in saying they wished she was dead. How could a woman be talking about “that”? One woman said that she would kill her if she could get her hands on her. Another woman started quoting her interpretation of the Bible to Jane. Jane, you know, was quite a Bible scholar.

**Jere:** She was always reading the Bible.

**Beth:** She corrected this woman’s quotes, not her interpretation, but her quotes. They had quite an exchange using scripture, and Jane matched her quote for quote.

**Jere:** Towards the end of her life, before she got sick, we talked at some length about *Kudzu*, her last full-length play. In that play there are two lesbians, whose lesbianism is incidental in many ways. She was coming to a very big change. There’s something insular about *A Late Snow* and *Blue Fish Cove* and *My Blue Heaven*. Non-gay characters are represented as outsiders. Where, indeed, in *Kudzu* she was moving in a direction that mixed the gay and straight worlds.

**Clare:** Jane believed in the freedom to live together in the community. And she saw that community in large terms, integrated black and white, gay and straight. She wanted to change our understanding, to enlarge narrow definitions of family, of community.

**Jere:** She was excited about the prospect. *Kudzu* fell in the middle chronologically of a series of seven plays called

“The Georgia Tapestry.” The same two lesbian characters in *Kudzu* were going to appear in three of the other plays. There were at least two plays in which no gay characters were planned. Who knows what would have happened. She was trying to prove the point that lesbians are not an anomaly; lesbians are not bizarre.

**Beth:** That we have regular everyday lives.

**Jere:** Which is why I found her funeral at the Universalist Church in Southold so touching. It was conducted by a straight woman minister who recognized the relationship between Jane and Beth, who recognized what Jane had been doing in her work and had no problem at all talking about it in front of her congregation.

**Beth:** The north fork of Long Island has been deeply touched by Jane. Everyone in our immediate area—shop owners, friends, neighbors, straight people—was at the funeral and always supportive of us as two people who were definitely woven together as a couple and accepted.

**Jere:** I think also the other dynamic that you both had going in that respect is that you did not close yourselves off and try to live in an exclusively gay community. A lot of gay people followed Jane and Beth out there. But they are very much involved in the community, and the community is very much involved with all of them. That’s, I think, the really important thing that has happened, thanks to Jane.

**Clare:** Really what you are also saying is Jane’s writing reflected her current living situation—a lesbian existence in harmony with the straight world.

**Beth:** She always said she had to write about people and situations that she knew.

**Jere:** In *Blue Fish Cove* and *My Blue Heaven* you can identify every person in the casts of characters if you’ve known Jane enough years. I know exactly who she’s writing about. That started with *A Late Snow* right through *Blue Fish Cove*. *Quintessential Image* she wrote for a benefit for the East End Gay Organization. The evening’s theme was “first meetings” and the play is an extraordinary comedy. In *Kudzu* she drew from memories, her early memories of the deep South.

**Beth:** Speaking of writing about people and situations that she knew, there were some people who tried to take her to task for *Blue Fish Cove* because it didn’t have a radical dyke character. They complained it wasn’t radical enough: the women were too feminine; no one looked androgynous; it was too middle class. She said, “I’m a middle-

aged, middle-class, WASP dyke. That’s what I know. That’s the sensibility from which I am writing. I wouldn’t ask you to write about a situation outside of your experience. I write about what I know. That’s where it comes from.”

**Clare:** How did she like performing in *Blue Fish Cove*?

**Beth:** What a treat. What a treat. The woman playing Kitty was ill. Her understudy had to go on for another woman who was ill. Jane hadn’t performed in 20 years. Larry [Lawrence Lane, co-producer with John Glines] called her to do it. She said, “Well, I just don’t know, Larry.” He said, “Just think of all the additional audience we’ll get. Everybody who’s been there twice will come back a third time.” And they did.

**Jere:** Do you know, she went on in two days.

**Beth:** Larry would run lines with her until he would fall down. Then Nyla [Nyla Lyon, director] would take over until she would fall down, and Jane would just keep going. Her first night when she walked out on the stage—Jane always had hyperthyroid eyes—I thought they were going to pop right out of her head. You just knew she was thinking, “Oh, am I going to remember where to go—my lines?”

**Jere:** She was fine after that first night. Except for one line: “Why was Donna so mean to Sue?”

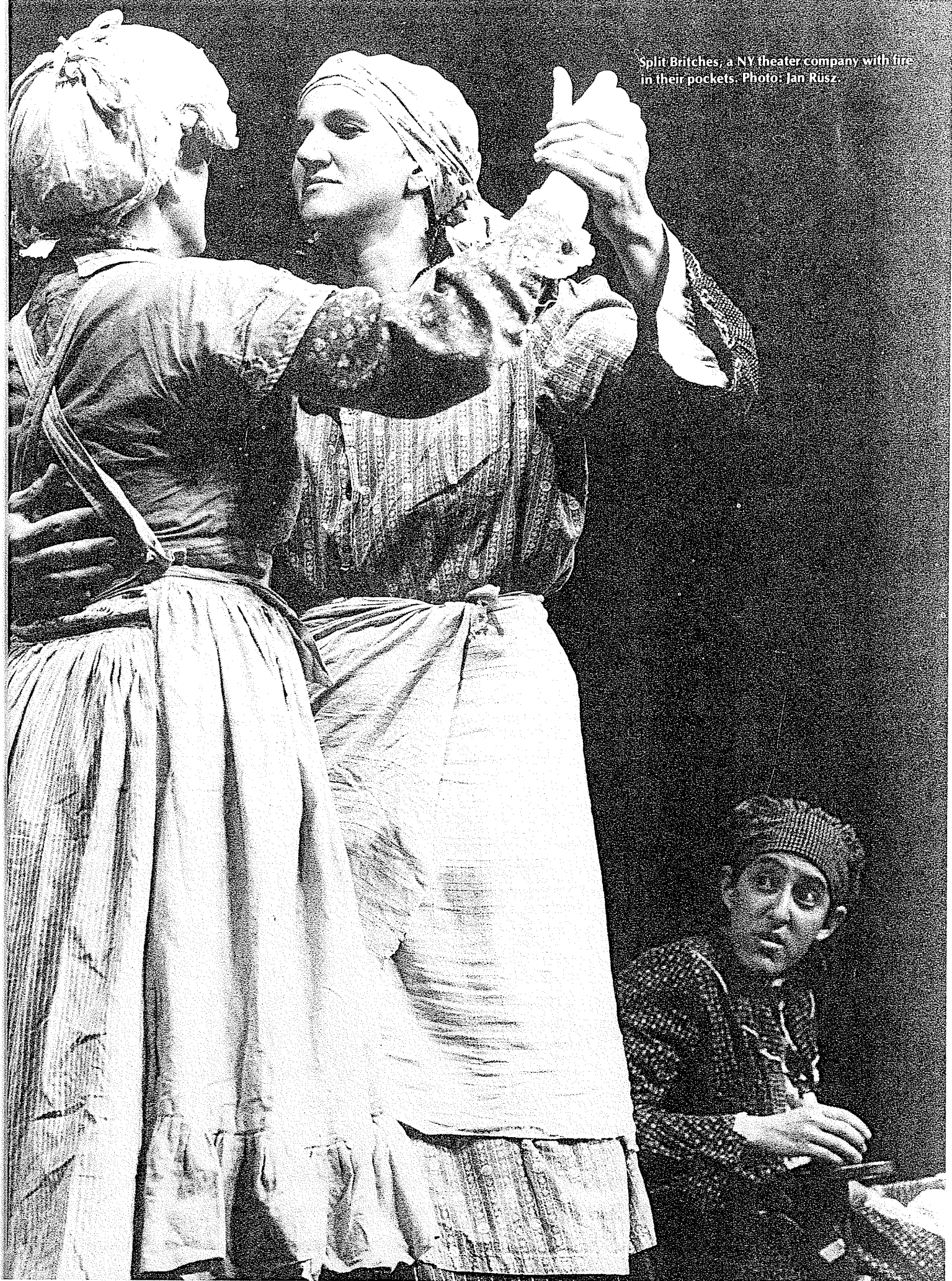
**Beth:** Jane took great pleasure from *Blue Fish Cove*’s success. Here she was at 42 finally realizing some recognition. Jane believed that doing things, being involved, was terribly important for the psyche. Energy creates energy. Boredom creates boredom. She was a very busy person. She liked working with women. Whenever she could she saw to it that there were women in production jobs and really made an effort to network herself in that way.

