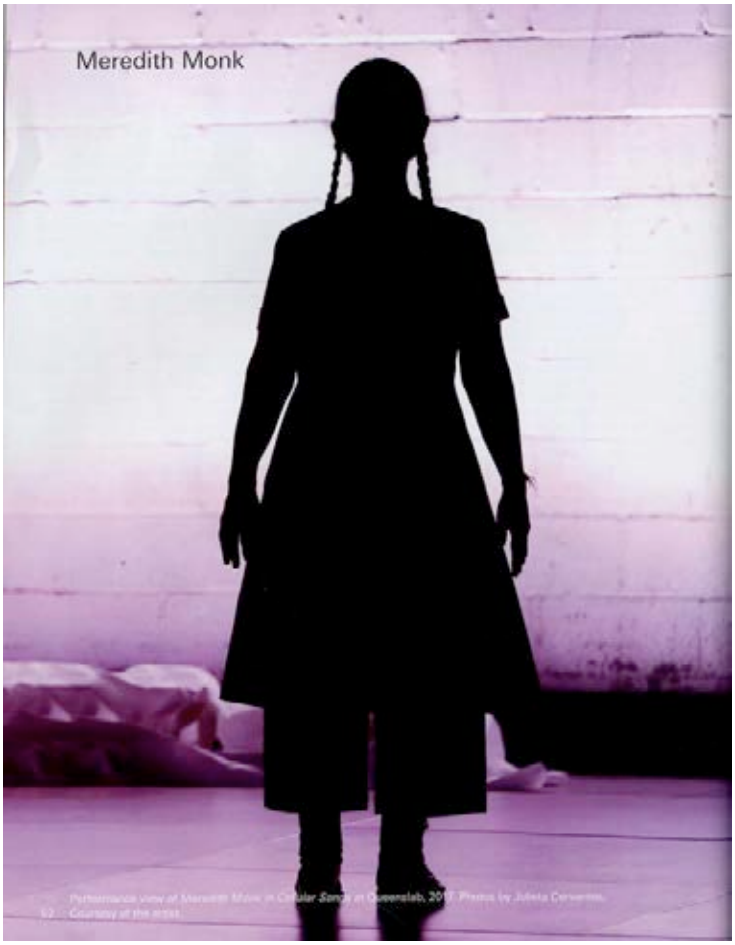
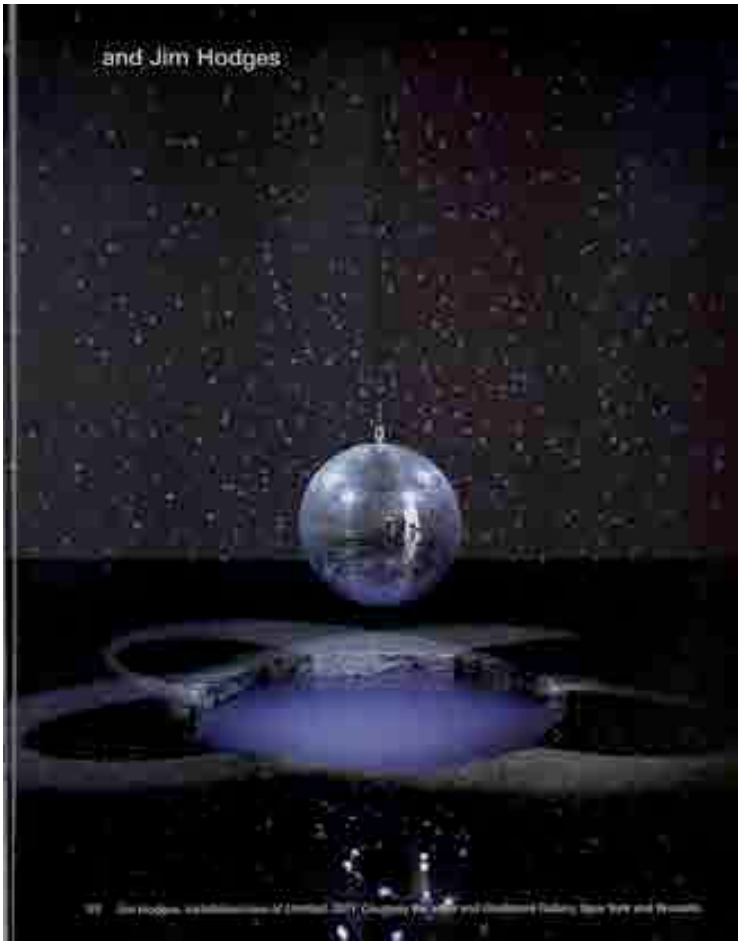
Sabine Russ, “Music and Art – Meredith Monk and Jim Hodges,” *Bomb Magazine*, January 4, 2018

