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WORD OF MOUTH

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## MEREDITH MONK AT THE GUGGENHEIM: TURNING IT UPSIDE DOWN

BY ALEX PASTERNAK



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The well-coiled audience sat at the bottom of the **Guggenheim** rotunda last Thursday, cross-legged and looking up expectantly, like children or very old people waiting to receive a message from heaven. And it arrived right on time, along with salutations from even stranger places. Women in white appeared like angels (or holier-than-thou museum goers?) around the ledges, gesturing and intoning. Not singing -- this could not be called simply that -- but creating ranges of notes in hypnotic repetition; it is chanting, secular but completely religious. Instead of rising as they often do, voices dropped into the center of Frank Lloyd Wright's white coil, swirled around, and rose and reverberated and multiplied again in more voices.

The echo was much older though: this was an unearthing of **Meredith Monk's** "Juice: A Theater Cantata in 3 Installments," a piece she performed at the museum in 1969 (she was 27!), when avant-garde still suggested an edge. But the new performance, with music and movement adapted from Monk's latest work, "Songs of Ascension," is no more enmeshed in the '60s as it is in ancient times or in the future. Moving up and around and down in the midst of "The Third Mind," an exhibit on Western artists contemplating Asia, "Ascension Variations" trades Western notions of straight up for an Eastern circular logic that moves in hypnotic circles.

As Marie Antoinette, Cleopatra and other white-clad figures appear along the rotunda, a quartet of dancers dressed in tatters and covered in red from head to toe -- a remnant from 1969 -- plods along the ramp upwards, often slumping together like a caterpillar or Beckett's sad clown-slave Lucky multiplied. The sounds of singers and musicians mingle throughout the space, appearing in snatches and disappearing. For the second section, the audience beats its own path up the ramp, where the red travelers and the rest of the ensemble -- some 120 performers in total -- are now scattered and wandering. Some confront the museum's artworks with gestures of appropriate confusion. One marches toward a painting repeatedly before turning around abruptly. One of the reds simply lies down before a painting with his eyes wide shut, exasperated, finished.

Amidst these intimate rituals, some mouths remain open, mingling with the instruments to fill the space for half an hour with a weaving rendition of "Mieke's melody #6," a new piece composed by Monk and **Mieke van Hoek**. Monk herself takes up residence before a black painting of a faceless woman, rehearsing her childlike movements with a frequent conspirator, **Ching Gonzalez**. Surrounded by a crowd, they appear to be having a kind of conversation about something they have resolved to do. Around us, the museum had become a giant speaker, a buddha box, an inverse stupa, a giant white throat.

When she appears again, she is at the bottom of the rotunda, perched on the floor over her sruti box. The singing is on the floor too, lower than Monk has ever sung; as she pushes the small case open and closed, it's as if she's packing a final suitcase. The choir joins in, and the ensemble begins its slow procession back down the ramp, down to the end and the beginning. They finish with their backs to the floor, still singing, still playing, having turned the building and the audience and the song and the dance upside down, and into something else.

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