Reestablishing Unity: Postmodern Connectivity in the Art of Meredith Monk

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Meredith Monk is often considered one of the pioneers of intermedia composition and performance practice. Although her many titles include composer, choreographer, director, performer, and film maker, Monk prefers to think of herself as a composer in all fields.[1] In her 1987 essay, "Mosaic," Monk writes, "I think of myself as a composer: of music, of movement, and of images."[2] Prolific and outspoken, Monk has been the subject of many published interviews in which she clearly states her view of multiple artistic media as connected, related, and perhaps not as separate as they are often considered. The concept of connectivity is present in her work on many levels, not only in the intermedia nature of her work. Monk explores the connections between people, the environment, the mind and body, artistic styles, and periods of time; an exploration that is exemplified by her intermedia practice.

Intermedia composition is deeply rooted in Monk's artistic education and upbringing. Born with an optic condition that affected her balance and sense of dimension, Monk had certain movement difficulties during her childhood.[3] As a means of practicing movement and coordination, her mother, a professional singer, enrolled her in Dalcroze Eurhythmics – a program that teaches music through movement. Monk credits Dalcroze Eurhythmics with instilling in her an intrinsic connection between movement and music, the voice and the body. At Sarah Lawrence, Monk continued her interdisciplinary training, studying dance, theater, and classical European vocal technique. In the introduction to her interview with Monk, Jennifer

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[1] Jennifer W. Kelly, *In her own words: Conversations with composers in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 175.

[2] Meredith Monk, "Mosaic," in *Further Steps: fifteen choreographers on modern dance*, ed. Connie Kreemer (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 252.

[3] Babeth M. Vanloo and Meredith Monk, *Meredith Monk: inner voice* (New York: First-Run Features, 2010) DVD.

Kelly writes that, "Monk's realization that she could treat her voice with the same flexibility as her body was a crucial breakthrough," she continues that, following her classical vocal training at Sarah Lawrence, "she began to develop her own vocabulary through experimentation with what have come to be known as extended vocal techniques."[4]

The extended vocal techniques performed by Monk and her vocal ensemble are one of the defining elements of her musical career. The instrumental music that often accompanies the vocal foreground is characterized by a highly repetitive texture that is often harmonically consonant. The repetitive nature of the instrumental layer often leads to the conception of a postmodern aesthetic, particularly one that is aligned with minimalist music such as that of composers Steve Reich and Phillip Glass, to whom Monk is frequently compared. Monk rejects this categorization of her work as minimalist, stating in response, "I hate any kind of school or category and I have spent my whole life basically fighting the idea of categorizing at all."[5] When asked to position herself in regard to other artists and composers, or to cite those most influential on her work, Monk has cited figures such as Hildegard von Bingen, John Cage, Jean Cocteau, Erik Satie, and choreographer Bessie Schönberg whom she studied with at Sarah Lawrence. A unique combination of influences that, although aligned with the European and American musical tradition, does not point to any movement in particular.

Monk is not opposed to the minimalist sound, however, and she notes that the motivation behind minimalism, a reaction to the European model of "separating the mind from the body," is a large part of her motivation as well.[6] Despite similar motivations, Monk posits that her methods are significantly different than minimalist methods: the minimalists turned to

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[4] Kelly, *In her own words*, 176.
[5] Jamake Highwater, "Interview," in *Art Performs life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones,* ed.
  Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, and Bill T. Jones (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), 89.
[6] Ibid.

polyrhythms and patterns, whereas Monk was working on ways of using the voice as a method for experimenting with form and the mind-body connection. Monk notes that her use of repetition, "was much more the way that folk music uses repetition. It's like a kind of carpet that was the ground base of something from which my voice could be totally free to leap, to spin, to skip, to do anything, and this instrumental base was a stable, a constant."[7]

Although Monk's methods may not be minimalist as some assume, it is her motivation to reconnect mind and body and to depart from the earlier European model that positions her as a postmodernist nonetheless. Monk's postmodernism may be better defined by her philosophy and practice of various modes of connectivity than by the structural characteristics of her music which, although important, may be misleading. Monk applies multiple types and levels of connectivity within her work which can all be linked to commonly recognized postmodern ideals that reflect a reaction to or against modernist ideals characteristic of first half of the twentieth century.

In 1983, Monk first published a mission statement in five parts outlining her artistic goals in terms of the type of art that she wishes to create.[8] Each of the five parts of the mission statement reflect various commitments to connectivity and postmodern ideals. Monk's philosophy, methods, and numerous works relate to these goals and demonstrate her motivation to "reestablish unity"[9] between modes of artistic expression and to, "[create] works that thrive at the intersection of music and movement, image and object, light and sound in an effort to discover and weave together new modes of perception."[10]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] A revised version of Monk's "mission statement" was published in 1993.

[9] Meredith Monk, "Mission Statement," in *Meredith Monk*, ed. Deborah Jowitt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17.