BOMB





As a composer, vocalist, choreographer, and creator of music theater and live sound sculptures, Meredith Monk has enthusiastically explored diverse modes of perception and expression since the mid-'60s. Joining the human voice—in her signature "extended vocal technique"—with precise and often ritualistic body movement, minimal instrumentation, and evocative images and objects, she fosters a holistic experience for performers and audience, one that feels simultaneously familiar and strange, integrating the ancient and the new. At its core, Monk's practice is beautifully simple: drawing out sound as an extension of breath, mining it to its fullest, and using its raw energy to uncover sensations universal yet ineffable.

Jim Hodges's large and ever-surprising oeuvre of sculptures, immersive installations, drawings, and paintings similarly manifests in multiple forms while engaging our sensory perception, attention, recognition, and memory. The narratives in his work aren't personal or bound to one specific moment but rather tap into our collective consciousness and a sense of the interconnectedness and timelessness of all things.

Hodges and Monk met in the early '90s and immediately recognized their shared desire to make art that offers an alternative experience in times of societal stagnation and *dis*-ease, art that can uncover the primordial in the quotidian and the sacred in the ordinary, art that inspires kindness and compassion. As Buddhists, they prefer to create from a place of not knowing, letting their work unfold without imposing judgment. In this spirit, we are invited to connect to its intrinsic elemental energy and perhaps find repose from our own expectations and constantly evaluating minds.

Cellular Songs, Monk's latest project with four female members of her vocal ensemble, is premiering at BAM's Harvey Theater in March 2018. This past June, Hodges offered Monk his spacious Queenslab for work-in-progress rehearsals and several preview performances. The unadorned, open space was ideal for a music theater piece that begins with the fundamental building block of all life forms, the cell, gradually growing it into haunting patterns of sound, movement, and light.

—Sabine Russ

54 Performance view of the Young People's Chorus of New York City in *Dancing Voices* at Lincoln Center, 2017.

MEREDITH MONK I just did this piece with the Young People's Chorus of New York City for Lincoln Center's White Light Festival called *Dancing Voices*. Ninety children from eight to eighteen years old. I was almost crying from beginning to end of every rehearsal. The commitment, skill, and honesty of the children was so beautiful.

JIM HODGES What did they sing?

MM First, a smaller select group joined me and members of my vocal ensemble—Katie Geissinger and Allison Sniffin—in a program of pieces from larger works like *Book of Days*, *ATLAS*, and *The Games*. The second part was the premiere of the choral version of *Three Heavens and Hells* set to a poem written by Tennessee Reed, daughter of the novelist Ishmael Reed, when she was eleven. My ensemble and I never memorized that score because it was so hard. But these young women did. They were determined! For the last part, Katie, Allison, and I joined them and twenty-one young men from the chorus whose voices had changed, the ACME string quartet, and two instrumentalists from my ensemble for "ascent" from *Songs of Ascension*.

Francisco Núñez, the chorus's artistic director and conductor, is creating an alternative community for these children. *Dancing Voices* was so freeing for them because they are used to singing with scores in their hands, but in this work they had to sing and move at the same time. It's truly one of the most meaningful things I've ever done. I could die happy now. Really. I'm raving because it's so important to find meaningful art projects in our world right now. Art that opens things up.

JH When your practice allows you to collaborate with youths or people outside of your normal practice, you plant seeds that can grow exponentially throughout their lives. The work is doing more than it would do by itself.

MM As artists, we have to find the antidote to this darkness right now, to how everything feels so compressed rather than expanded.

JH It's troubling to operate from that kind of broken place. But it's our duty to bring forth some light from this darkness.

MM It's a life and death kind of duty now.

JH We've experienced previous eras of madness, socially and culturally, but there's a kind of crescendo—

MM It's madness and it's compression. When I was coming up, there was a sense of expansion. I was so fortunate to experience that anything-is-possible mentality.

JH That's what you and your generation were demanding. The culture wasn't like, "Oh, you have permission." You took this on. Part of the brilliance of your generation is that it ruptured a particular realm and then expanded it into something more, which your work still does.