**Jere:** When we were going through her papers last week, we came across a wonderful cartoon she had drawn of a woman at her office door gesturing to a second woman to leave and saying, “Just because I’m not writing doesn’t mean I’m not writing!” The two women looked not unlike Jane and Beth.

**Beth:** I had never lived with a writer before. When we first started sharing our lives 14 years ago, everytime the typewriter stopped I thought that meant she wasn’t writing. And I would go in and run by our dinner plans or discuss everyday details that come up. It would so enrage her, because even though she wasn’t typing, she was deeply involved in her writing process. She said she was going to put the typewriter on automatic so I would stay out of the room.



Split Britches, a NY theater company with fire  
in their pockets. Photo: Jan Ruzs.



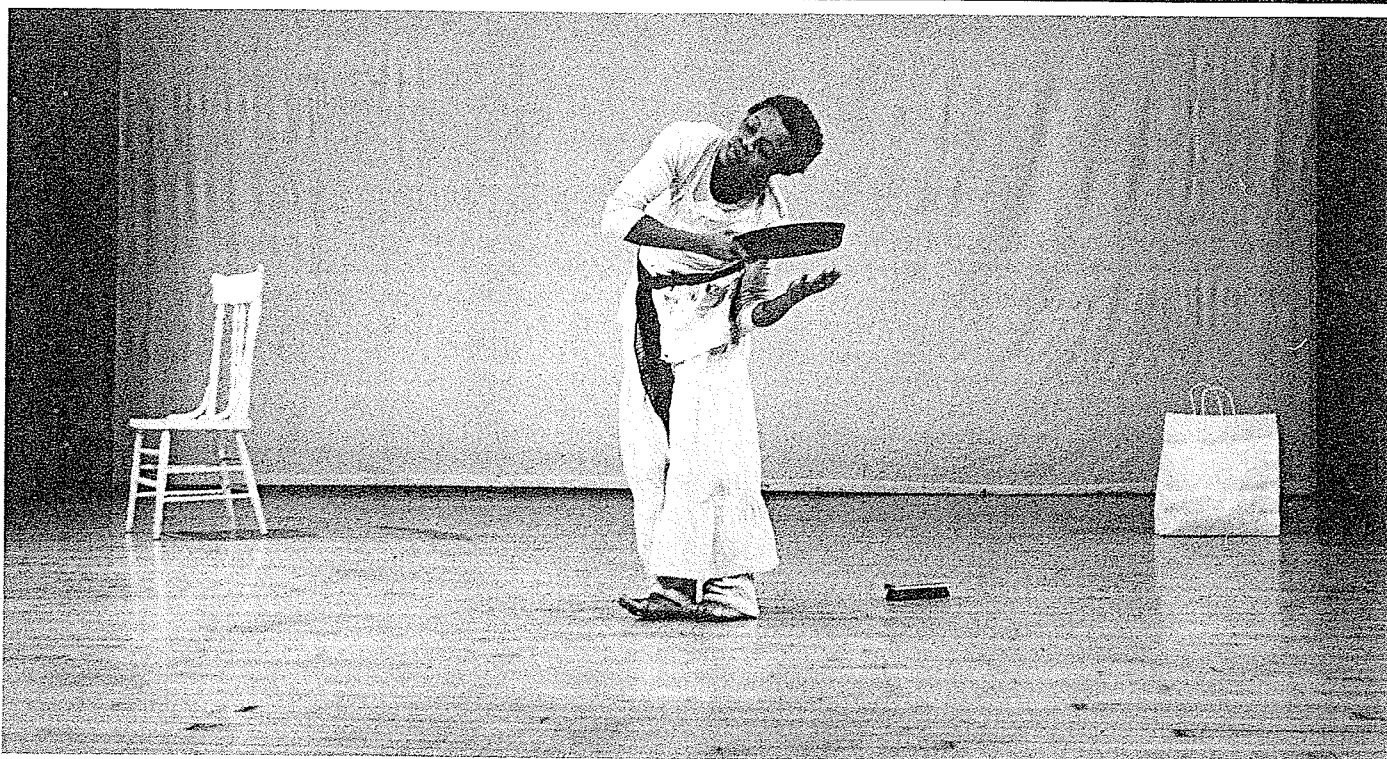
# DANCE INSTRUCTIONS FOR A YOUNG GIRL

Kimiko Hahn

Stand: knees slightly  
bent, toes in *posed*  
*you watch the hawk over the river*  
*curve, until his voice, shoulders back*  
*gently overcome by Seiji's mouth*  
*against yours, the white breath, and elbows*  
close to your side. *The silk cords*  
*and sash crush your lungs* you are  
young—beautiful, and almost  
elegant. The layers of cloth pastel,  
bright red, and moist  
twist around. Follow his flow  
of steps, a shallow stream between rocks  
*the carp. Seiji draws your hand*  
*toward him or a stroke.*  
Before you look back turn your chin  
in a figure eight, tilt, balance  
then kneel quickly *the relief of cloth*  
*pulled off.* Bow to him and the audience.  
When you straighten, his black and red lines  
against the white powder  
are drawn, as his gesture  
and step, perfectly. More perfectly *the weight*  
*of his chest* than your own, although his  
belong to you, a woman.

*Note: Geisha were often told to imitate the female impersonator Kabuki actors.*

Kimiko Hahn, poetry editor for *Bridge: Asian American Perspectives*,  
has published in various literary magazines.



