

Meredith Monk (1942 -)

by Marcia B. Siegel

Meredith Monk is often considered a crossover artist. She is equally accomplished as a singer and stage performer, choreographer, composer, director, and filmmaker. But in Monk's work these categories overlap and transform each other. Dancers sing and act. Stage works incorporate films and live video. Music evokes visual images. Singing choruses can encircle the audience; sounds can dismantle time and space. Because Monk's unique artistry is deliberately nonverbal, dance has always claimed her as one of its own, although she seldom draws on dance's codified techniques or choreographic conventions. She says her primary medium is music, but she probes below all the performative surfaces and structures to access the span of human experience.

Winner of two Guggenheim Fellowships, a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, the Samuel H. Scripps [American Dance Festival](#) Award, and numerous other prizes, commissions, and honors, Monk has continued to find new inspiration after five decades of creative work.

Monk began her professional career in the mid-1960s, when the performing arts were undergoing drastic re-definition. Downtown New York was a powder keg of new ideas provoked by John Cage and [Merce Cunningham](#), the Happenings and Fluxus groups, the Living Theater, and the dissident dancers of [Judson Dance Theater](#). Monk collaborated and performed with many of these revolutionaries as she was making her first pieces. The dance and performance art critics who covered that scene recognized her originality at once. Growing up in the suburbs of New York City in a musical family had already prepared her for boundary-crossing. In addition to childhood ballet, piano, and voice lessons, she studied Dalcroze Eurythmics, a system of integrating music theory with body movement. At Sarah Lawrence College, from which she graduated in 1964, her curriculum included music as well as dance under the esteemed composition teacher [Bessie Schönberg](#).

In her first multimedia piece, *16 Millimeter Earrings* (1966), Monk combined rudimentary movements and gestures with vocalizing, simple

stage effects, textual voiceovers, and a film of her own face projected on a paper globe that covered her head. This combination of seemingly naive performative elements, visual images, and dissociated personal references informed her future work. By 1970 she had created two sprawling pieces (*Juice*, a "theater cantata," and *Needle-Brain Lloyd and the Systems Kid*, a "live movie"), her first record album (*Key*), and several smaller performance pieces. The components grew more refined over the years, but Monk's work is still compounded of down-to-earth, emotionally affecting, visually arresting characters and events that unfold over a musical continuum.

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With three immense, site-specific pieces, *Juice* (1969), *Needle-Brain Lloyd* (1970), and *Vessel* (1971), Monk realized her most expansive visions. *Juice* began in the rotunda of New York's Guggenheim Museum, continued days later, with the same elements reduced, in the Minor Latham Playhouse at Barnard College, and concluded in Monk's loft. *Needle-Brain Lloyd* took up an afternoon and evening on the Connecticut College campus. *Vessel* looked at Joan of Arc within her historical moment, as a female hero, a political symbol, and a visionary martyr. Reversing the telescopic lens of *Juice*, *Vessel* began in the loft, expanded to the Performing Garage, and opened up still further, to a parking lot and an adjacent church in downtown Manhattan.

In staging live action for different venues and extended time-spans, she was exploring sound and space, memory, history, and architecture. All three pieces involved more than 75 performers and elaborate production elements that had to be devised and minutely coordinated. These events solidified Monk's reputation as a major imaginative artist, but she didn't undertake anything of such proportions again until *American Archeology #1* (1994), a pageant for 70 performers, which used as its setting and subject New York's Roosevelt Island, which had served for over a century as a quarantine and prison site. For several years after her first large productions, Monk probed the possibilities they had suggested for

metaphor, character, and music. She devised ways of concentrating the elements into chamber works, films, and musical forms. Her core group of dancer-actors was incorporated in 1968 as The House, with contributors added or subtracted as needed for each new project.

Experimenting with the range and timbre of her own voice, Monk ventured off the pitch limitations of Western harmony to produce sliding, quavering, shrieking tones and nonverbal syllables that were more like emotional outpourings and chants than conventional song. Typically, she grounds these vocalizations with a repeating ostinato phrase or a rhythmic figure, and critics have linked her music with similar world folksong traditions. Monk explored the resources of her own voice to tap into universal images, to "come upon sounds that have existed throughout all time."¹ She could sing across registers. She could reproduce the immature piping of a child, the vibrance of a lyric soprano, the growling and barking of animals. She could sing a conversation between several different characters.

Occasionally Monk has used recorded loops and echo assists, but her musical language is grounded in acoustic sound rather than technological effects. Accompanying herself on organ or piano, she gave solo concerts and wrote music for the work of other choreographers, accompanying Merce Cunningham on several occasions. She would develop her own theater pieces over a period of time, performing completed segments in concert. Ideas would finally accumulate into a larger form, and then linger afterward as concert items, often finding their way into new theatrical mixes.

