

## LINDA MONTANO: ALWAYS CREATIVE

SITE SANTA FE  
1606 PASEO DE PERALTA, SANTA FE

*My technique for feeling life's ecstasy has been negation, taking something away, discipline.... I am in a perpetual state of letting go of control.*

—Linda Montano

### IN 1986, THE NEW MUSEUM IN NEW YORK

opened the exhibition *Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life*, curated by the museum's founder and director, the late Marcia Tucker. This show included such artists as Marina Abramovic and Ulay, James Lee Byars, Spalding Gray, Tehching Hsieh, and Linda Montano. It was at this show that I first saw Montano's compelling and haunting video *Mitchell's Death*. For all its focus on mortality, it proved to be my own point of entry into a show that rigorously investigated aesthetic counterpoints to a wider art world of commercialism, media overload, art's co-option by entertainment and fashion, and the art world's seeming lack of a moral compass.

It's worth referencing the *Choices* show because most of Montano's creative life as a performance artist has been an attempt to blur the boundaries between art and life, and her retrospective at SITE Santa Fe—curated by Janet Dees—loops back to her first sustained performance, if you will, as a would-be Catholic nun. Besides becoming anorexic

in the convent, this experience set the tone for the artist's inclination toward a highly disciplined control of her mind-body systems in order to reach a heightened state of being, plus Montano's spiritual edge is part of her driving wheel.

By the time *Choices* opened, Montano had already begun, in 1984, a work with a multi-year duration, *Seven Years of Living Art*. This piece was based on the seven energy centers, or chakras, of the body, and each year the artist would color-code aspects of her life—such as her wardrobe—to match the seven colors associated with the chakras: red for the base of the spine, then yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, and white at the top of the head. In addition, the artist would stay a minimum of three hours a day in a space matching the color of the chakra in question, listen to one certain pitch for a minimum of seven hours a day, and, for one year, wear only clothes that matched the color aligned with

the chakra under investigation. But Montano's art-life piece had a public component as well and that's where the New Museum comes in again. Once a month, for seven years, Montano sat in a room in the museum painted to match the color of her clothes for that year, and she met one-on-one with individuals who desired to engage with her in art/life discussions and counseling.

At SITE, the largest component of Montano's retrospective is devoted to documentation from *Seven Years of Living Art*. Each year's uniform hangs on the wall, and on the floor, directly in front of the colorful garment, is a bundle of clothes matched to that year's hue. Besides the clothes, which poignantly carry a strong sense of the artist's presence as well as her absence, there is a video that deconstructs the spiritual rationale for this long and intricate performance. In it we see the artist's tattooed back marked with circles denoting the chakras positioned up and

down her spine, but the most interesting part is the live snakes that wind around her neck and back and symbolically refer to the coiled Tantric energy that is supposedly located at the base of the spine.

Death is an eternal mystery and, on a fundamentally deep level, the loss of someone we love is never easily integrated into our landscapes of memory. The power of loss is palpable in Montano's video *Mitchell's Death*, which is about the shotgun accident that took the life of the artist's ex-husband Mitchell Payne, in 1977. This is the strongest and most incantatory of Montano's works. In a voice-over monologue, the artist relates the moment of learning about Payne's accident; traveling to Kansas where he lived; dealing with her ex-husband's family; examining Payne's body in the morgue; and unveiling her confusion and grief. The attempt to mirror the death and its impact on Montano results in a decidedly profound artwork. In the video, her face morphs from something ambiguous and skull-like to a face dotted with acupuncture needles and slowly back to a soft-focus skull. The artist recites her litany of painful loss in a one-note drone that emphasizes the strangeness and horror surrounding Payne's death. If Montano were to be remembered for only one work, this would be it.

The late art critic and writer Thomas McEvilley has written extensively on the potency of artists determined to create situations and gestures that have "dissolved the traditional boundaries of art activity and set new ones within the limits of the life-field." Establishing fluid boundaries within the "life-field" is at the heart of all performance work, and what results in this mind-expanding genre are images of a variable self splitting open like a seed. In 1983, Montano collaborated with well-known performance artist Tehching Hsieh in a yearlong piece where the artists were tied together by a ten-foot rope but were forbidden to touch. Hsieh commented about this piece after it was over and said, "It's more than art—you have to be a human being and an artist. It's like [the movie] *Rashomon* in that everyone's point of view and understanding of the same thing will be different." In thinking about performance art, the work eventually comes to rest in the mind of the viewer, which alters the distances between what is art, what is life, and what it means to be a witness to phenomena that arise between the two forces.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*, video still, 1977

