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CATHY WEIS

AND HER

ELECTRONIC

EYE

BY ELIZABETH ZIMMER

view dance/video collaborations with alarm. Dance is large and living; television is small and canned. Jerking my attention between tubes and live performers fatigues and irritates me. If God had wanted people to dance on television, she'd have made us all seven inches high.

But when Cathy Weis is involved in the process, I find myself sucked in, often against my will. Her thoughtful manipulations of time and imagery broaden, rather than diminish, the scale of a performance.

Weis is a small, sharp-featured woman who until recently resembled a Russian immigrant as she bundled her cameras and equipment around Manhattan's several experimental dance spaces. Now she looks like a countess; the wavy dark hair she used to plait down her back has been reshaped into a chic pyramid.

Writing about her, I've been subjected to the basic Weis collaborative process, a gabby, relaxed, ongoing odyssey around the city, trading anecdotes, histories, views of process, views of our interior regions. We've shared some key experiences: a Russian-Jewish background, a Bennington education, attempts to work on the West Coast. And here we both are, struggling to survive in Manhattan by translating the work of

dancers into other media.

Weis (she pronounces it *wise*) grew up in Louisville and Prospect, Kentucky, dancing ballet. From 1964 to 1966, she was a principal dancer in Fernand Naut's Louisville Ballet Company. Before she arrived at Bennington, she'd never been out of Kentucky. "It was hard, at first, dancing there, switching from ballet to modern dance." Wendy Perron, Risa Jaroslow, and Lisa Nelson, all of whom met her then and collaborate with her now, remember the time she made an environmental work in the basement of a Bennington studio, transforming the space into an elaborate fun house.

"The piece completely transgressed the system there," says Perron. "It was the first performance art I'd ever seen. She got hordes of people to do it. Cathy subverts expectations, in real life and in art."

According to Perron, with whom Weis collaborated on the video segments of *Standard Deviation*, "She's always looking for what's real, and is suspicious of hype. Cathy has a gift for seeing each thing as it is, never pushing it to be anything it isn't. She has a very broad yet rigorous eye."

After Bennington, Weis toured Canada as a member of a bluegrass band. Then she moved to California.

She tap-danced in a cabaret act, ran a dance studio in Sausalito, performed tap duets with Camden Richman, and did contact improvisation with Nita Little. She also worked in stained glass. I found out all this by commandeering a copy of her résumé; she doesn't really like to talk about herself and parried my every question to her with a question of her own.

She came to concentrate on video after a foot injury forced her to stop dancing in 1979. "I couldn't walk for two years. I had to do something. It was driving me crazy." While the foot was healing, she spent time in Kentucky, taping her grandmother, who was then 95, in her home with family and friends; she got hooked on videotape then.

Largely self-taught as a video artist, she drew great inspiration from a three-week course she took with Robert Frank in 1984. "Frank had done this tape about himself and his family, in half-inch video, with real cheap equipment. Someone with something to say can say it on any tool, with the crudest of instruments. He was as honest as he could be.

"Tape is so cheap, you can shoot forever. Frank, who's primarily a filmmaker, was very discriminating about what he shot. And he's a photographer; he

waited for the moments. When I first started, I shot everything, experimented with everything, saved everything. It was good. I have the freedom to look back."

Since working with Frank, she says, "I try to be more clear about what I'm working on. Fellini, Joyce, they throw every fucking thing they love into their work. It's all experience: the more you do, the more you see the distance between what you're trying and how it's communicated to other people.

"Every collaboration is an intensified relationship with someone. The pressure exposes all kinds of things about the people involved. I get into things for three reasons: I like the person, I like the work, and I need the money. Most of my collaborations have been worked out with a choreographer. I'm rarely 'hired.'"

She free-lances as a tape editor and documentor, and teaches, to help support her personal artistic habits. She has plans for fabulous projects she can't afford to do, envisioning "a Calderesque carnival thing, a whole room full of monitors that bounce and roll." A first step toward this dream was *Monitor in a Tire*, a 1984 piece for which she adapted a truck tire to house a TV monitor and then explored the relationship between the rolling movement of the monitor in the tire and the movement of the images on the monitor.

Weis lives and works in a small studio apartment on West 16th Street, with great views out the 18th-floor casement windows and hardly any furniture. There's a big work table, a simple desk littered with equipment, and a few odd objects: gutted television cabinets, stained-glass slippers full of candle-stubs, a stuffed alligator. A table in the bathroom is stacked with art magazines and catalogs.