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In the opera *Education of the Girlchild* (1972-73) Monk began cultivating what she called a "personal mythology,"² a collection of characters and themes that she could bring into

¹ interview with Jamake Highwater, in *Art Performs Live*. Walker Art Center, 1998. p.80.

² "Personal Mythologies" by Marianne Goldberg, in *Meredith Monk*. PAJ Books, 1997. p. 51

play through music-making and ritualistic actions. *Education of the Girlchild* centered on a family of women who traveled through life together. For the second part of the piece, a solo, Monk changed her posture, movements, and vocal coloration to become a woman who regressed from old age to middle age and youth. In this tour de force, Monk performed not only the physical but the emotional states of the three women.

She made an ingenious palimpsest of World War II images in the 40-performer opera *Quarry* (1976), projecting armies, refugees, dictators, Biblical characters, and civilians clinging to domestic life, from the anxious viewpoint of a small child. She orchestrated multiple voices in a large, militant marching-singing group and in the canonic female ensemble of "Quarry Weave," which she later used as an audience-participation chorus.

One striking aspect of Monk's theatrical work, and one reason for its accessibility among non-classical audiences, is that she aims for universal expression even when the work is based in specific characters or events. In *Quarry* there is no character named Hitler, but there are six archetypal Dictators of different nationalities, all terrifying, some ludicrous. The family members in *Education of the Girlchild* are all women, but they comprise different ages, ethnicities, races, and physical types.

Alongside her large works, Monk was making smaller performance pieces and concert works for voices and instruments. These chamber-size compositions allowed her to tour widely in the United States and abroad, without the requirements of theatrical production. In 1978 she established the Meredith Monk Vocal Ensemble, a group of versatile singer-actors who not only toured in concert and cabaret formats but became a laboratory for Monk's musical experimentation. Rather than asking singers to imitate her own voice, she nurtured the capacities and colors of each individual, thus extending her compositional range as well. In 1981 she established a longstanding association with the new-music recording company ECM. "Dolmen Music," the first release, included three selections from *Education of the Girlchild* as well as the title track. Originating in 1979 as a

concert piece with cello and percussion, "Dolmen Music" was a dense weave of male and female voices that suggested a community in a landscape.

Through her recordings, Monk has been able to preserve the musical component of a constantly evolving theatrical repertory. "Turtle Dreams," a piece for four singers and two organs, was incorporated into the Civil War opera *Specimen Days* (1981). A cabaret version, with the singers lightly choreographed, went into the Ensemble's touring repertory. The music was recorded by ECM in 1983. A 27-minute film, "Turtle Dreams (Waltz)," directed by Monk's frequent collaborator Ping Chong, was produced by WGBH-TV the same year.



Monk began making films early in her career. The silent, five-minute "Quarry" (1975) was incorporated into the larger performance work of the same name. It was one of several incidental films that made their way into larger pieces and concert appearances. Her two most important films used a documentary style to convey viewers into forgotten moments of history. The half-hour "Ellis Island," completed in 1981, time-traveled back and forth between modern-day tourists visiting the dilapidated port of entry before its 1990 renovation, and scenes of the cruel and impersonal screening practices to which early 20th century immigrants were subjected.

"Book of Days" (1988), shot in France and Germany, once again looked backward, as present-day construction workers unearthed a medieval ghetto wiped out by the plague. Invisible reporters interviewed the inhabitants of the town and photographed scenes of their domestic life. The central figure was a visionary young girl who drew an imaginary airplane, a gun, a bus on the wall of her home. Monk played a half-mad hermit woman who taught the girl magic spells and encouraged her futuristic fantasies.

As a kind of recuperation from the demands of larger projects, Monk periodically moved in closer to focus on particular characters in their native environments. In *Paris*, a duet with Ping

Chong, she sought to evoke the mood of that city at some unspecified time in the past. *Paris* was the first part of a Travelogue series that also included *Venice-Milan* and *Chacon* (1972-76). Monk and Chong reunited to film the *Paris* duet for KTCA-TV in 1982.

In *Facing North* (1990) Monk and Robert Ee sang and danced as hardy companions living in the Arctic. This piece, which toured widely to Japan, Europe and the United States, contained some of the seeds for *Atlas* (1991). In that three-part opera, a female traveler (based on the 19th century explorer-writer Alexandra David-Neel) gathers a group of companions who roam from the Arctic to the desert, with many adventures along the way. They encounter demons, sinister entertainers, an enigmatic forest sage, and a village of friendly natives. The companions eventually escape from an out-of-control technocracy into an extra-terrestrial refuge, where they sing in meditative harmony with a new chorus of friends.

For *Atlas*, co-commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, the Walker Art Center, and the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia, Monk conducted a series of workshops to audition singers and to familiarize them with her offbeat musical methods. She has continued to give workshops and master classes for laypersons, students and professionals, introducing ways of channeling personal memory and meditation into the body and the voice.