MM Back then, while the dominant culture had a tightness to it, there was a large enough communal impulse to expand, to explore, to not say no to anything. There are cycles in society where there is a sense of breadth and expansion. Then the counterbalance is where we are now, in a period of terrible compression. I love working with young people because it gives them a chance to know that, Yes, you can open up, you can integrate your visual images with your voice and body.

JH The work manifests in the voice, but it's derived from a physicality of construction akin to choreography.

MM Because the kids were memorizing *Three Heavens and Hells*, I could do a little of what I call gestural choreography for them. When you see fifty people doing the same movement, it's very powerful. I was watching them work on a very rhythmically complex passage, and one group broke off saying, "We can't learn it this way," and they went to the other side of the room and figured out a different method to learn it. Isn't that great? They invented a new way.

JH Art as an opportunity for development and invention, it's the most important thing, especially for children.

MM It's miraculous. There's a duet in *Book of Days* that was originally performed with Toby Newman when she was ten years old. This time, I performed it with Milena Manocchia, another young girl, and in one of the rehearsals I burst into tears because singing with her was so deep, like soul to soul. After working fifty-two years, I'm getting a new depth of experience. Ultimately my own experience is not really important, but it amazes me that after performing for all these years this could happen.

JH These are the experiences where we are formed and changed in community. It's also profound because of the solitude we work in as artists before we're brought together in these groups.

MM I do spend a lot of time alone. Many people think because I work with an ensemble or a group that that's where it starts, but it never does. Sometimes I'll work a year or two alone and then I have enough material to share with the group and sculpt it in rehearsals. Often, I'll go back alone again to reevaluate and then return to rehearsal. That's pretty much my process. What is your ratio of working alone and with other people?

JH I've always identified with your practice and the necessity of solitude in making. In my experience, how things manifest in different collaborations is really dependent on the type of performance I'm looking for and the particular army of collaborators required to make something happen. The largeness of a work hinges on its aliveness and performance. And the recording of it, if you will. But the performance itself is in getting to that point—out in New Mexico or Upstate or wherever you go—where solitude exists.

MM That's where my inner work takes place.

JH I run back to my solitude as often as I can and relish it, even if it's on the subway. A place to take notes, to be in the stillness, and to be receiving. I'm not really sure how art ultimately comes about, but in my experience it's something that is given birth in its manifestation through a single solitary moment.

MM That's how I feel.

JH And then it's brought into the arena of exchange with others' voices and becomes more of a machine, if you will.

MM Or surprises you.

JH There's the collaborative experience, the richness of that and finding people along the way that you're willing and able to—

MM —trust.

JH To bear it all, to embarrass yourself, to fail, to cry, to laugh, to demand, to be the monster and the angel that you have to be to make something happen. To me, that's the gift—to be able to move into a place like you did with these children.

MM Well, I call my ensemble my midwives because they're like, "Come on! Push!" (*laughter*) So many times I have my doubts along the way, but they encourage me to keep going.

JH We're lucky to benefit from the brilliance of so many talented, generous others. I must collaborate; I can't do it myself.

MM In the way you work, it sounds like each project demands a different "army of love."

JH Often different armies, yeah.

MM Whereas these last years I've been experimenting with how to take the same group and try something new. I've been stubborn about that since the early 2000s—although, sometimes I work with different sets of people. For example, in *Cellular Songs,* I'm working with only the women from the ensemble. Is there a certain time when there's no inspiration anymore with the same ensemble? So far, I've found it's still there because they're all brilliant artists in their own right.

JH And what's asked of us as collaborators, that we make space for the others' voices, is something one has to learn on the way. That's the letting go, which is also a hallmark of an artist's practice—the surrendering.

MM Absolutely.

JH It's just one more jewel in the jewelry box that we get to experience.

MM I can describe a literal version of that: When I'm writing something, I lay down four tracks—I only have a four-track tape recorder and everybody laughs about all these four-part pieces—but I lay down all the tracks myself. There's something magical when you hear one person's voice singing all those tracks. Then, when I offer it to the ensemble, the moment of my voice becoming other people's voices is shocking. But it's also fantastic because it becomes something different. Do you do that with your own work, too?

JH Working is, for me, either a boxing ring or a mountain climb. The challenge is different every time, but it's never without a battle. It's like being blindsided or hit by a life experience.