Blondell Cummings, *Chicken Soup*, PS 122, NYC. Photo: ©1984 Dona Ann McAdams. Blondell Cummings is a performer and choreographer.

# KUDIYATTAM:

An Ancient  
Acting Tradition  
for Women

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HrUT Keshishian

A Nangyar walks onto the stage settles down on the new white cotton cloth adjusts herself comfortably cross-legged lifts a pair of tiny cymbals from another folded cotton cloth holds them ready for the lengthy performance. Unassuming.

To her left are members of her caste playing the bulging pot drums. She watches them perched above their instruments—ready to strike from above the stretched skin across the tiny surface... ta ki ta ri ki da ta ki ta... She can see the other instrumentalists holding the bugle, the small drum and the conch.

To her right sits the audience cross-legged on the floor, the connoisseurs right up against the slightly raised platform.

In front of her is the space that will soon be filled with the actors/actresses—Chakyars/Nangyars—with their movements their dancing their colorful clothes.

I went to Kerala (in southwestern India) to record the variety of performances, both religious and secular, domestic and social. Recent developments in traditional Indian theater have excluded women performers, but here women participate fully as musicians and actresses. The matrilineal traditions are also very prevalent. I interviewed the Nangyars (female performers), lived in their households, traveled with them for performances, and watched them in their daily routines, in their relationships with their relatives and friends, husbands and children.

## Sitting on the cloth, the Nangyar

watches her pupils and daughters take the roles of women from ancient Sanskrit plays.

hears roaring sounds from the left. A skilled Chakyar is to impersonate a female demon. S/he steps onto the stage but remains behind the flexible curtain thumps stomps roars clutches the cloth tears it down violently, jabbering in a tribal dialect. The flames rise from the large bell-metal lamp and light up the grotesque features outlined with rice-powder paste on a blackened face and body. Lime + turmeric = vermilion lips. S/he wears a garland of bones. S/he has strapped a wooden breast painted in brilliant colors. Areca-nut leaves as hair and skirt fan out as s/he shakes and thrusts her body around the lamp, threateningly.

watches her reappear from the right, through the entrance of the theater wrapped in a bloody cloth, stumbling through the audience. On either side two figures hold large torches. Without her nose without her

breasts s/he sways and shuffles—dripping with blood—onto the stage. And the epic story begins of how Sita is abducted by Ravanna, King of Lanka. Rama and Lakshmana begin their search. With the help of the monkey kingdom, they cross the waters and attack Ravanna rescue Sita and return safely to Ayodhya for the grand coronation.

watches the clever switches on stage by Rama—tucking the lower portion of his cloth into his waist unraveling the upper cloth knotting it in a new way changing postures and expressions to become Sita—for she never appears on stage.

chants the Sita-shlokas keeps the pace of the performance with her tiny cymbals.

What is seen today in Kerala is a glimpse of the lost theater tradition of India. Kudiyaattam—a theater production with dialogue, monologue, mime, dance, music, singing, makeup, and costume—is performed only in the state of Kerala. The skills have been handed down for at least 1,000 years within the temple society. Traditionally performance was considered a duty. It was an offering to the gods, one considered superior to the ordinary sacrificial offerings. The gods, it was said, enjoyed it more than anything else. Although land reforms, marital reforms, and a secular constitution have reduced the powerful position of the temple society, a few families still perform Kudiyaattam, continuing the tradition of rigorous training and practice within their households and temple compounds.

The plays today use the ancient Sanskrit scripts, but certain sections are interpolated with Malayalam, the state language. Although Kudiyaattam is a highly stylized art form, it allows for considerable extemporaneous performance. The stories consist of mythology, social issues, ritual, and much romance.

The oldest performer at present is Mani Madgava Chakyar. He describes the plays as "visual Yagas" (sacrificial ceremonies), for there are many links to the religious ceremony. The fire for the lamp on the stage is brought from the shrine; the wicks represent the god Agni. Once the Chakyar has put on the red band over his forehead, he assumes the status of a Brahmin. With him, the performers become ritually separate from the other devotees, in the audience, for the length of the performance.

Although the Chakyar has a central position in the Kudiyaattam plays, the performance cannot proceed without the presence of the seated Nangyar. She sings out the invocations in the preliminary scenes, and it is her privilege to chant the final shlokas. A Nangyar who is skilled enough to sit on the cotton cloth has a complete knowledge of the repertoire. It is she who holds the performance together from the beginning to the very end, piecing each unit, each sequence, night after night.

All through the performance the Nangyar on the cloth strikes her tiny cymbals sings Sanskrit shlokas—clearly and correctly I am told. She watches follows guides the movements, gestures, expressions. She coordinates participates shapes the sequences throughout the evening. I can see why she sits in that particular spot on stage—she relates to the performers (who are facing the audience most of the time) and the instrumentalists (who are at the back of the stage). She never rises from her cloth. Seemingly unimportant. Unassuming. . . .

She never dresses up in the colorful costumes, as do the other Nangyar women. She sits on her cotton cloth in her everyday Kerala dress, like the rest of the audience like myself—a few yards of white cotton cloth wrapped around and tucked at the waist and another smaller cloth spread across the front and over the shoulder. . . .

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HrUT Keshishian, an American born in Cyprus and now based in London, writes on performance.



