

The Virtual Dancer

Embodying the Invisible

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

In this chancy world, we take comfort in small certainties. Television sets, for example, don't sashay around our living rooms. Performers in a theater don't maul the folks who pay to watch them. Tell that to Cathy Weis, whose video performance works undermine such assumptions. One of her wackiest achievements in *Gravity Twins* involves having live performers argue and tussle with a virtual opponent, one we presume was taped in advance.

We're watching Annie Iobst and Jennifer Miller, two of Downtown dance's most endearingly raunchy performers, in what might be described as a competitive circus act without tricks. A querulous voice from the back of the Kitchen interrupts them. "I can't see," it complains over and over. "Could you please pass me down?" The voice is coming from a fancily framed monitor on a long wire, and as the audience obediently does what it's asked, we can see that the speaker is Weis—or rather, Weis's black-and-white head, life-size. Once in the front row, she starts commenting on the dancers ("Are they sisters?"). She doesn't like what they're doing and tells them to stop. They go ballistic, yelling and snarling. "This is one head that's gonna roooolll tonight!"

Once they get their hands on the monitor, they do roll the head, swing it around, all but toss it through the air, while "Weis"—her mouth weirdly in and out of sync with her words—

howls her confusion and alarm. Beyond the technical play with past and present, live and taped, the whole scene is startlingly transgressive. Behind it lurks the vision of Salome cuddling the head of John the Baptist. But it also tweaks the status quo of performance. Weis, the supposed spectator, is the actual choreographer in charge; yet her dancers are controlling her disembodied image. That Weis appears all but powerless in her own creation has further resonance. Once a dancer as well as a video artist, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1990. In this section of *Gravity Twins*, she is wildly mobile; others "dance" her.

In comparison, a quartet for Jennifer Monson, Ishmael Houston Jones, and their simultaneously taped images seems merely lovely and visually provocative. Shot from overhead and from one corner, these wonderful performers—improvising, to judge from their watchfulness—appear both in the flesh and projected, life-size, onto a wheelable screen. Yet in this segment of *Gravity Twins* too, Weis shows us events that we know contravene reality: a filmed hand touches a filmed body, while the two live performers remain apart. In a shadow dance with only the screen and a light source, Monson, by shifting her location and position, can become a callipygian fertility goddess, head tiny, hips immense.

The scene for the third pair of

"twins," Weis and Scott Heron (both live), is less concise, more labored, but it juxtaposes two startling visions: Monson, the knockout dancer, immobilized on video as a "pupa"—hair and flaking white costume seeming to blow upward (the image of her hanging by her feet is projected upside down)—and Weis, the one with a limited movement palette, harnessed and soaring overhead—a born-again butterfly.

So-called multimedia works, in which live performers are juxtaposed with onscreen ones, go back more than 30 years. Some dances, whether decorative or provocative or both, have simply presented two perspectives on the same event. In Robert Joffrey's 1967 rock ballet *Astarte*, Trinetta Singleton and Maximiliano Zomosa performed a ritualistic copulation in front of a huge film of them going at it. In *Cross-fade* (1974), Alwin Nikolais, that magician of light and dance, projected the performers' naked bodies onto their flesh-colored leotards. The dancers in Lucinda Childs's 1979 *Dance* were multiplied by Sol LeWitt's simultaneously projected film of the piece. Other works, like Meredith Monk's 1966 solo *16 Millimeter Earrings*, have used film to give a psychological dimension to the onstage reality, making the film and dance elements completely interdependent. Weis's use of herself on video creates a further bold possibility: the virtual performer as a fully interactive presence.