MM Do you ever look at your projects and realize the mystery is so profound that you don't even know how they came to be? That you have the sensation that they're given? I'm always a good shoemaker working away, but every once in a while, there's one project that just comes and I can't think back technically about the process. I wonder, How did that just come together? I always feel it came *to* me, or through me. I know my tools and what I did, but what happened was so much more than my decision making. Have you ever experienced that?

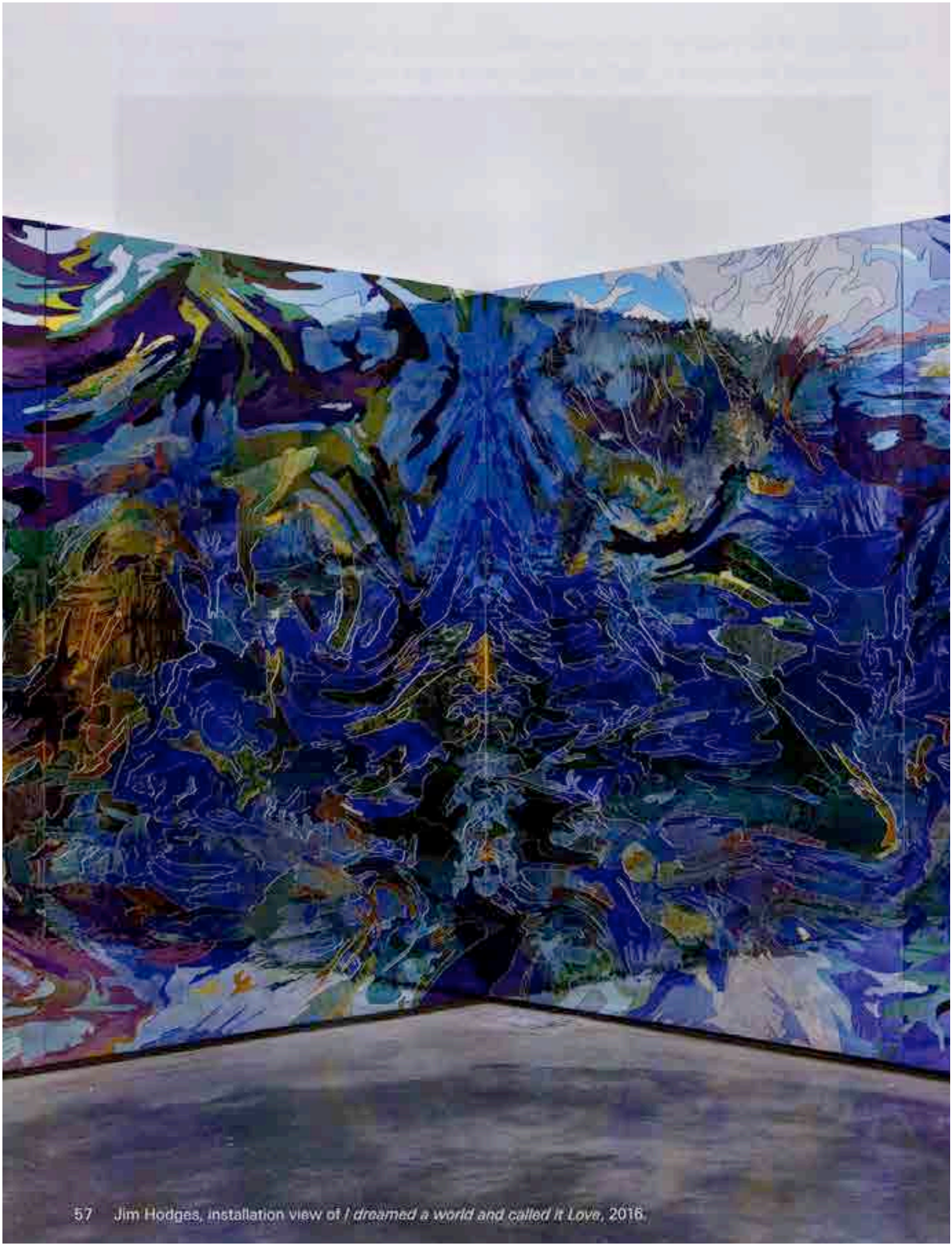
JH Yeah, I definitely identify with that. Often, my way into my work is just to do the job.

MM Mmm, you start with where you are.

JH You're the worker, not the judge or the jury. I say, "I have to make the donuts." You're a shoemaker. I'm a donut maker. I feel like it's just being at the service of whatever's necessary.

