

WAITING FOR GOD : THE VIDEOTAPES OF LINDA MONTANO

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THE TAPES

MITCHELL'S DEATH (22 Minutes/Black and White/1978)

PRIMAL SCENES (10 Minutes/Black and White/1980)

ANOREXIA NERVOSA (60 Minutes/Color/1981)

CHARACTERS - LEARNING TO TALK (45 Minutes/Color/1978)

KARATE EXAM (10 Minutes/Black and White/1980)

Linda Montano is best known as a performance artist who sees little if any difference between life and art. Her performances stress the idea of duration - extended time, and often include a collaborator. In 1973 Linda Montano and Tom Marioni were handcuffed to each other for three days in San Francisco. In 1975 the artist lived in the desert for ten days with composer Pauline Oliveros. In New York City, from July 4, 1983 to July 4, 1984, performance artist Tehching Hsieh and Linda Montano were tied by an eight foot rope, and were not allowed to touch for the entire year. This performance received worldwide critical and popular attention.

Since 1969, Linda Montano has created more than 40 performances, about half of which involved collaborators. Since December 3, 1984 Montano has been involved in a solo performance, "Seven Years of Living Art." This performance is a rigid structure - it adheres to the ancient chakra (energy) system, and requires the artist to be in a constant state of attention to the performance. Each year Montano must wear clothes of one color, listen to a single tone for seven hours per day, be in a single-color room for at least ³ seven hours per day, and affect one of seven speaking accents for each year of the performance. During the first year of the performance, which dealt with root chakra - sexuality - the color was red, the tone was B, and the accent was French. The performance continues for six more years, and the artist has had the

seven chakras, in the appropriate colors, permanently tattooed on her body in the traditional places. In order to involve the interested public in "Seven Years of Living Art," Linda Montano has set up the Art/Life Institute at her home in Kingston, New York and once a month performs hand readings in the window of the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City. The nature of the performance is such that the artist's aesthetic intention and the work itself are inseparable. The artist is the work of art - a ritual, an exercise in learning to pay attention.

Linda Montano's public performances have received much attention, and many have been chronicled in the art press as well as in her own book, ART IN EVERYDAY LIFE (Astro Arts/Station Hill, 1981). However, the artist's videotapes, an important part of her prolific oeuvre, have never been examined thoroughly. The tapes, while philosophically an affirmation of the ART/LIFE singularity, also shed light on the background of the artist, her beliefs, her dreams, her fantasies, her attempts at crisis resolution, her high regard for systemic ritual, and ~~several~~^{various} other issues. In viewing Montano's video work we are better able to understand, in a holistic manner, her approach to art/life, and the influences that have helped to form this approach. A thorough reading of these video works is essential in order to comprehend the complex and compelling nexus of ideas that make for a controversial life and a subversive art.

MITCHELL'S DEATH, which was created at the Center for Music Experiment at the University of California at San Diego, where Linda Montano was an Associate Fellow, is a work of great power and almost inexplicable grief. In 1971, Linda Montano married photographer Mitchell Payne in

Rochester, New York, where she taught sculpture at Nazareth College. After a honeymoon in Niagara Falls, Montano and Payne moved to San Francisco, where they lived together until 1975, when they separated. On August 19, 1977, in Kansas City, Mitchell Payne died in an accident. While preparing to do some skeet shooting, ^a his gun misfired and killed him instantly. MITCHELL'S DEATH was created in response to this event.

This tape is one of a series of attempts by Linda Montano to deal with the death of Mitchell Payne. From September of 1977 through April of 1978, Linda Montano involved herself in four public performances dealing with the life and death of Mitchell Payne. The videotape is a record of journal entries that Montano kept from the first moment she heard of the death (by telephone) through the ordeal of seeing the body at the crematorium. The tape is structured so that the performance is delivered in an unremitting monotonous chant. The image is a close-up of Montano's face. In her face she has placed several acupuncture needles, particularly around the eyes so that the needles resemble tears. The voice has been processed - a slight but chilling echo, suggesting memory and stream of consciousness.

