

"I LIKE CREATING THESE  
RADICAL CHANGES THAT MAKE  
YOU NOTICE YOUR HABITS."

# TV SUBLIME



Cathy Weis uses video like no one else in dance—as if the TV sets and screens gave her more bodies to choreograph, more conveyances to move

them in, and more room to play. ≈ *Gravity Twins* (1997) began with a 13-inch black-and-white television being passed through the audience from the back row to the stage. On it was the head of the choreographer, grousing: "I can't see! Coming through! Coming through! Hey, don't touch my hair!" And so on, until this talking head reached the two dancers onstage and delivered her critique: "You call that a show?"

Weis says she was just trying to set a tone. There's often a touch (or maybe a push) of antic irreverence in her work, but that's not all. Later in *Gravity Twins* came a moment—very brief, almost throwaway—when litter bearers traversed the stage, carrying a television between their poles as though it were the Ark of the Covenant. We never saw the screen, which faced the ceiling, and never heard its sound. But we knew that this emanation was a television by its glow, its aura of atomized color that, for all anyone knew, might have been a Coke ad. Weis had rendered it mysterious and sublime, a television transcendent.

"I like seeing TVs move in ways you don't normally see," says Weis, who's also rolled them across stages in tires and dropped them from ceilings on bungee cords. "We're very

conditioned to look at television in a certain way. See an electronic image—do not move your head. Stare into that TV. Fall in. It doesn't move around, doesn't interact with people, and doesn't swing through the air. I like creating these radical changes that make you notice your habits."

**LIVE PERFORMERS CANNOT COMPETE WITH** moving images. It's like witchcraft: Put a screen on a stage and an audience is soon glued to it, no matter what else is happening. Weis, however, keeps us watching the whole scene. One reason is that she likes creating illusions with her cameras, even as she reveals how the trick is done. Sort of.

In *A Bad Spot Hurts Like Mad* (2001), she danced in front of receding Chinese boxes projected on the back wall. The image of her own dancing figure appeared both right and left in each box, a split second behind her "live" movements, like an echo. The camera was visible onstage. "I saw somebody else do a similar thing with probably a \$20,000 machine," she says. But low budgets are the mother of invention. "This is just the camera pointing into its own image, into this screen, and then reversed from the projector." Now she tells us. What the audience understood at the time was some kind of relationship between performer, camera, and screen that was mesmerizing to watch.

A few years ago at the old Dixon Place on the Bowery, Weis brought a TV out to the tiny stage and turned on a tape of some performance set outside. The dancer was Scott

Heron, "a mainstay of my stuff," who capered and cavorted, then donned a skirt of clanking cans. We watched as, on camera, he climbed through a window. Which turned out to be our window. It was shocking. The whole thing had been a live feed from the Dixon Place roof. So the clank on our television actually entered the room, leading to that moment of surprised recognition Weis is always going for.

This week, Weis opens her season at Dance Theater Workshop with the culmination of a piece she's developed for over a decade, *An Abondanza in the Air*, and a new work, *Electric Haiku*. Weis begins to explain it—sort of. She gets up from the table in her tiny Chelsea apartment, walks out an entrance, lies on the floor to illustrate where Heron will be in relation to a camera, and goes to her two computers to call up an image.

Of course, she wants everything to remain a surprise, "so I don't know what the heck you're going to write about."

**WEIS HAS BEEN DANCING SINCE SHE WAS** three. At 13, the earliest age she could enter the Louisville Ballet, she became a soloist. She moved to post-Cunningham technique at Bennington. In San Francisco, she did contact improv, learned tap, and competed in disco-dancing contests. In the late '70s, she says, "I started having these falls. I broke some bones in my foot, and I wasn't feeling so good." She stopped dancing—and once you leave something, she points out, "you kind of lose your thread."

Weis fed her need to create by making stained glass, even winning a competition. And she took up video. When she moved to New York in the '80s, she began documenting many other dancers. Now neat rows of tapes line a wall and fill a closet. She points out a stained-glass alligator and plugs in what appears to be a worn sneaker, actually a stained-glass lamp.

As 1989 began, Weis finally got a diagnosis for the insistent weakness on her right side. Multiple sclerosis. "After I was diagnosed, and I kind of fell apart, I had a big epiphany: If you're going to do something, you better do it, because you don't have all the time in the world." She got started late, she says, presenting her first piece in New York in 1995, when she was already in her forties. For a while, she says, everyone was writing about her illness. She thinks she may have talked too much about it. "The one thing I know is that I wanted to keep making things. That's what *Electric Haiku* is about. Things stop you, and then you change your path a little bit. Outside forces change the haiku. Whether it's war or disease or growing older, it's all the same. Something out of your control."

Weis retrieves the 13-inch battery-operated television she uses in *Abondanza* ("abundance"). She's been working on this piece for over 10 years with an old friend, dancer-videographer Lisa Nelson. Weis shows me the plastic shelf they each added under their sets to hold the batteries and the handles screwed to the side. "It used to feel so much lighter," she says. "I'm pretty much using one arm. I said to Lisa, 'Let's do *Abondanza* again. It'll make us finish it. We better do it while we can still lift the televisions.'"

Weis has monitors, but does not own a regular television. "I would probably have it on all the time." TV is just a tool, she says. And like other serious videographers, she's given it a higher calling. She puts on some old version of *Abondanza*, describing as we watch: "It keeps going back and forth between reality in the darkness, dreams in the light. So suddenly you're in a different dream or you're in an interview with somebody or you're eating dinner. It keeps shifting like that, and the TV's a part of it. The television keeps telling you to look at things differently." ▣

## THE VIDEO/ CHOREOGRAPHY OF CATHY WEIS

ON EDGE By C.CARR

the village **VOICE**

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