MM You're being present—

JH —to whatever's being asked, and that includes asking others to help build it with me.



57 Jim Hodges, installation view of *I dreamed a world and called it Love*, 2016.

i

ii

(i) and (ii) Ellen Fisher, Katie Geissinger, Meredith Monk, Allison Sniffin, and Jo Stewart in *Cellular Songs*, Queenslab, 2017.

Do you ever look at your projects and realize the mystery is so profound that you don't even know how they came to be? —Meredith Monk

What's being generated at times feels like a frenzy of activity, and I don't know what the hell's going on. I'm just engaged in the process of making and being open to what this is about. But to get back to your question of experiencing a flash of having—

MM —a gift.

JH A gift that one isn't aware of how it arrived. Artists are continually in a state of small, seismic eruptions we're not able to grasp. And all of it adds up to these finished works that have nuance and aspects that are out of our control.

MM That's the mystery and beauty of it. That's what keeps me going all these years, this sense of discovery and risk.

JH I work toward the not-knowing. That's part of what you were saying earlier: the newness is something we step into and that's the magic of it.

MM It's the newness and the oldness. Sometimes I feel like the newness is also cycling back to the ancient, like the cycle of time. The newness is totally fresh and would only happen in this moment, but at the same time there's some resonance toward it happening in an ancient past.

JH You're very visual in your making. Once you suggested we collaborate and—of course, I would love to do that—but at the same time, I don't know what I could necessarily bring to your practice because it's so fully realized in itself.

MM Working with visual artists challenges me in a positive way. Collaboration throws me into something that I wouldn't do on my own. But I feel like you and I are actually too close.

JH Our kinship of spirit could be a redundancy.

MM That's right. Even though nobody would ever think that in a million years, seeing the way our works manifest. For a collaboration, it's better to come from different places, each person lets go of some parts, and you make a third thing.

JH The location you are coming from is home to me. We live in the same neighborhood, if not the same house. Let's talk about *Cellular Songs*.

MM Yes, as much as I can talk about it.

JH Do you say that because of where *Cellular Songs* is residing now and how in-process it still is?

MM I haven't completely finished it. I'm now working on film elements, but I feel like the older I get, the less conceptual I am. When I was a young artist, part of the value system was how many ideas I had in one piece. But in my meditation practice, for example, we're always trying to get past concept and that discursive way of thinking. I've taken that seriously, and it's manifested in the way I think about art, which is sometimes terrifying. I was talking with Ann Hamilton, and she said, "Don't be terrified, you are going to *it* itself now, trusting the material to come up without conceptual overlay." When I'm having moments of doubt, I try to remember those words.

Concept can be a kind of imprisonment. In some of my early pieces, I started with concept, but orthodoxy was never my temperament, so the conceptual things didn't exactly work out. They were always escape hatches. In these last ten years, I've been doing pieces that I consider a kind of cycle—starting with *mercy*, then *impermanence*, *Songs of Ascension*, *On Behalf of Nature*, and now *Cellular Songs*. They each contemplate questions that can't be answered. That's part of the process, and I consider it a very worthwhile way of spending my time on Earth. All those pieces are dealing with the unknown, the inexpressible or the ineffable.

JH Does one piece give birth to another or move you to a particular place of creating for the next?

MM Not necessarily. They each are their own world. But looking back, they all have to do with creating sacred space, something unnamable. It's sort of an oxymoron to say, "I'm making a form about impermanence." It's really about the contemplation of impermanence, and that manifests as an artwork that touches upon something. *On Behalf of Nature* did lead a bit to *Cellular Songs*. There is a connection, but I wasn't thinking in those terms.

JH Not literally.

MM It's really more that I'm in this biological . . . what would I say?—I'm contemplating systems of life. Now with this piece, I'm going deeper into the source of life.

JH When you're making the work, do you have an ideal place of performance in mind or does that happen after the fact?

Artists are continually in a state of small, seismic eruptions we're not able to grasp. And all of it adds up to these finished works that have nuance and aspects that are out of our control. —Jim Hodges

MM Well, doing the piece in your space, at Queenslab, was ideal. I always thought of *Cellular Songs* as a three-dimensional, rotational piece. In your space, I had the audience on three sides and they could see images from different angles as if the images were always turning. I love site-specific work and am always inspired by space. The hard part is to convert that experience so it works for a stage. There just aren't many spaces like yours in the world. How do I get that same sensation to a larger group of people but retain that sense of rotation?