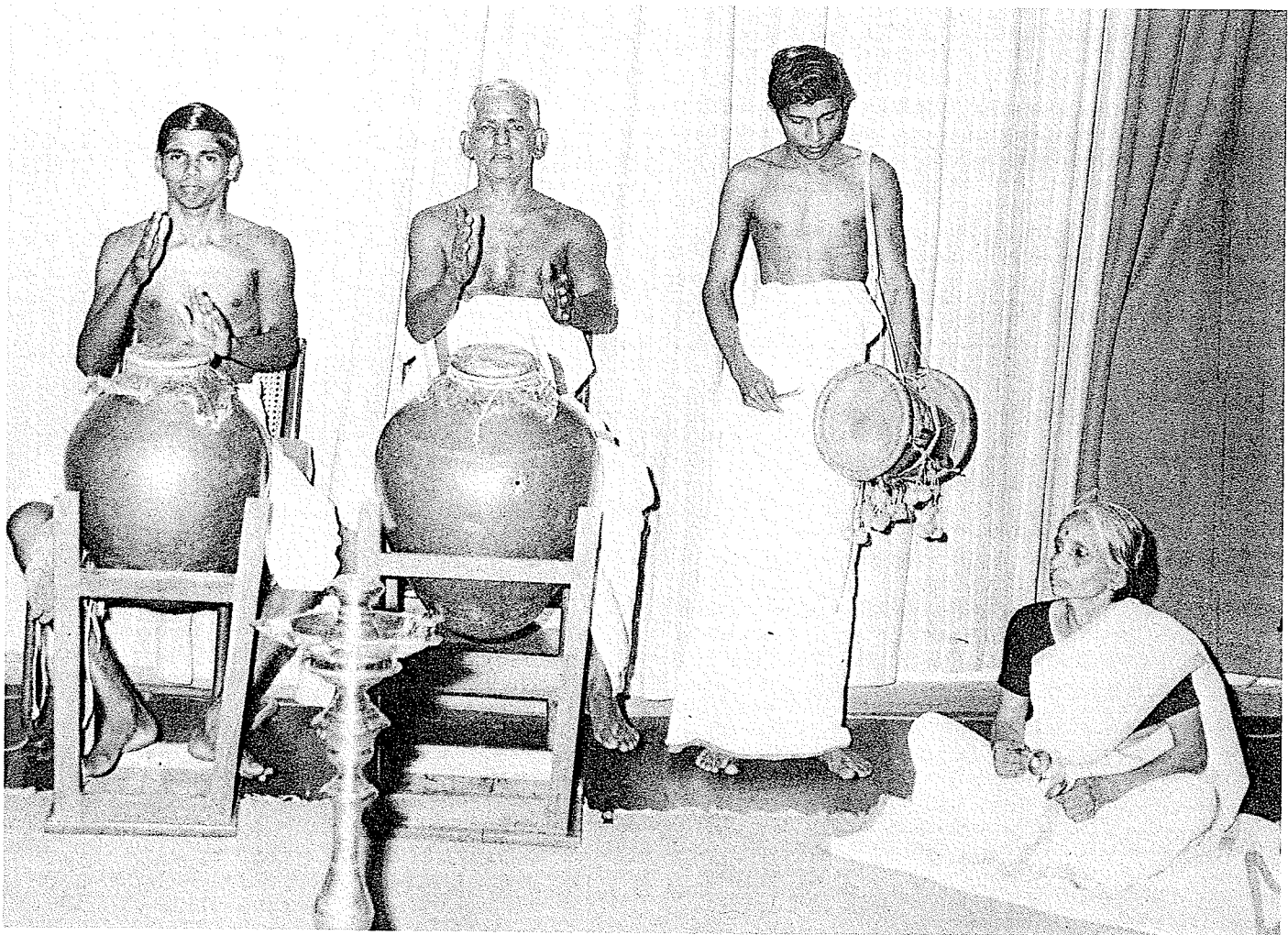
She is now watching her daughter entering behind the flexible curtain, looking so adult—it's all the makeup and dress—but she has so much to learn, she is only 12, and it shows at times in her movements. I am quite close to the stage but I am not allowed to take photographs. So I watch greedily, one eye on the whole production, following the narrative line with the help of Padmanabhan. With the other eye, I isolate the particles that are interesting to watch in themselves. There is much I cannot follow but at least—unlike the Western tradition—the bodily gestures, the musical sounds, the movements are as important as the script, the dialogues, the rich imagery.

Traditionally, the status, role, and lifestyle of the Nangyar were clearly defined within the social structure. At present a Nangyar lives a very active life within her society. She does not live within the temple compound, nor is she isolated from others because of her religious role. She is born and brought up in a family context (once a matrilineal joint family complex, now a nuclear patrilineal family unit). She attends the educational institutions open to all citizens and often follows this up with a career in either a private or government job. But as a member of a temple family, she is also committed to carry out the work expected of her caste: to entertain in theater productions.

A Nangyar, together with other performers, receives a specific sum of money for each performance from the temple

committee and authority. The amount varies according to the status and wealth of the temple, and also according to the occasion. Traditionally the stage money (in coins) was put into a cloth bag and placed, together with areca nuts and leaves, in a large coconut leaf in front of the bell-metal lamp on the stage. The Nangyar was responsible for collecting the money, and she distributed it to the members (who then lived in a joint family household, where everything was owned collectively). Today, however, the fee is handed to the manager, who distributes it among the performers according to their skill, age, and role. The Sangeet Natak Academy has given nominal grants to individual performers, as well as pensions for those who are unable to continue performing.

Even though only about a dozen individuals are fully knowledgeable and experienced at performing, Kudiattam is still considered very important within the temple culture. A small group of enthusiasts can appreciate the intricate details and watch critically. Elaborate productions are carried out during festival periods, in temporary or permanent theater structures (Kutambalams). In an attempt to revive the art form, Kerala Kala Mandalam Academy and the Calicut University Drama Department have invited a few temple artists to teach Kudiattam performing skills to women and men who are not members of the temple castes. The handsome theater at Cheru-Truthy is the first Kutambalam to be built in a secular context. There foreigners can watch the performances with ease, without having to trespass on temple grounds.



Nangyar seated on white cloth with musicians. Photo: Sangeet Natak Academy.

# HEARING AND SEEING

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## LINDA MUSSMANN AND ANN WILSON

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### ON CREATING NONNARRATIVE THEATER

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#### compiled by Harmony Hammond

Linda Mussmann and Ann Wilson write and direct abstract theater—theater that is nonlinear, nonnarrative, and non-dramatic. Their work is not anecdotal. It is formalism softened with the personal and deepened with political implications. Feminism is one of its assumed underlying bases. Both Mussmann and Wilson have developed special styles of working that represent new developments in dramatic writing and directing. Neither woman's work fits neatly into categories of theater and performance.

"Hearing" a text first, then developing its speech-song-like quality through a long, intensive rehearsal process, Mussmann landscapes in geometrical terms with words as objects. Text, objects, movements are all functional. Coming from a traditional theater background, Mussmann now usually works in a small storefront, constructing her lights and sets from devices that are cheap and functional—lights are made of tin cans and controlled by Mussmann herself with household dimmers in full view of the audience. Objects used for sets are as simple as paper hung during the performance or roofing tin hauled cross-country from her parents' Indiana farm. The text

is often visible. The performer carries it or perhaps it is written on the wall. The text functions as a tool, the way a carpenter uses a hammer.

"Seeing" images first, Wilson uses the proscenium stage as a large, upright, traditional painting rectangle with performers and objects carefully placed and woven together by text, music, and movement. Wilson comes from a strong visual arts background, moving from painting on old quilts and silks to collage, to assemblage and environments. Eventually the environment became the performance space. Collaborating with other artists, Wilson has developed a process of taking a text, visually and musically choreographed in detail, and with relatively little rehearsal time, refining and developing large-scale abstract theater. Her sets are object constructions that can be exhibited as painting and sculpture, artifacts of a process.

Similarities and differences in the work processes of Mussmann and Wilson emerge in the following "dialogue," the outgrowth of an interview in New York City in May 1983.

#### LINDA MUSSMANN:

The reason I started writing was out of a need—there was no text written that really moved theater in a new direction. I felt that the theater had one primary function, which was to develop a new text and language. The theater couldn't compete visually with the cinema, painting, or sculpture; nor could it compete with movement because dance was exploring these new territories; nor could it compete with music. The one thing that was left, it seemed to me, for theater to do was to deal with language.