Atlas brought together many of Monk's perennial themes: adventurous journeys, work and community, environmental integrity, the transmission of tribal knowledge, the dangers and the possibilities of science, space travel as enlightenment and escape, the power of insight, and the search for spiritual truth. Her next big theater work, *The Games* (1983), co-created with Ping Chong, constructed a universe that was both utopian and anti-utopian. The inhabitants of a futuristic planet, perhaps the descendants of escaped Earthlings, attempt to reconstruct archaic practices like dancing and quiz shows, under the command of a dictatorial coach. In *Magic Frequencies* (1988), inquisitive tourists from space copy earthly customs like eating with knives and forks.

Monk has often remarked on the necessity of "quiet" as a recuperative device in performance--a way to allow the audience to absorb new impressions. She also uses the word in the meditative sense, as a means of centering the attention. Around the end of the 1990s, Monk immersed herself in Buddhist studies as a means of understanding horrific world events. She performed a vocal offering for the Dalai Lama during the World Festival of Sacred Music in Los Angeles in 1999. In 1996 she made a music theater oratorio, *The Politics of Quiet*, which she called "an elegy for our troubled age."³ The same year she produced *A Celebration Service*, in which the Vocal Ensemble, augmented by local performers, choreographed prayers and invocations in a variety of sacred and secular spaces.

In between touring and concert appearances, Monk was extending her musical range with commissions from the Kronos Quartet, Michael Tilson Thomas's New World Symphony, and the Saint Louis Symphony. Her musical work was honored with a three-concert retrospective during the 2000 Lincoln Center Festival, and with four-hour performance marathons at Zankel Hall in 2005 and the Whitney Museum in 2009.

Three major performance works premiered during the decade after 2000. *Mercy*, a collaboration with visual artist Ann Hamilton, explored acts of kindness as an antidote to cruelty and torture. The creators used micro-cameras to project surreal close-ups of Hamilton's hand, drawing on a board, and the interior of Monk's mouth as she sang. In 2006, reflecting on the death in 2002 of her longtime partner Mieke van Hoek, Monk and the Vocal Ensemble premiered the music-theater piece *Impermanence*. Part I of the work had its premiere at Riverside Studios in London in 2004.

In her lifetime quest for the global possibilities of the voice, Monk has cultivated techniques related to Inuit throat singing, Middle-Eastern ululation, and hocketing, a practice in which the singers collectively produce a melody by singing one note per person. Similarly, her ideas of

instrumental accompaniment have gone beyond the strings and winds of Western symphonic practice. As early as 1972, in a group of songs written as the score for William Dunas's dance *Our Lady of Late*, she accompanied herself by sliding her finger around the moistened rim of a wineglass. *Atlas* had an orchestra consisting of percussion, strings, keyboards, and woodwinds including recorders, didgeridoo, and shawm. She liked the exotic sounds of the Japanese sho and the Indian sruti. By the time of *Impermanence*, having made voices act like instruments for decades, she was composing for instruments as if they were voices.

Songs of Ascension (2008) and *Ascension Variations* (2009) originated in an eight-story tower in California designed by Ann Hamilton. A meditation on transcendence, the work enlisted Monk's Vocal Ensemble, a chamber group of musicians, and two large vocal choruses. The later incarnation of the work took place in the Guggenheim Museum and directly quoted from *Juice*, Monk's Guggenheim cantata of 40 years before. At the Guggenheim the performers and the audience once again traveled up and down Frank Lloyd Wright's spiral ramps; small encounters and dances took place in the alcoves; disembodied voices rang out into the high space. This time the journey seemed to be less about pioneering and discovering, and more about the release of energy and desire into some infinite sphere of stillness.

Meredith Monk has often spoken of herself as a conduit, a medium through which visions not entirely of her own creation could be transmitted. She told scholar Constance Kreemer, "The way I feel about making art is that every piece is its own entity and it already exists before I start, so I discover a world that already exists in another dimension, and then I have to figure out what the laws of that world are."⁴ From her portrayal of Joan of Arc to the clairvoyant Jewish girl in *Book of Days* to the science fiction escapades of the '90s, Monk has been seeking to discover utopian states of safety, unity, and peace within everyday experience. She seems to be saying that each

³ New York Times, 16 June, 1996

⁴ "Cracks and Cliffs" in *Further Steps 2* edited by Constance Kreemer. Routledge, 2008. p. 136.

person, each act, contains oppositions within it. People can be both threatening and benign, humble and arrogant, deeply serious and comical. She told an interviewer in 1997: "I've always been interested in the mysterious and indefinable; seeing the familiar as strange; crossing boundaries of how we normally perceive the world. I like to think that I am offering an experience that could be a template of expansiveness, of limitless possibilities, of feeling more alive."⁵

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⁵ interview with Jamake Highwater, op. cit. p. 92.