JH It's interesting how your approach is so sculptural.

MM Well, I love space so much, which is ironic because I don't see three dimensions. I actually see more like a medieval person, in layers. I've worked in layers for years, but *Cellular Songs* is different. Even the music I'm making is like sound sculpture because within the musical form there's all this turning and weaving, and you *hear* the sculpture. I'm fascinated by *Cellular Songs*. I'll be seventy-five years old on November 20 and this work is opening things for me that I've never done before. Hallelujah! That's what I want: to be discovering until the day I leave the planet.

JH I definitely experienced *Cellular Songs* as a musical sculpture.

MM I'm premiering *Cellular Songs* at BAM in the Harvey Theater, which is beautifully rounded.

JH It opens up to the audience.

MM I like my work to be seen from above. My sensibility is sculptural, and the visual frame doesn't work for me. At the Harvey, I could put some of the audience on the stage if I want to, but that's not quite organic in that space. I'm thinking instead about the way the space curves and will work with three-dimensional surround sound so the audience gets a feeling of being immersed.

An ironic thing about *Cellular Songs* is that some of what we're singing is so small. One could say it's delineating the inside of the body, but then, when it's amplified, you're surrounded by it.

JH What you managed to do at Queenslab was enliven the space so that the room itself became part of this amplification of sound, which I had never experienced there before.

MM When I saw the space originally, I sang in it and it had an incredible feeling.

JH It's very alive.

MM The worst thing for me is to sing in a dry-sounding room that doesn't have resonance. When the room is live, it's a dialogue. You have clarity and resonance in one room.

In *Cellular Songs*, I have a solo in which I'm performing actual words. (*laughter*) How did that happen? I felt like it was given. Sometimes in your life you know you've somehow touched that magic source. It's hard to talk about it.

JH I think it's beyond our capacity. It's out of our reach. We can't judge because we don't know. That, to me, is a critical aspect of making art.

MM That's so true. I used to be so judgmental, even as a performer. I remember listening to tapes of myself and thinking, You're the worst judge. You have an experience, but that's not necessarily what other people experience. I remember one time in the '80s when we were doing everything fast and furiously. We performed "Tokyo Cha-Cha," and afterward I thought, That was so great! We were so cool. And my partner Mieke said, "That was just horrible. It was so aggressive and hyped up." I listened to the tape, and she was right. We're the worst judges of ourselves. There's no relation to reality.

JH Ultimately though, you're also the person who signs off on everything that happens, so you live with both the success and the failure.

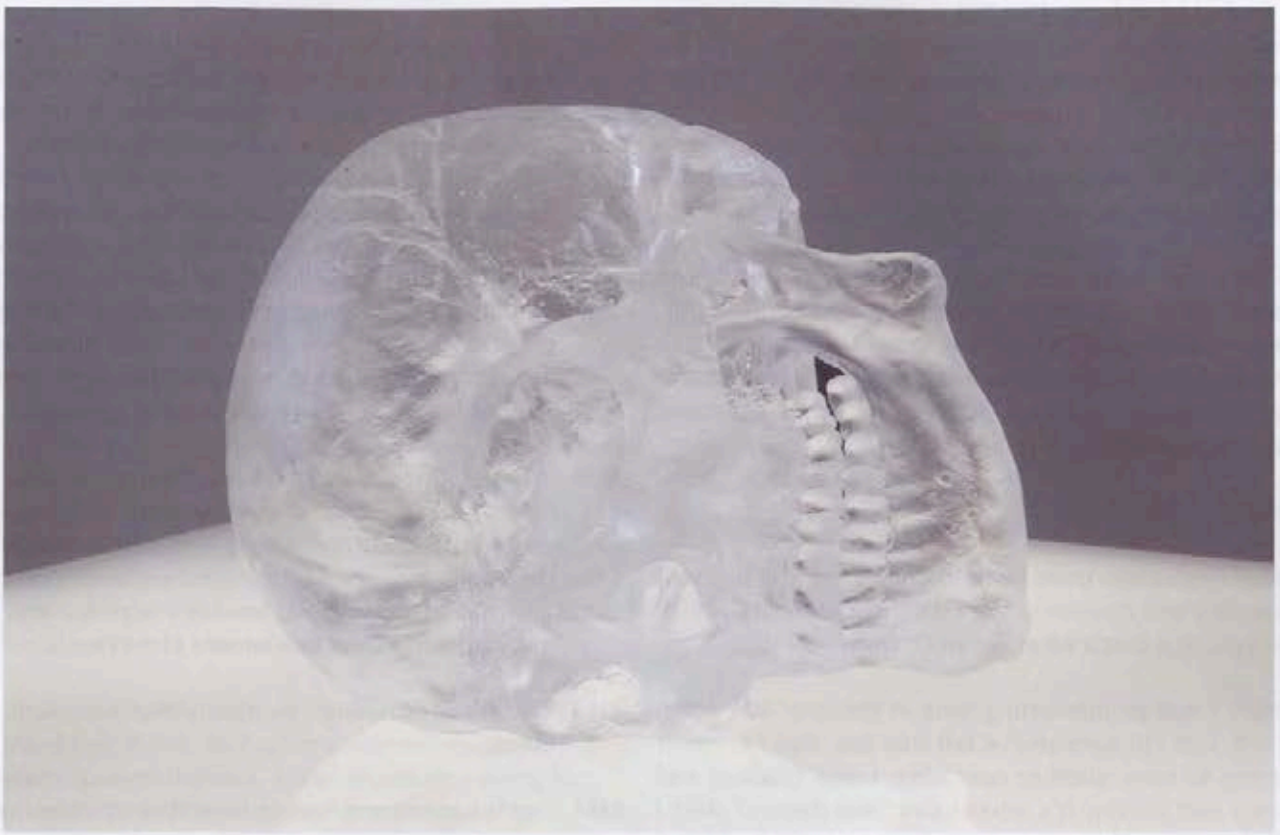
MM Failure is very interesting.