Every text I looked at or worked on always had drawbacks. Actually it was through Gertrude Stein that I started working on language; she showed me the dictatorship and politics of language. She showed me that a noun and a verb had roles and that they played them out and words had histories, just like people. She showed me, through *The Making of Americans*, that I could work without a character for the first time. Her language was so strong and so interesting that I liked listening to the text. And I also have to throw in Roland Barthes, who—at the time I was thinking about this "language" idea—wrote a great book called *The Pleasure of the Text*. And I certainly had a great deal of pleasure in text, and he keyed me into something that I loved—words and language.

It seemed clear that if anything extraordinary were to happen to theater it had to happen with what someone was going to say there and how it was to be said. It had to function outside of character; it had to function away from story; it had to

Harmony Hammond, NYC painter and sculptor, recently published *Wrappings: Essays on Feminism, Art and the Martial Arts* (TSL Press, 1984). Linda Mussmann is director of Time and Space Limited Theater and Ann Wilson is director of Patchworks, Inc.

#### ANN WILSON:

In 1951 I moved into a loft that had been an extermination factory. There was this great oven where they had exterminated bugs from furniture. There I was in New York, in this extermination factory, painting visions of the western Pennsylvania landscape on early American quilts—visions of a landscape vanishing under strip mines, automobile junkyards, and subdivisions. I was painting faded photographs from my memory of farms I had seen in my childhood. As I began to juxtapose these rural images over the quilts, the images became more abstract. With the accumulation of multiple images, the collages became three-dimensional. Gradually I felt the need to build architectural or environmental spaces for the assemblages. Then these environments demanded characters to tell their metaphoric stories. And suddenly in 1971 it just grew into theater.

The architectural spaces I created were metaphors for the action of the characters in my imagination and dreams—in my dream theater. Space and architecture, having atmospheric involvement with form, light, and shadow, lent themselves to narrative abstraction. I had always written journals, essays, short impressionist writings on the work of other artists, and some criticism. So scripting for characters became the natural way to include my writing. I am making performance constructions out of simultaneous and divergent aspects of perception. It involves philosophic speculation about perception, movement, and objects in a post-Freudian non-narrative framework.

I use my dreams. I am lucky to have total recall, so I write them down. It is the dream space that we all experience. I write down and use dreams to create a kind of place-action

move away from the linear and away from the psychological. It had to be nonlinear; it had to do what music did, what dance did, and what visual art did; it had to do everything but imitate life as we know it in storytelling terms—the narrative Ibsen-Strindbergian sort of structure which the Americans like O'Neill, Williams, Albee, etc., imitated—had to be moved away from.

I started to think about objects and spaces—similar to what Stein had done. And the first major piece I wrote was *Room/Raum*. I just tried to think about the phenomenon of the space in a room. This thinking was directly related to my own theater work. I spent hours in the theater space, a storefront on 22nd Street. I was working in this room, this long, rectangular black box all the time. I was always in there thinking and making ideas. And what was this room? Could I understand it but not abstract it? That's a big struggle for me. The difference between abstracting something and understanding it. I wasn't abstracting a room because I didn't have a room in mind when I wrote about it—I wrote about the phenomenon of space. I tried to open up and think about it. It was like a meditative state in a way, of opening my mind up so that I could just think about *Room* and just think and think—and all sorts of things started to happen. Strange things came out of my mind when I just focused on one place. And I came up with a short text of about four pages that I was happy with.

I took out every connecting word I could find. All I had left were objects, word objects. If I said "the room is sleeping," I would erase "the" and "is" and I'd say "room sleeping." I wanted to move away from all arrows used to guide the mind. So the process of removing connectives and articles, for example, from a sentence, became more like how a painter or visual artist would deal with images. The idea of "room" and "sleeping" would be dealt with individually as well as in relationship to one another. By erasing I found I got more. The image became stronger by erasure—the same idea that Ann Wilson uses when she takes an image and xeroxes it. Wilson takes an image and erases it by photographing and re-photographing each new generation—and with each photo the hard edges of the image emerge. I take language and by erasing and keeping the absolute, the hard edges of language emerge. I am able to hear and see the words for the first time.

The East has provided me with a certain amount of material to reflect on—a culture with ideas so foreign and strange to my experience could show me the extraordinary in the ordinary. . . . It is easier for me to relate to Japan than it is to my own modern culture. I find the Japanese influence is directly and clearly related to the background of being born and raised as a farm person. My life as a farmer is based on experience of nature. We learned how to plant corn quickly and simply. There was a fragility. Momentary beauty was also a concern on the farm, as well as the making of the hay. My mother planted flowers for beauty and pleasure. There was no other reason. . . .

My ancestors developed something from nothing and had a great passion and love for their objects. This passion, this simplicity was similar to that of the East. The washed denim overalls that we all wore on the farm, for example, became a costume of pride—how it was cared for, how often it was washed, how often it was patched, how it faded with each wearing. This overall became a ritual as basic to the West (even today) as the care in the preparation of rice to a Japanese. Through the East, I was able to find the rituals and simple forms of the West.

The most important element for the beginning of a new piece is the *sound* and what I hear from the inside of my memory. It

situation that is a ground for juxtaposition. Experience in the dream space of space and time isolates deeply felt metaphors in an undistracted way. It is this crystallization of dream metaphors that I try to suggest in my work. When I watch most American television, I never see that space. When I go to most theater, I never see that space. I want to get to the feeling of resolution and completeness of the inner life which is found in the space and content of certain dreams, in the half-thought thing, the perception right on the edge.

Our culture is so flat-out pragmatic that the intuitive, the inner life, has just about been squeezed to death. The inner life has been removed from our experience just like the nutrients have been removed from our bread. American culture suspects the inner life because its perceptions consume pragmatic time. People in America respond to the vacant inner life by filling the emptiness with speed, white bread, white sugar, white cocaine, and thus consume their bodies and minds in the fast fires of delirium. Dreams, unlike delirium, come on natural time, sidereal time, seasonal time, and this is the time I work with and the reason the dream theater is so important to me.

Japanese teahouses built for the scale of the physical movements of the tea ceremony gave me the concept for my dream theater. I am constantly collaging. I take a metaphor out of context and rearrange it to make a statement. My text unfolds as I react to content. I get excited when content connects with dream explanation at the confluence of my life and the world.

The first thing that comes to me is the arrangement of the space—place, genus. The architecture suggests the activity. I never have trouble finding that space. I would say that I recognize it when I need it. When I met the *capella* [chapel], it was there where I was walking on the mountain path—it was just there. I have never had to look for the space. The space comes. And then comes the text. I get so excited about this space that I dive into a library and I consume ten books a minute. And I xerox. I get a glut of images. I am an American materialist when it comes to images. I mean, more and more, I am a glutton; I am a pig about images. And out of all those images, I am looking for objects and for people. Objects talk. The bottle in *Faust* talked. The objects are also people. While meditating with a tanka, images begin to move, to change face, to speak. That is a level of meditation experience. So I approach the image and the image approaches me; the contents start coming, the dreams start coming, the voices start coming.