[10] Meredith Monk, "Meredith Monk," accessed May 3, 2015. http://meredithmonk.org/.

Connectivity is itself a vague concept. In the context of postmodernism, the term may be used to describe an appeal to the emotions, a connection between the author and the audience on a personal level that is facilitated by the work. This concept of connectivity is in opposition to the depersonalization of art associated with modernism, in which the artwork is autonomous and the 19th century model of emotional appeal is rejected. However, if we consider connectivity in the broadest sense of the term, an interconnection, then it is possible that interpersonal connectivity is only one type of connectivity. This broad definition arguably more fruitful in a discussion of postmodernism, in that it allows for the creation of additional categories of connectivity, each of which relate strongly to commonly accepted tenets of postmodernism and which may help to situate those tenets as reactions to modernism.

I present here six categories, or types, of postmodern connectivity that can be used to describe connective motivations of Meredith Monk and other artists who exhibit such postmodern commitments: intermedia, interdisciplinary, pluralistic, person, interpersonal, social/environmental.

Intermedia connectivity describes the use of multiple artistic media (visual, auditory, movement, etc.) an a highly integrated fashion. The term "intermedia" became prominent following its use by Fluxus artist, Dick Higgins, in 1965[11]. Contrary to the term "multimedia," which is commonly used to refer to works that use multiple types of media, intermedia implies a unity and high degree of integration far beyond mere presence.[12] In terms of postmodernism, intermedia art allows for the possibility of greater comprehensibility as well as possible engagement with the body. This is contrary to a modernist aesthetic which is more concerned

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[11] David Bithell, "Intermedia art," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online.* Oxford University Press, accessed April 1, 2015. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/A2241749.
[12] Ibid.

with complexity and structure than comprehensibility and which is characterized by bodily disassociation.

Monk's 1966 piece *16 MillimeterEarrings* is an example of intermedia connectivity in its use of music, dance, film, and visual art that are used in an integrative way to create texture and dimension. Monk notes that she conceived of this piece largely in visual art terms. She states, "I was thinking of the stage as a canvas, thinking like a painter. I worked with a sense of the tactility of surfaces and layers in a literal, physical way."[13] Her process of applying concepts from one art form to another implies a profound integration indicative of intermedia.

"Interdisciplinary" is another term that is often confused with intermedia. In reference to art or artists, "interdisciplinary" often refers to work within more than one artistic discipline. This is a logical use of the term, particularly when describing an artist as opposed to a work. However, the term may be broadened to include disciplines other than the arts. Such other interdisciplinary relationships might be the combination of music with computer science and technology or with medical science in the case of music therapy. The range of possibilities in interdisciplinary work in turn broadens the possibilities of the implied "purpose" of music. Whereas the modernists prefers music for its own sake, interdisciplinary work may lend itself to an extramusical functions.

Pluralistic connectivity refers to the acceptance of the validity of many forms and styles , as well as the presence of multiple styles within a work or body of work. The value system of high vs. low art, significant to the elitist notions of modernism, is challenged by pluralism; often elements of popular music and art music are used within a single work. It is important to

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[13] Deborah Jowitt, "Interview," in *Art Performs life: Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, Bill T. Jones,* ed. Merce Cunningham, Meredith Monk, and Bill T. Jones (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1998), 71.

distinguish the appropriation or use of forms that may be considered "low" art forms in a postmodern aesthetic is without commentary on the value of that art form.

Whereas interpersonal connectivity refers to the emotional or personal connection between author and audience mentioned previously, personal connectivity refers to connections between different aspects of oneself. This holistic view of the self as a physical, intellectual, and spiritual being, in which none of those aspects is preeminent and all are deeply interconnected, is a strong departure from the modernist view of music as a purely intellectual and auditory activity. Personal connectivity in postmodern art often goes beyond an acceptance of the relevance of the physical and spiritual self, toward a motivation to highlight that connection. Personal connectivity may also be expanded to include ideas about gender or other characteristics (such as a recognition of male and female qualities within oneself – a characteristic that Monk has attributed to the voice) as well as qualities that are shared between humans and nonhuman entities.

Artwork that employs social/environmental connectivity is engaged with social or political ideas or ideas about time and place. This is meant to describe a significant link to external factors. An example of this is activist artwork, which is meant to elicit awareness or change regarding a social or political concept. Cultural characteristics may also play an important role in socially connective works, such as Monk's exploration of how different nationalities deal with war in *Quarry: An Opera*. An example of environmental connectivity is site-specific work, in which the environment is intrinsic to the artwork. Monk has composed many site-specific pieces, which are designed to highlight certain aspects of the environment. In *Break*, for example, the architecture of the gallery space plays a significant role in the formal structure of the piece.

Although, as the term implies, connectivity is based on the concept of forming connections, we may also think of it as eliminating boundaries and divisions. If modernism aims to compartmentalize and separate popular and art music forms, the mind and the body, the mind and the emotions, male and female, etc., then connectivity defines a postmodern response to those boundaries by elimination.