JH Doubt, I think, is useful.

MM This is going to sound crazy, but I've always had doubt. And I always thought my male colleagues had it easier because their mothers told them they were the greatest thing on earth. They don't seem to have any doubt, and what they make is more product oriented. How come no one ever said that *I* was the greatest thing on Earth?! (*laughter*) But looking back now, I realize doubt is actually a good thing. Since you're male, my question number one is: Do you have doubt? And number two: Did your mom tell you that you were the greatest thing in the world?

JH Yes and yes. (*laughter*) I find doubt to be my friend and

i



ii

(i) Jim Hodges, *picturing: tracing form*, 2004, glass, 6 × 5.75 × 7.75 inches. (ii) *we fell through pink* . . . , 2011, cut C-print, 32.75 × 50 inches.

my eternal companion. I don't think I'll ever step away or have the work dismiss me without feeling like, Oh, I blew that one again. But it's not any of my business. I find, if I get fixated on the doubt, I may be digging into something that really will distract me. And the purpose for me is to actually *do*, not to be the judge.

MM Both of us are always working on our process, learning about it and applying that knowledge in a positive way, but it's always a struggle.

JH That's the reality. And there's the question of where one's voice actually comes from. What is one's purpose and mission? There are certain things that have motivated me, and the primary one has been liberation. Freedom from my imprisoned self, my judged self, if you will.

MM Yes.

JH That motivation goes back to childhood, the place of learning and discovery. We take the materiality of ourselves, and that's what we work with.

MM Well, I had an interesting time in the late '90s when I felt, and I'm sure you've felt this too, that I'm never going to have another new idea. I was blocked and tired and empty. It's what I call "the desert." And I had an incredible experience: I read a book by Mabel Dodge Luhan, who was friends with Georgia O'Keefe and the Lawrences, all these wild ones living in New Mexico around Ghost Ranch, near where I live. God knows what was going on. Mabel was a wealthy society woman who built a house in Taos and married a Native American man named Tony Luhan. The first winter she was married to him, she noticed how everybody in the pueblo wore soft moccasins and they were tiptoeing around, being extremely quiet. She asked him, "Why are they doing that?" And he said, "Oh, we're just letting Mother Nature rest, so that she can come forth in spring. We have to stay quiet because we don't want to disturb her." This gave me a deep insight during my "desert period." part of the process is to honor and nurture those times of winter or desert, when it seems like there's nothing there.

JH I love that you've named it "the desert." I may have to borrow that.

MM In reality, I love the desert as a landscape. It's the desert but then a little bud comes out, and you're like, "Woo." A door opens. When I begin a new work, I try to start from zero. I tell myself "step by step" but with a German accent: *shtep by shtep*. It's like beginner's mind. And then you find one little bud and know you might be on a path.