Sometimes I hand a performer a picture, say, of a Japanese goddess or a quattrocento virgin and say, "Look at it, and show me how you can get in and out of this gesture." I abstract that part of the gesture that seems clearest and design it into a sequenced phrase of movements. On stage I move people around like they were big blocks of sculpture. Movement units are like an architecture of the body—moving sculpture. They become visual leitmotifs which accompany the pacing, phrasing, and rhythms of sound. These units, which represent themes or characters, are then interfaced in varying time sequences to form the play.

It takes me about two years working on a play and presenting it until the full work is built by gradual accumulation. I work on two plays at once, simultaneously, alternating and sometimes fusing the material. The play I am working on now is called *Anna O's Private Theater*. I want to introduce the subject of private monologue, ideas, dreams, and daydreams into theatrical form. I work with a collaborative made up of painters, sculptors, musicians, choreographers, dancers, archi-

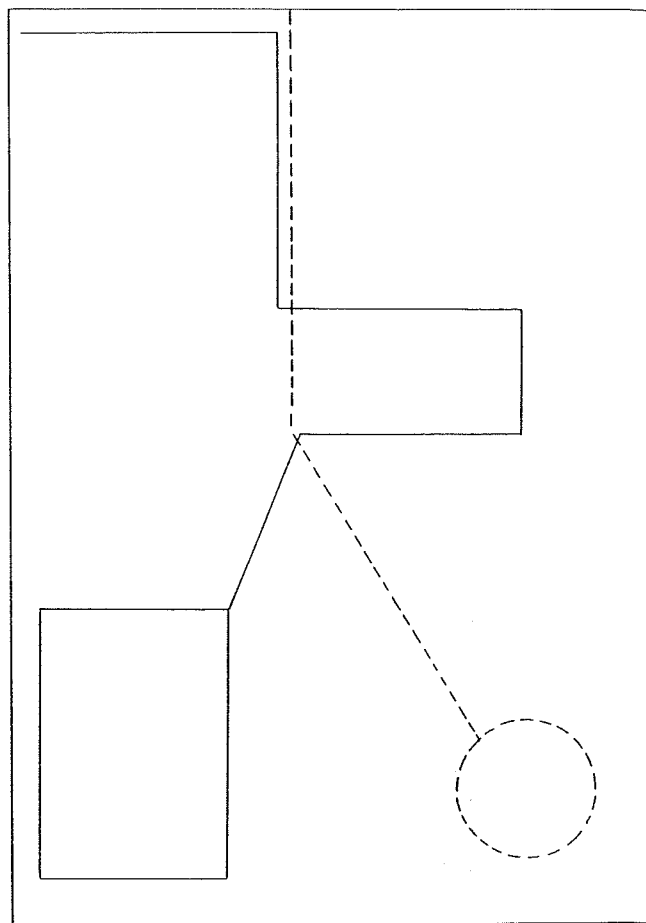


ITS ONLY A PAPER ROOM  
ITS ONLY A PAPER MOON  
ITS ONLY A PAPER TOON  
ITS ONLY A PAPER PLAY

HOW OFTEN —> NOW WAITS TO  
BE SEATED  
DISCOURSE IS TO MOUTH

A BLUE BERRY  
A PIE  
A PLANE SCAPE

THE PAPER TOON  
SPOKE ILLUSION  
THE PAPER MOON  
CAST CONFUSION  
THE PAPER ROOM  
MAKES WAY



Linda Mussmann, Paperplay text.

monkey slide

dog slide

gypsy

frog pond

road cross

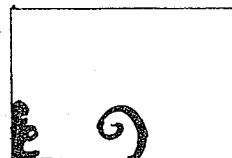
Think of it!  
A mentaphysician has  
nothing with which to  
build a word system  
except the perfected  
cry of monkeys and  
dogs.  
speculation is stringing  
together in an  
arbitrary order,  
onomatopoea, crys  
of hunger, fear, and  
love from the  
Primeral forests.

The gypsy sang a short  
song over his wine.  
His wife had no shoes.

Do I believe in anything  
exterior to myself?

Those crickets there.  
The frogs in the pond.  
What about when  
winter comes?

This small male God  
nailed to a cross  
in all those little  
boys by the road.  
How about a fox  
in them? Or a  
beautiful carved Rabbit.



Ann Wilson, notebook.

is very difficult to even begin to speak about where something comes from, but most often it comes from inside my mind and it's something that I've heard. And when I speak about hearing, I am ultimately speaking about remembering, that there is something in the memory that I search out and try to recall—but not in the usual Freudian sense. It's not a memory of emotion; it is a sense of feeling and being at a particular point in time where something extraordinary occurred and that it was so extraordinary that I cannot even understand it or remember it clearly. It is a distinct feeling, possibly someone would define it as a kind of *déjà vu*.

What I work on are concepts that have occurred somewhere in the past that I try to understand in the present, and without speculation, that is where I try to bring together a certain period of time—past, present, and future time—and put it in one time, to bring it together in a true sense of “right now.” They are things that were heard, or they were sounds, or images that occurred in the inside of my mind, which is like a huge tunnel; there is some large dark tunnel that sits up there on my shoulders and there is something that goes on in there that I clearly don't understand. I try to seek out that sound and define the something that I heard in terms of hearing it, seeing it or drawing it or showing it in terms of movement. I think Claudia Bruce's movements define the very state of that “all time” that I'm trying to bring to the work. And her information is usually gathered directly from the text—which is the source of the material.

What everyone works from are the words, but the words function without tangible meaning. They are mostly objects like a painter would paint, like a place on the page. Words which have relationships—individual and on their own. Like if I say “chicken, fence, tree,” there are no connectives usually and that is all that is stated. It is just simply those relationships. And then when the reader reads those, they then are open to form any relationships they wish to those words. The problem is to try to get that to come close to what I hear and that is what is difficult to talk about. It is definitely something occurring in the ears. I don't know why. It is a sound pattern; it is a way of listening to something. And I think part of it comes from participating as someone who watches or listens to the world rather than participating directly.

... I need a translator. Sometimes I am able to translate my own concepts but the best translator of my work is Claudia Bruce, who has the ability to do the sounds as I hear them and the gestures. Each piece that I make is different. Claudia is the primary performer and collaborator in the work. In many ways if Claudia had never really been able to do it, it never would have been done. Claudia's extraordinary vocal and physical ability have made the work possible as a reality beyond concepts on paper. A traditional performer has no idea of what to do with my work, and I don't expect them to anymore. It is not interesting to them or to me.

Everything is worked out in the process of rehearsal, which is why I think Ann does more writing than I do; I've always had more rehearsal time. The movements of the piece appear like photographic processing. I've always compared the work to photography, where you take the image into the darkroom and you print it and as it emerges through chemicals, you begin to see the image. And that is how I work. I take a group of people, I take a text; I depend on the text to influence everything. It's very focused because you have one place to look. And then out of that emerges a something and whatever that something is—I try to define that and take the dust away and bring it forward and invite it in and ask it to sit down and stay. I ask the performers: “Can we repeat it?” “How do you feel?” “Does it feel right?” A lot of rehearsals are about that. It



Bonnie Stein in Ann Wilson's *Anna O*. Photo: © 1984 Robyn Brentano.

tects, actors, and technicians. My concept for this play is the storytelling of Anna O's invention of the cathartic method in order to heal herself and to escape the limits of male concepts of the female mind.