SYLVIA PLACHY



Cathy Weis

"People's voices fill with pleasure as they describe the process of working with her. They apply for grants to pay for her services. If the grants come through, it's great; if not, sometimes they do the work anyway, though it's likely to take longer. She takes her time getting to know her collaborators. For a recent tape on the elderly denizens of Washington Square Park, she sat with them until her presence was taken for granted before she began shooting, and got some astonishingly vivid, expressive, very personal portraits.

She does not let financial difficulties or the lack of adequate space and equipment interfere with her productivity. "When your work gets good, things come your way. Over the years, I've tried to keep simplifying. I'm in no hurry. I'm learning all the time."

Recent projects include working with choreographers to transform performances into video works that have their own integrity. Joe Pupello, director of the Manhattan Performing Ensemble, says, "It's exciting to sit down with someone who has the patience to edit with you, to see a piece in a new way, having a different effect. There are tons of people you can call to videotape a piece, but not many who can create a new product.

"Video is instant gratification. Cathy is working with us to change the sense of time of the piece, so people, especially grant-givers and presenters, can get a better idea of the whole thing. Often they look only at the first three minutes, so they don't get a sense of beginning, middle, and end." Weis and Pupello are planning to shoot *Stomach*

*Trouble*, an orgy of eating which premiered last year at P.S. 122, in a downtown restaurant, staging it specifically for video.

Randy Warshaw and Johanna Boyce have similar intentions in their collaborations with Weis. Warshaw: "Cathy knows dance. She does very sensitive, sensuous camera work. But videotaping the performance will not be the completed project. For a little more work, we'll have another piece."

Weis views her work as a mission, almost, "to save something you know is going to die: a moment, a person." Others concur. Boyce: "She's much more interested in video as an eye that can see humanely than in the tricks she can come up with." Weis will work with Boyce to transfer *Ties That*

*Bind*, her duet for Jennifer Miller and Susan Seizer, to videotape.

"It's an intimate piece," says Boyce. "It's important that the person taping not be invasive. I'd like to get it on video because it's not the best kind of touring piece. It's about a moment in a relationship, about living things. The relationship may not be there in 10 years. If we get it on video, it can always be what it was."

In early March, Weis taught a two-day workshop called "Fluid Video for Performance," to train artists in moving with the camera. Maria Manhattan, a longtime friend who took the course, says Weis "gave me strong direction, made it easier to get to my point a lot quicker, cut through the bullshit. She knows how to make something real tight."

(Several years ago, Weis participated in Manhattan's parody of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, which was called *Box Lunch* and honored "30 women of dubious distinction." Weis constructed the Joan of Arc box, which included many people around a fake fire, in which there was a french fry tied to a stake.)

Lisa Nelson, who lives in East Charleston, Vermont, exchanges "video postcards" with Weis. Composed of narrative ideas and subtexts made of one word and one image, the tape is both an electronic notebook and a piece in itself. "It's been a sustaining way of keeping in touch," says Nelson, who was part of the five-woman team (the others were Weis, Perron, Christina Svane, and Paula Clements) that produced *Mobile Oeil*, a videodance collaboration at St. Mark's in 1984. All involved consider it a magnificent failure in which the deadline arrived before the product had jelled.

Wendy Perron admires the contradictions that abound in Weis's style. "She's an absurdist. She has a kind of deadly humor, which puts everything in jeopardy. You're really serious, and all of a sudden she gives you a look.

"She has a kind of wisdom surprising in someone who's joking all the time. She doesn't separate humanity and art. The only people she seems to really respect are babies and old people, who stand outside of society.

"She manages to be totally accepting and totally discriminating. She gets very strong fixes on things, but she doesn't impose her aesthetic. She's incredibly open; collaborating is just a way for us to enjoy each other."

In *Standard Deviation*, Perron and Weis aimed "to make something in which the two halves would be radically different, to incorporate video without interrupting the focus or diverting the energy. We let the video monitors be a light source. We knew we didn't want the video and dance going on at the same time. It was a challenge to keep the energy of the piece up because of the way the video would interrupt."

"Cathy always surprises me," remarks Jaroslow, who recently collaborated with her on *Heartthrob*, which explored the passage of time through the image of a heart melting in a hand. "She comes up with things that knock me out. We can work side by side comfortably, feeling our way. She knows how to be simple—most of the time that works best. She got me to strip a piece down a lot, and the more I took out, the better it worked. Her instincts about that always seem to be right. She was a dancer. Knowing all she knows about performing shapes how she visualizes. When she puts a video image together with performance, that's something she knows."

It's hard not to collaborate with Cathy Weis. She calls you up, invites you in, never rushes. She'll make herself at home, and then turn her sharp eye on the domestic arrangements. Sly, elfin, she's like a cross between your fairy godmother and one of the seven dwarves, helping you realize your vision and transform your work. ■