JH Listening to you, I can so instantly enter your narrative. I feel like I'm experiencing it myself. That's also how I get pulled into a profound reality through the vehicle of your art. I'm not separated.

MM That's how I feel about *your* work. You manifest energy in an object. It's like the objects are living, animated beings. The vision is so large, but then it can also be the tiniest and most intimate object.

JH Yes, that's where we find the similarity in each other's work. The scale can be playing on a spectrum that's so broad. And in terms of practice, the desire for liberation is to explore oneself and expand that spectrum of experiences, starting at zero. The difficulty of starting at zero is that you have to essentially murder all of the past yous. You have to get rid of yourself.

MM If I say, "Oh, I've heard this before, Meredith," I have to tell myself, "Just accept that now, and you'll find a way of getting to something new within that." It's just the beginning.

Another thing we have in common, Jim, is that our works manifest in a variety of ways.

JH We allow ourselves to rise to the occasion of our ideas—

MM —in whatever medium or form they want to manifest.

JH I am so in love with the process of making. The joy and pain of it all; it's just so rich. It's a luxury, a privilege to be a little part of that bigger machinery of making. I feel our connectedness, Meredith, is echoed out in the world by the connectedness of other creative people and their exchange of ideas, finding a common place not only of exchange but also of love and spirit.

MM All these years of working, we've become perceptual experts, weaving perception or isolating perception. There are other people who have that kind of expertise, but it's exploited and manipulated in terrible ways. As artists, we can use our perceptual expertise to benefit human life.

JH Perception has always been about everyone else, not about you. It's about us.

MM I've devoted myself to one thing in my life: art. That's it, from the time I was twenty years old. You could say, "Gee, that's pathetic on a certain level." But while it seems quite narrow, it's so rich and full because, number one, I have been doing what I love, and number two, the work has led me to travel around the world, meet amazing people, and experience our commonalities. Art is a choiceless choice.

People always ask, "Do you consider the audience when you're working on a piece?" And I have to say no. First comes the integrity of the piece itself. But

in the process I'm always making sure that what I'm doing is clear. So ultimately, it's for others. I'm trying to get to the authenticity of the form and, at the same time, I'm trying to communicate.

JH Yeah, it's like you don't walk outside and act belligerently. You want to be understood and respectful. You want to be aware and available for what echoes back to you. The rigor and standards are part of the responsibility of the artmaker. People are looking.

MM But you can't start there, you have to actually start with the thing itself, realizing that when you're rigorous and meticulous with what you are making you're actually giving more.

JH There's that beautiful gestation period and then there's the thing itself. I don't know if you experience this, but I find that when my work is "finished," I'm dismissed. It parts from me. It's alive in the world, and I only have my history of it and can never really feel it. That's where trust and faith comes in, as does doubt, because I don't ever really "know" it.

MM I have a slightly different process. I'm doing something that's live, and what's interesting about that is that it's never finished. It's an organism having its own growth, surprising me as it goes along. That's why, when I make a performance piece, I want to be able to perform it as much as I can so that it has its life cycle—maybe it could grow past infancy and even become a teenager? The performance is where the learning comes. That process never ends; it's always changing.

On the other hand, I've had times when I come back to something I recorded at the beginning of the process and see that, as the work has grown into a teenager, some aspects that were originally very essential have gotten lost. It's like playing telephone. Then I have to step backward to get to what the original impulse was. I was on a panel with John Cage in the early '80s, and he said, "I'm me, my work is my work and I wish it well." As a performer, I can't achieve that separation, but with an object, like a recording, I give it everything I've got and then that's it. There might be flaws, but I have to say goodbye to it. "You are now you and I wish you well." (*laughter*)

JH My work has its own demands. Something can sit around on my table for years. I'm not a quick maker—

MM Me neither.

JH I don't really know what this will be, if it even will. Whether it's just the scent of something or becomes a color, it needs precision or clarity of making. I find that editing is the job where you have to hold yourself to a high standard. Editing stuff out so there's clarity and it sings.

MM There has to be rigor, even getting rid of material that you like the best. That's really hard.

JH It doesn't come easy.

MM You can always see the difference between young artists' work and the work of people that have been creating for a while. I call it the "everything but the kitchen sink" syndrome because young people don't realize they're going to have time to make these forms. You don't have to have every single one of your ideas in every piece you do.

JH It's a matter of trusting that time is not our enemy, that time actually works with us.

MM That's what I think being an artist is about—learning trust.