My alternate play is based on William Carlos Williams' great epic poem “Patterson.” He wrote it over 20 years while he worked as a medical doctor in New Jersey. Williams, continuing the American vein of writing after Walt Whitman, conceived of the poem as a life voyage by installment. The organization of “Patterson” is based on principles of association, variation, and recurrence that suggest a relationship to music. This process structure makes it ideally suited to adaptation for performance, dance, music, and visual art. While directing and designing *Anna O*, I will be gathering material for *Patterson*, working in shifts between the two plays.

In July 1982 I began writing a series of dialogues while I was staying in the Italian Dolomites, which formed the basic text of *Anna O*. This serial dialogue was written each day from private mental states I was processing, from architecture as a meditation form, and from an evaluation of Freud's view of women in his studies of female sexuality and “hysteria.” I was studying the effect of Freud's view of women on Surrealism, which is similar stylistically to my way of working. Consequently, I had to reevaluate its origins to free my method from Freudian interpretation. I was reading Freud and thinking about roles for women which would reevaluate Freud in feminist terms. Anna O's story gave me the form and feminist perspective I needed to string the beads of the day plays together into the statement I wanted to make about how public and political realities affect the private inner life of the artist-storyteller.

My source for a visual form with which to present *Anna O* was found in small stone *capellas* in the Dolomites. These were shrines to the virgin built in the 16th and 17th centuries on sites of earlier pagan shrines. I built models, did elevations of them, and made paintings and photographs of their details.

A shrine encloses space more than it encloses a thing. The enclosed space that no one enters is the numinous action in the numinous space. For me, there is always a numinous space, and things are often buried in the ground to create that space. When you go to Delphi, there is a spring and then there is a temple. The space was numinous before the building was built on it. And so nature, the symbol of nature in my work is this portion of the stage that is never walked on. I've always wanted to do a performance that was not seen, under the performance that was seen.

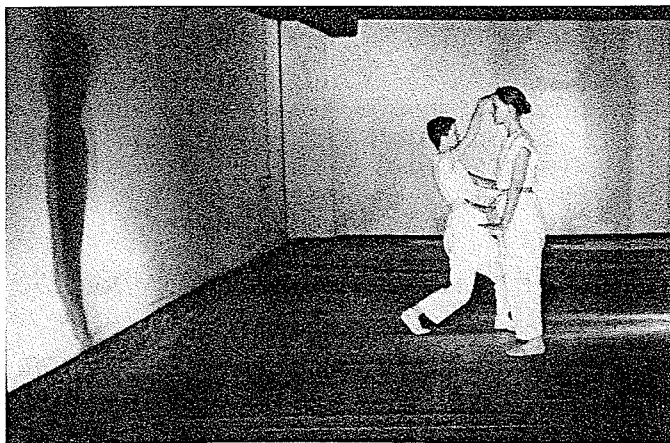
The dream theater environments, which became a place for the dream plays to occur, also function as gallery installations or as individual artifacts. Linda and I both design nontypical

is a sense—if they don't feel good, it's wrong. If they don't feel a certain amount of something that entices them, it's not correct. And if it can't entice them, it can't entice an audience. If the performers or the people working in that room don't feel the energy, that coming together somehow, then you're on the wrong track; you have to find another mode, another operation.

Politically I think it is definitely a hazard to be a woman and an artist—I mean you have two strikes against you. The fact that you do things that are not woman-like. And this throwing aside of all the stereotypes, of all the expected roles that women are supposed to do puts an additional burden on people who view the work or talk to us about the work. I'm always confronted with the issue of "woman." You are a woman doing this. After a while it becomes boring and tiring. If you dress a particular way or if you act a particular way, the issue of being a female always becomes part of it, part of anything you do; it's just never accepted that you could be a person wanting to do something. To a degree, the feminist movement has opened a certain amount of territory. But I'm still amazed that in the 1980s it is still a problem if you are a woman doing work.

The fact that I've tried to use women and men equally in the work has caused me a great amount of headache and grief because of public response. When I did *Danton's Death*, I had women perform the roles of Robespierre and Camille, which offended many people. Claudia Bruce played Camille and Betty LaRoe played Robespierre. Historically these are men's roles both in life and in the theater. This show was performed at La Mama E.T.C. where even Ellen Stewart disagreed totally with my choice and wanted me to recast men in place of these women. I refused. I made this choice because Claudia and Betty were the best at the job; they did it best. Whether they were men or women, it didn't matter to me—they did it best. . . . But if you put women in men's roles you are making a sexual and political statement.

My personal concern is to move on, to go on, to move away from role-playing of any kind. But it still is not possible. Either you are stuck in the roles or you are stuck in the role reversals. It is an impossible conflict at every turn of the road. If I had done *Danton's Death* in the early '70s with the same cast, it would have been much more acceptable to see women acting in those roles. Because politically the time was more open to women jumping out of their usual role-playing into another sort of role-playing. The theater, in its most avant-garde form disregards women more often than not—there has been little progress for women. The theater is heavily funded and funding depends on being polite.



Claudia Bruce and Sophie Siemens in Linda Mussmann's *Paperplay*.

theatrical environments. My arrangements function like characters. Space has a voice and an atmosphere of its own. I make taped dialogues for some of the architectural forms and objects, which then talk with the performers and move about. A bottle dialogue, a pyramid dialogue, a *capella* dialogue. Language need not always be attached to a person or even to a voice, for that matter—as anyone who has ever talked to cats well knows.

The cost of theater, about \$5,000 for two nights in a small proscenium house, makes perfection unattainable. Such full-scale production can only be developed over a month of public performances, but the fees for light and sound technicians and performers are out of my financial realm. So much of the work has been theoretical. I have, out of necessity, developed a form of theater presentation in which process receives more emphasis than full stage production. Economic reality is shifting part of my focus from the proscenium stage to alternative and gallery spaces and close viewing, which in turn has brought about more concentrated detailing of action for audiences which are much closer to the performers.

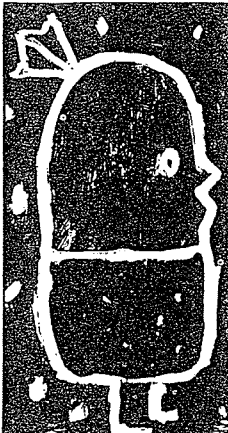
Because I work with very young, emerging performers, who are not set in any style, I rarely get the polish of a full professional. The performers also do the technical staging—something not possible in the union theater. We work with very little money. Bonnie Stein, my principal performer, has contributed a great deal of energy and motivating spirit toward the completion of my work.