MITCHELL'S DEATH is an attempt by the artist to share with an audience the ritual of mourning - a very painful and private necessity. Montano shares with us her feelings of guilt, pain, fear, but along with these she also paints a miniature portrait of Mitchell Payne's life. Small but intimate details surface that allow us to know the person for whom the artist grieves. Montano, questioning whether this accident was indeed an accident is comforted to know that on the morning of his death her ex-husband made himself popcorn, a sure sign that he was happy. We

too are comforted by this information. The artist wishes to share her innermost feelings and thoughts through the vehicle of art - involving the audience in a process that, if handled some other way, might be read as exploitation or self-indulgence.

It is not stretching too far to state that for Linda Montano this videotape is a sacrament in the Church of Art. From 1960 to 1962 Montano lived as a novice in a convent of the Maryknoll Sisters (training to be a missionary). From 1971 to 1976, she had daily association with a Yoga ashram. From 1981 to 1983, the artist lived in a Zen center. Some form of spiritual affiliation has been a constant in Linda Montano's life. As a child she desired sainthood beyond all else (she is a saint in the Universal Life Church). Art, for Montano, is a way to live life in the sacred lane. The conflict that the violent death of Mitchell Payne presented to her beliefs, her faith, made Montano react in an open and confessional way. The audience hears the confession, in a state of rapt attention to the Gregorian/Tibetan chant, sharing grief and bestowing grace upon the artist (It is interesting to note that another video artist, Paul Ryan, who was trained as a Catholic monk, created a "Video Confessional" booth at the historic "Television as Art" show at the Jewish Museum in 1972. This piece required the audience to confront itself, one by one, and hear its own confessions).

In his book, ESSAYS ON PERFORMANCE THEORY:1970-1976, Richard Schechner points out that Victor Turner, author of DRAMAS, FIELDS AND METAPHORS (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974), locates four actions as necessary elements in a social drama. These are: 1) breach, 2) crisis, 3) redressive

action and 4) reintegration. The breach is a situation that schisms a social unit. The crisis is a precipitating event that must be dealt with, or else the fabric of that social unit will unravel. The redressive action is taken in order to overcome the crisis. Reintegration eliminates the breach that caused the crisis, and this reintegration can occur either by healing the breach or by what Gregory Bateson has called "schismogenesis."¹

MITCHELL'S DEATH is a prime example of the structure created by Turner and addressed by Schechner. Montano has captured the elements of social drama in a way that allows the audience to identify the tape as an attempt at healing, for this healing process is exactly what social and aesthetic drama become - an attempt to resolve a breach, either by healing the original breach or by creating yet a larger breach that all but erases the original element in the drama. Obviously, what Linda Montano has done in MITCHELL'S DEATH has been to reintegrate her own life with the memory of both the life and the death of Mitchell Payne, and the tape itself functions as redressive action in a crisis situation. The tape represents a compelling use of the video form for self-reflexive confrontation. The artist has confessed to herself - to her audience - to her God. She has handled the process of reintegration on the personal, social, aesthetic and spiritual level and is able to move on. MITCHELL'S DEATH serves to replace the ancient Catholic ritual of making novice nuns look at corpses and pray for the corpses' souls. Instead, Montano has created a secular ritual where praying for the dead is not enough. We must celebrate the living as well.

PRIMAL SCENES is best described as a video collage. The visual material, in this case a black-and-white film of the birth of a baby, is far removed

from the audio portion of this tape, Linda Montano has chosen to write an erotic prose poem for this tape, the subjects of which are a young nun and an older priest. The artist reads this "blasphemous" tale of her own creation, while the audience, its eyes riveted on a very compelling image - birth, half-listens to the voice - a voice of experience, a voice of fiction, a voice of memory, a voice of imagination.

