

Mediadance

Joan Jonas: *Solo Hits*, Intermedia Art Festival
Guggenheim Museum, New York

Meredith Monk: *16 Millimeter Earrings*

Soho Weekly News, 5 March 1980

Joan Jonas's Guggenheim Museum performance during the recent Intermedia Art Festival consisted of four pieces made between 1972 and 1979 under the title *Solo Hits*. Odd how many of the pieces shown in this festival were revivals. For almost two decades we've been told avant-garde work should be disposable, even deliberately self-destructing. Repertory is supposed to be a bourgeois limitation, and if you preserve a performance experiment you might inhibit its therapeutic value. Yet this season some of the major iconoclasts of post-Judson dance are reviving their early works. Of course, it must be easier to get public funding to reconstruct a known antiestablishment dance, one that *didn't* touch off the revolution, than to finance a new one that just might. I even heard Yvonne Rainer is doing a remake of *Trio A* for Dance in America, with big dance stars in the roles created by herself, Steve Paxton, and David Gordon. Can this be true?

Jonas's works, performed with linking interludes of sound and projected images, ran together almost imperceptibly. Her consistent subject over the years seems to have been the identity of the performer as threatened and expanded by the devices of replication: film, TV, and also simpler modes of reproducing images, like drawing. In one way, she's hardly there at all, except as a target, an object to be cycled through the machine and consumed. In another sense, though, she's Megawoman, purveyor of a thousand identities, all of which could only have come from herself.

The performance is about who she is, or about the ambiguity of who she is. Sometimes she looks middle-aged and plain. Sometimes she looks young and glamorous. She puts on masks and becomes smoother, more opaque. I don't know what she looks like. I'd never recognize her on the street.

But not only has she a multiplicity of faces. There in the center of the media and gadgets, she makes sounds that get modified or blended with recorded sounds; she dances witchy dances that conjure up films of volcanoes. Fragments of her flicker and pulsate and drown out the whole of her standing ten feet away. She shows you herself through many eyes. Who's to say which is the real one? The naked woman who scans every inch of her body through a pocket mirror sees a self we can't see—but we see one that she can't. At one point, she beats a rhythm with her hands as a video

camera films her. The video monitor shows her hands on a split, sliding screen, so that the rhythm on the screen is different from the rhythm she's "actually" producing.

At the end she undresses a skeleton, tenderly lifts it from its stand and carries it like a baby, telling it a story. She puts a punched tape into a music box and cranks it, singing a lullaby to the tune it plays. She takes the tape out, flips it over, puts it through the music box backwards, and sings a different tune to the same notes played in reverse.

Media itself has this intriguing dual capability. It's fantastically changeable, fleeting, not bound to the physical limits of time, space, volume, and it can transform its subjects in the same ways. At the same time it can fix and preserve an image to create a very narrow, inflexible, and long-lasting version of truth. Perhaps the continued existence of the films that were part of many recent avant-gardists' work has helped them see their work as more permanent, more like a painting or a sculpture.

The Intermedia festival also showed a record film of one of Meredith Monk's earliest dances, *16 Millimeter Earrings* (1966), newly shot by Robert Withers and incorporating most of the original footage of the piece. This dance too was about multiple identities projected by Monk live and Monk on film, sometimes simultaneously. Earlier and more primitive technically than Jonas's work, *16 Millimeter Earrings* used theatrical and dramatic devices like costumes and fake flames, but employed the camera mostly in straightforward close-ups, with film images thrown directly onto props like a lamp shade. Manipulations of Monk's image were achieved mostly through cutting—time-lapse montages, split-screen images—rather than through distortion of the picture such as blurring or fast zooms. And Monk still uses film in this relatively uncomplicated way.

Both Monk and Jonas as performers are quite passive, allowing themselves to become objects of the camera's (or the audience's) gaze. But their methods are different. With Jonas, the emotional or aesthetic message comes from the technical changes the media can work on her neutral surface. In *16 Millimeter Earrings*, Monk's fingers slowly claw a red Dynel wig into a snarled web of fibers. In her *Quarry* the camera stares at a group of people huddled in a cave, then slowly withdraws until they become flecks in a rock pile; later it glances across lifeless bodies floating in still, clear water. With Monk, the content of the image is always stronger than anything the technology does with it.