

# Art in America

## Exhibition Reviews

JUNE/JULY 2013

### LINDA MARY MONTANO

SITE Santa Fe

This exhibition, “Linda Mary Montano: Always Creative,” revisited the artist’s performance-based practice from 1969 to the present. A central figure in the “art as life” lineage of Duchamp and Kaprow, Montano made work in the early ’70s that reflected conceptual approaches in the air. Like many first-wave feminist performance artists, Montano often assumed various personas, allowing her to be simultaneously in and outside her body.

Rather than documentary footage, curator Janet Dees wisely emphasized still images of Montano’s performances (which capture the feeling of the originals) as well as character-based video works. In the 45-minute video *Learning to Talk* (1978), a costumed Montano enacts seven characters, including a cowgirl and a karate instructor. The rather disturbing piece *Hillary and Barbara Talk* (2000) juxtaposes footage of artist Martha Wilson as Barbara Bush with that of Montano as a deranged Hillary Clinton carrying out an ayurvedic nasal cleansing. There is no conversation between the two first ladies.

Performances like *Handcuffed for Three Days* (in collaboration with Tom Marioni), 1973, and *Three-Day Blindfold* (1974) were minimally represented by video and photo-text documentation. Oddly missing was any sign of Montano’s 1983–84 extreme endurance work with Tehching Hsieh, whereby the two artists were tied together by an 8-foot rope for a year.

*Mitchell’s Death* (1977), a grainy black-and-white video mourning her ex-husband’s unexpected death in 1977, remains one of Montano’s most powerful works. The cropped framing of Montano’s face pierced with acupuncture needles, eyes cast down, and the out-of-sync monotone chant relating the moment of learning about Mitchell’s death and the days following calls up anguished head shots of Renée Falconetti in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 silent masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Created as a means to cope with loss, *Mitchell’s Death* is a moving example of art influenced by, and in service to, life.

In 1984, Montano began *Seven Years of Living Art, 1984–91*, the first of two cycles to engage the seven energy centers, or chakras, and their corresponding colors, sounds, glands and psychic states. Each year was dedicated to a chakra. Montano wore only clothing of the color associated with that chakra, spent a prescribed number of hours daily in a space of that color listening to one tone and made one drawing to represent the year’s experience. In addition, once a month for seven years, Montano conducted sessions titled *Art/Life Counseling* in the windowed project space of New York’s New Museum. During her absence, a monitor adorned with a wig featuring a close-up of Montano’s face functioned as her surrogate. *Another Seven*



Partial view of Linda Mary Montano’s *Fourteen Years of Living Art, 1984–98*, documentation and relics from performance, colored clothing, 14 drawings; at SITE Santa Fe.

*Years of Living Art, 1991–98* repeated the chakra experiences of the previous seven years in reverse.

At SITE, these two works were presented together as a visually dramatic installation. Seven colored jumpsuits hanging on black walls stood in for both the performing body and the performance. Instruction labels, the 14 drawings and a video about the first seven years by Maida Barbour (1994) were among the elements on view. Montano conducted *Art/Life Counseling* sessions during the opening and intermittently via Skype. The rest of the time, a wigged monitor playing an *Art/Life Counseling* video was installed in a room painted with blackboard paint, where viewers were encouraged to express themselves on the walls. The head-size monitor with Montano’s made-up and distorted face was just wacky and weird enough to suggest an undercurrent of something a bit out of control.

A new two-part durational performance, commissioned by SITE, brought the documentation and performance relics to life. On opening day, Montano sang along to Linda Ronstadt songs for seven hours on a scissor lift in the galleries, ascending one level per hour. At the exhibition’s closing, she was stationed on the lift outside of SITE and descended hourly, singing to Raka Mukherjee’s Hindu devotional music.

Montano continually documents, re-presents and re-contextualizes herself and her work, destabilizing authorship through interactivity and gifting. The exhibition labels and catalog-cum-performance art workbook are part of Montano’s creative project. Both prompted visitors to create their own art/life performances based on themes explored by the artist. Ultimately the exhibition, like Montano’s work, was about agency and the belief that art can make a difference in life.

—Harmony Hammond