This tape bears little resemblance to MITCHELL'S DEATH. PRIMAL SCENES is composed with a light touch, and the imagery is hopeful and tender. The reading of the text is personal and inflective - an alluring story of frustration and release, of deep religious and deep earthly feelings, of love of God and thirst for passion. Again, the tape aligns itself with Montano's own life history, her own conflict over the cloistered life and the appetites that are the world. It is almost as though the artist is attempting to let herself into the world by representing a vision that is condemned behind the cloistered walls. A nun does not have a child. A nun does not have sex. A priest does not have a child. A priest does not have sex. The truly religious do not look at a film of birth and certainly do not listen to a text describing human longings by those who should be beyond such base feelings, in order to better protect us from these same feelings.

We can view PRIMAL SCENES as a sociological ritual - an attempt to illustrate a rite of passage by the artist. She has emerged into a world of the senses, leaving behind the world of the spirit. And yet, this spiritual world is the frame of reference for the artist. She cannot let go completely of that which gives her comfort and joy beyond the moment. She must frame all pleasure under the glass of sin. In

this case, the artist's conflict centers on Original Sin - a sin of deed, a sin of mind. Yet, Montano tries to work this conflict through by purging herself of impure thoughts, and to examine the concept of being born "in sin."

Schechner again presents a model that allows us to regard Montano's personal ritual as an attempt to move from one reality (religion) to another reality (the world). He presents four possible models for the structure of theater as a movement away from ritual. His second model depicts the structure of PRIMAL SCENES best. It is:



In other words, the performance is the vehicle by which one moves from one world (or at least worldview) to the next. Note that the structure is bidirectional, and results in a different actuality, as the performance oscillates.² We could also look at the structure of the performance

this way: 1(actuality 1) + 1(performance) = 1(actuality 2)

or
1(actuality 2) - 1(performance) = 1 (actuality 1)

It is this concept of 1+1=1 that is integral to the work of Linda Montano, and is best exhibited in the creation of her "Characters" (discussed later in this essay). In PRIMAL SCENES the elements of text (1) plus (+) image(1) do not equal two distinct elements of one tape, but rather work together to present a coherent point of view, albeit a point of view laden with conflict and contradiction. Montano's work is held up to her audience as a mirror of our own world views. She is creating the work that deals with the questions, and the work is the statement, not the contradictory elements in the work.

ANOREXIA NERVOSA is a formal investigation by Linda Montano into the

experiences of five women who have been anorexic. Montano interviews four women. She is the fifth. The interviews focus on self-image and the lack of power young women have in society, and how the negative aspects of these issues can lead to eating disorders. The tape is instructive and alarming - more than twenty per cent of adolescent women are said to be anorexic or bulimic.

When Linda Montano left the convent of the Maryknoll Sisters in 1962, she weighed 82 pounds. Her poor health was the reason she had to leave the order. She could not eat while serving God, giving all her personal power over to Another. As early as 1948, when Montano was seven years old, she was hospitalized with a stomach disorder, caused by her coat being stepped on by her classmates. She stopped vomiting only when given her own coat hanger in the cloakroom. Her teachers were nuns. Obviously, eating disorders have been a lifelong issue for Linda Montano, and true to her art/life stance, she has incorporated this problem in her work.

Working in the documentary form is unusual for Montano. The bulk of her work in video is personal narrative, but the form is not at all the issue when discussing ANOREXIA NERVOSA. Rather, the focus of the tape is the life experience of the artist reflected in the collective experience of the other women. As she did in MITCHELL'S DEATH, Montano shares her experience with others - other anorexics and the audience. She attempts to shed light on a serious problem that has only recently received public attention, due to confessions by famous women (Jane Fonda, Cherry Boone) and the death of Karen Carpenter.

ANOREXIA NERVOSA was originally ~~exhibited~~^{conceived} as an installation. Popcorn was ^{to be} served, so that the audience would have something to eat. The question of deprivation is one that is central when discussing this videotape. If Montano became anorexic while a nun, why did she deprive herself of food? Was she being fed by her spirit? Did she feel that life was everlasting, and that the body was a mere cover for the soul? Was she testing her faith? The artist mentions that when she was a child her father worked so hard to put food on the table that she could never feel comfortable eating - it was like eating her father's sweat and blood. While a nun did this guilt transfer to the blood of Christ?