I came out of the Kerouac generation in the 1950s, from Pittsburgh, Pa. My generation broke space open for the counter-culture that created the avant-garde theater we now work in. We broke open marriages and lifestyles; we invented loft living. William Carlos Williams was one of our blueprints. The idea of records of life passage in American rhythms became our mode; dance came from daily life gestures. That idealist world of our youth is now being erased by expensive computer materialism. Fragmentation is the new mode. The old romantic days of crossing the continent in a beat-up car have been replaced by instant replay.

When I look at the future and calculate support for the live moment in life, in theater, I see that I don't fit into the major mode. Most of our theater is still European; our thinking is still insecure about our own American voice. Corporate funding, if inclined to cultural PR, is still symbolized by the British upper-class situation on Channel 13. Italian opera, German music, and Shakespeare still receive the *largest* proportion of New York State and national funding. No opera by a senior American composer like Virgil Thompson has been performed at the Metropolitan Opera in four decades.

*Anna O* is about the woman who first conceived of the "talking cure" that Breuer and Freud developed. This performance explores the new psychoanalytic theme—the reevaluation of Freud's seduction theory. I wanted to make a work that was confidential, like telling a very close friend of a powerful dream; about prophecy, jealousy, pain, death, and the end of mourning. I do not know where it is going until it gets there. That is the most exciting thing about the manipulation of nonmaterialistic theater. Through the merging of all the personalities involved with my original insight, another much larger insight evolves: a collaborative presence, not always explainable, not always controllable, but something with a very strong life of its own—energies in which my life and the artist-performers' lives are for a moment merged. It always leaves this curious echo in our minds of its actually having lived. An empty stage right after a performance has ended is always filled with ghosts. Then there is a dream which is at once an echo and a new site line, and the next play begins.





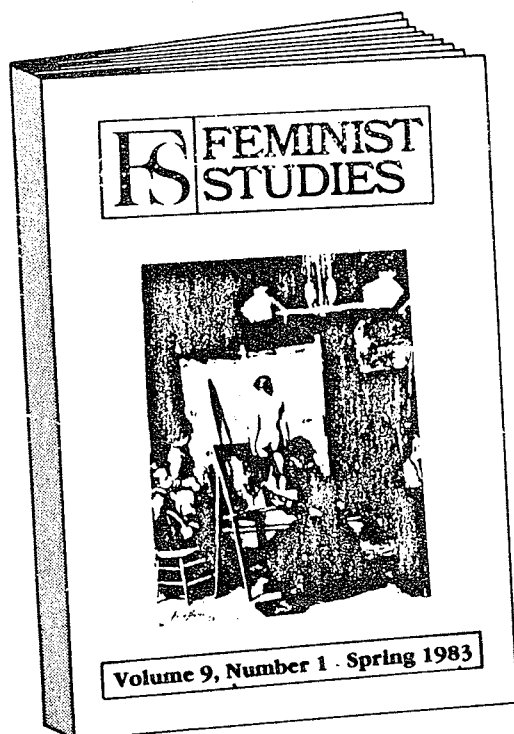
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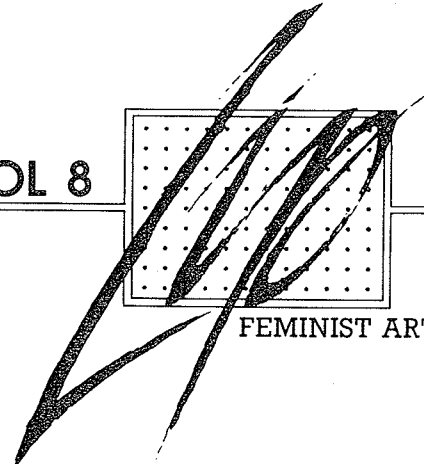
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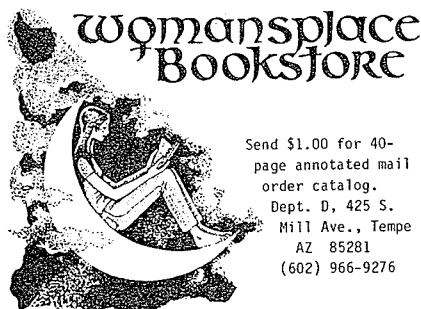
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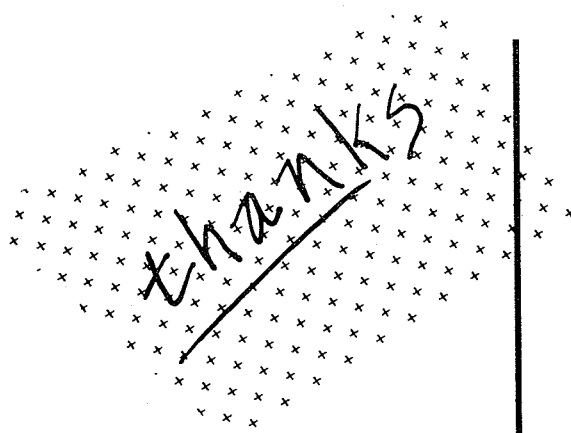
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Next—a double issue:

### Mothers, Mags and Movie Stars— Feminism and Class / Satire

How do women's magazines and movie stars point up issues mothers and daughters are in conflict about (or agree on)? A look at the institutions that shape the mother-daughter relationship, with an eye to how this relationship affects our understanding of family, class, and culture. Plus a satirical remedy to conventional media presentations of women, with parodies of food and fashion features, feminist comics, political "ads"—lots that laughs.

### Women's Groups—Time to Raise Hell!

Projects and plans from progressive political and cultural groups all over the world. An action-oriented issue with suggestions for organizing and mobilizing the public.

### Neighborhood/Community Arts

From murals to graffiti to street theater, this issue is on art that lives in the community. Send us proposals, visuals, discussions, interviews with neighborhood viewers. We're particularly interested in examining the relation between the artist and the community, as well as funding questions.

### Food As a Feminist Issue

This antidote to diet books and pop-psychology treatises will explore the cultural-political impact of food on women's lives, from kitchen conversations to recipes to images of nurturance. Is food a theme in your art, writing, film, performance? We want both critical essays and creative pieces that attempt to define and reclaim our kitchen heritage.

### First Strike for Peace: Women and Disarmament

With the possibility of nuclear destruction threatening all our lives, it's increasingly important to "hear" more voices in protest. What is the impact of creative work on disarmament? Which imagery or form is effective in which context? For a special, 32-page "portfolio," we'd like original page art, designed specifically for this issue.

### Guidelines for Contributors

Each issue of HERESIES has a specific theme and all material submitted should relate to that theme. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced and submitted in duplicate. Visual material should be submitted in the form of a slide, xerox, or photograph. We will not be responsible for original art. All material must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for it to be returned. We do not publish reviews or monographs on contemporary women. We do not commission articles and cannot guarantee acceptance of submitted material. HERESIES pays a small fee for published material. Send all submissions to: HERESIES, PO Box 766, Canal Street Station, New York, NY 10013.

JOAN BRADERMAN

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