In Meredith Monk's work, the elimination of boundaries may be a more apt description of her connective motivations. The five parts of Monk's mission statement, below, present goals to disassemble boundaries and to rebuild old connections, to reestablish a unity that has been rejected or ignored.

"To create an art that breaks down boundaries between the disciplines, an art which in turn becomes a metaphor for opening up thought, perception, experience."[14]

Monk's interdisciplinary mindset is exemplified by her conception of the voice. In "Notes on the Voice," Monk describes the voice in physical terms. She writes of, "the dancing voice. The voice as flexible as the spine," and, "the body of the voice/the voice of the body."[15]

Monk attributes personally and interpersonally connective characteristics to the voice, "the voice as a means of becoming, portraying, embodying, incarnating another spirit," "the voice as a direct line to the emotions. The full spectrum of emotion. Feelings that we have no words for," "the voice as a manifestation of the self, persona or personas," and "the voice as language."[16]

The absence of text in favor of non-linguistic syllables in Monk's vocal music is a testament to her commitment for allowing for multiple perceptions and experiences. Sensing that

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[14]Meredith Monk, "Mission Statement," 17.
[15] Meredith Monk, "Notes on the Voice," in *Meredith Monk*, ed. Deborah Jowitt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 56.
[16] Ibid.

text and language might create barriers of understanding and reduce interpersonal connectivity, Monk opted for another type of vocal performance. She tells Deborah Jowitt, "Right from the beginning I sensed that the voice could speak louder and more eloquently than a particular text could; that the voice itself was a language that spoke directly and had the possibility of universality. So I felt that words just got in the way."

"An art that is inclusive, rather than exclusive; that is expansive, whole, human, multidimensional."[17]

The language used in this goal is somewhat vague. An "inclusive, rather than exclusive" art may be referring to pluralistic connectivity or an acceptance or inclusion of various types and styles of art and music. Monk has demonstrated pluralistic connectivity in her work and noted the influence of popular forms on her work, particularly of rock and folk music. It is also possible that Monk's use of "inclusive" may be referring to accessibility as opposed to pluralism, which is aligned with interpersonal connectivity rather than pluralistic connectivity.

It is unclear what exactly Monk means by "expansive, whole, human, multidimensional." Human likely refers to a personal and interpersonal type of connectivity that references or accepts physical and emotional as well as intellectual human characteristics, and perhaps the kind of social connectivity demonstrated in *Quarry* as well. The terms "expansive", "whole", and "multidimensional" themselves imply ideas of a broad inclusion or multiplicity which refer again to Monk's first goal of eliminating boundaries and allowing for a high degree of perceptual possibility.

"An art that seeks to reestablish the unity existing in music, theater, and dance – the wholeness that is found in cultures where performing arts practice is considered a spiritual discipline with healing and transformative power."[18]

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[17] Meredith Monk, "Mission Statement," 17.
[18] Ibid.

Monk's choice of the word "reestablish" as opposed to "establish" in respect to unity is purposeful and significant. A strong connection to the past, including ancient time periods is prevalent in Monk's work and philosophy. Her concept of a unified art of theater, movement, and music suggests Greek theater or theater of other cultures in which the divisions between disciplines are not so clearly defined as in European culture. Monk, who often describes her work as existing in multiple simultaneous time periods, in some sense, has also described her work as "transcultural," thus inhabiting a space where it does not necessarily borrow from any particular culture, but, in searching for its own unique characteristics, may exhibit qualities common to many cultures.[19]

The notion of attributing "healing and transformative power," to music is very much contrary to the modernist notion of art for its own sake. This ideal attributes an extramusical power to music, a power to heal and to transform, a profound ability to alter listeners. The idea of music as transformative, as possessing healing qualities may also be traced back to earlier centuries and ideas from other cultures about the power of music on the physical, mental, and spiritual world.

"An art that reaches toward emotion we have no words for, that we barely remember – an art that affirms the world of feeling in a time and society where feelings are in danger of being eliminated."[20]

The danger of the elimination of feelings that Monk cites in this statement of her mission is an intense response to the anti-Romantic inclinations of modernism. The remembering of feelings again reaches into the past, prior to the start of the twentieth century. The affirmation of feelings as a response to the fear of their elimination from art demonstrates the intensity of

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[19] Jowitt, "Interview," 75
[20] Meredith Monk, "Mission Statement," 17.

Monk's commitment to personal connectivity, to the human connection to art as something more than an intellectual activity.

Meredith Monk's commitment to "restoring unity" in the arts represents a commitment to connectivity far beyond interdisciplinary and intermedia work. Monk's mission statement outlines goals which refer to that many different categories of connectivity discussed, all of which relate to postmodern ideals. Through her use of the voice, movement, theater, and music, Monk aims to create unity that transcends boundaries on many levels in order to allow for what she considers the content of her work, an openness of human perception.[21]

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[21] Highwater, "Interview," 80.

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