In CHARACTERS + LEARNING TO TALK, Linda Montano introduces a formal system of performance via videotape. In this tape the artist assumes seven different personae that correspond to the seven chakras, the energy centers in different parts of the body, starting at the base of the spine and moving through the body to the "Crown Chakra," just above the head. The characters/personae, with their corresponding occupations and chakra qualities are:

1. Lamar Breton (French poet + sexuality)
2. Sister Rose Augustine (Nun - security)
3. Kay Prior (Blind Jazz Singer - courage)
4. Linda Lee (Country/Western Songwriter - love)
5. Doctor Jane Gooding (English neurosurgeon - will)
6. Nadia Grozmolov (Russian choreographer - intuition)
7. Hilda Mahler (Karate Black Belt - bliss)

In the tradition of "Bad Painting" I believe that Linda Montano has developed a school of "Bad Performing" or "Bad Acting." All of the

characters in LEARNING TO TALK are quite funny because they are parodies of themselves. The poetry of Breton is comically bad, Sister Rose demonstrates the vacuous nature of believing in sin, Kay Prior belongs on the Gong Show, Linda Lee writes truly bad songs, and instructs others how to do the same (if you send \$2 to \$5 to her folks' place in Florida). Doctor Gooding is the most illogical choice to present Eastern medicine and Shamanism to the West, Nadia's choreography is a cliché made worse by the fact that her luggage is temporarily lost, and Hilda Mahler is a disembodied voice.

There is, however, something endearing about these characters. Perhaps it is their comical weakness that appeals to us (most display a touching vulnerability). Montano performs with an engaging lack of self-consciousness, and holds our attention. Structurally, the tape resembles nothing so much as late night local television programming and commercials, the only tape by Montano that owes much to broadcast TV.

CHARACTERS - LEARNING TO TALK is directly related to "Seven Years of Living Art," Montano's current long-term performance that is based on the chakra system. Although the live performance does not hold fast to the exact character, and adds other criteria for successful practice that the tape does not deal with (color, tone, duration), it provides a basis on tape for further performance work. And it raises a compelling question.

The chakra system is ancient and Eastern. The adoption of this system is sincere and based on Montano's experience with meditation and a long-

standing commitment to the study of Eastern culture and religion. "Seven Years of Living Art" is dedicated to Montano's meditation teacher, Doctor Mishra. Montano's performance is based on a formal discipline thousands of years old.

The question then becomes if all of this discipline derives from the East, the Ancient East, why are all of the characters from the industrial West? Is it a statement about the transfer of wisdom from one culture to another? Or is it a statement about the artist herself -- internalizing wisdom while surviving in a culture full of comical stereotypes? It would appear that the cultural/religious contradictions that the artist dealt with in MITCHELL'S DEATH, PRIMAL SCENES and ANOREXIA NERVOSA are on the way to being resolved. If Linda Montano can couple serious meditation with country/western music, the chakra system with a witless nun, religious visualization with bad poetry, it is possible that she has solved the mystery of how to live in the world. Laugh on the outside. Learn on the inside.

The tape, KARATE EXAM, is to the video work of Linda Montano what chess was to Marcel Duchamp. Montano is a serious student of karate, and in this tape she is being tested by composer Pauline Oliveros, herself a black belt and teacher. Linda Montano is being tested to determine if she is worthy of attaining a higher degree of green belt. When Montano is called upon to display her familiarity with formal katas, we see an intense concentration and confidence coupled with tentative and sometimes clumsy physical movement. When Montano is called upon to "fight" Oliveros, she loses confidence, afraid perhaps to inadvertently hurt her "opponent." It is only when the artist is instructed to improvise her own movements that concentration and movement are one. The grace of the moves come out of a place of self-creation,

a space for all of the training and the instinct to work together.
Linda Montano is free to invent a new persona - Linda Montano,
black belt.

F O O T N O T E S

1. Richard Schechner; ESSAYS ON PERFORMANCE THEORY:1970-1976
(New York, Drama Book Specialists, 1977) p. 140
2. Schechner, p. 91