

P R E F A C E

Setting Questions to Music

One of my favorite passages in these conversations is Meredith Monk's description of how she works. This is what she says: "I always allowed myself to think of my forms as bottles, but my process as a liquid. If there was something from the bottle before that I hadn't totally realized, I allowed myself to put that into the next bottle. Maybe I would develop it a little bit more." Those words reflect so much about her way of working—the feeling for form, utter clarity, process before product, economy of purpose, trust. At its core a cumulative, step-by-step path to art-making.

What is that quality of endeavor we call "art"? How does an artist describe all the elements of the self and the world that create an artwork? In *Conversations with Meredith Monk* we explore these questions, leading us into unexpected realms. Mostly, we sat down at her kitchen table or my dining room table and began to talk, to see where our thoughts would take us. In embarking on this volume I was fortunate to have such an articulate conversation partner whose body of work in music, theatre, performance art, visual art, movement, video, and film extends five decades, prompting our discussions to consider historical legacies as well as the contemporary, within the expansive contours of a long career. For, what can be understood without bringing the two together? How does an artist start to take a measure of where she is now in relation to where she began many years ago? Wisdom is the other side

of virtuosity, an attribute I welcome in knowing an artist's work over decades. Who is this woman sitting before me, in the twenty-first century, someone I as a young writer first saw perform in the mid-seventies? How does she do what she does?

Monk entered the arts scene in New York, in 1964, upon graduating from Sarah Lawrence College. Part of our conversation recalls the work she saw, what she performed in, what she read, and the early work she made. A multidisciplinary artist from the start, she experimented with live performance and technology, in as many forms as she could develop, questioning the nature of perception. There is also the childhood and college preparation that got her to this point. She was always living in art. Most revealing are the moments when Monk talks about the struggle of a young artist to find her artistic identity and to learn how to work with elements of performance and media. Sometimes the joy of discovery is mixed with the pain of rejection.

What's apparent at the outset of these conversations is that her primary method is to ask questions. I like very much that our exchanges are punctuated by the kinds of queries she makes for different works over the decades. Monk says that once she gets the questions she is asking about a piece, then she's on her way. For the recent *On Behalf of Nature* the question was, "How do you make an ecological artwork, thinking of all the physical materials and not creating waste?" For *Education of the Girlchild* it was, "How do you make a non-verbal portrait of one woman's life?" For *Songs of Ascension*, she considered: "How do you get people out of that audience situation to become a congregation?" Her bottom line question: "Are we

going to have objects?” Objects have a syntax, a language, like every other element in a performance.

Monk trusts her basic process: to find out what the world of the work needs and what its principles are. Then, to understand what is right for that world and to bring it into existence. She speaks of “beginner’s mind”—going into a project with an open mind so that something new can come through. That is not to say there isn’t any fear or risk. Monk has plenty to offer about confronting the unknown and searching for the path into a work, available liquid notwithstanding.

Yet, the theatrical works are not weighed down by any sense of ponderousness. I’ve always enjoyed the lightness and humor in them, no matter the theme: quirky turns by the performers, witty songs, instrumentalists who lie on the floor. It must also be a great pleasure for the splendid company members, many of them working with Monk for decades, to sit as they do along the periphery of a performance space, watching each other perform, before getting up for their own turns. They seem more like a community than a cast. “My group is still part of my body,” the artist observes.

What one understands from these conversations is just how demanding is the *work* of getting any piece to completion. Monk’s precision in describing how she develops the space in a theatrical event or film is quite formidable in its remembered detail, particularly in the comments on earlier works such as *16 Millimeter Earrings*, *Juice*, and *Quarry*. Time and space structures set their foundation, the staging ideas often worked out beforehand in line drawings, maps, or charts. Struggle is a necessary feature of the process. Nowadays it impacts the musical

in relation to the theatrical, as increasingly music composition comes to the forefront. The music is becoming more and more free-ranging in new dimensions of sound and feeling. Something she admits to still figuring out is the less complex staging that is the result of that development. Like any artist with decades of experience, Monk values the essentials, only what is needed. Work with the givens. Similarly, she talks about a special visual condition she has, known as strabismus, which makes the retinal experience different from seeing objects in a more tactile, three-dimensional sense. This way of seeing is reflected in a certain layering in the pieces.

At their heart is the idea of weaving. Such a metaphor refers not only to the frequent mingling of music, theatre, media, and movement in them but also to the more Buddhist notion of the interpenetration of perception and sentient beings. Monk refers often of the Buddhist principles in her work, especially in linking art practice to spiritual practice. For her, performance space is sacred space, a meditative space. An offering to the audience. Her theatre is a deliberate alternative to the speeded-up, distracted way of contemporary life that, she believes, prevents people from direct experience. Rather, it encourages a certain mindfulness and the beauty of quietude. The music, the human voice, grows more astonishing in the variousness of its presence, bringing forth a new kind of music-theatre that honors the ancient and the contemporary, the liminal and the here and now. What is one's work doing in terms of the world? she wonders. Philosophic worldview metamorphoses into performance ethics, a feeling of grace that encompasses our world and worlds unknown.

A final question. “Part of the strategy of being an artist is, How do you create an experience for people that allows them to see and hear in a new way? It opens up the possibilities of perception, so that when you go back into your life you might be more open to the moments of life, and see things you haven’t been aware of before.”

What things? I ask.