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Savoring the Slowness of Art at the Speed of Television

by Kay Larson

In the haze of a chill Manhattan dawn streets the colors of breath on marble a cadre of Asian women gracefully practice martial arts routines in a vest-pocket park in Chinatown. The dance, half Kung Fu, half Chinese opera, is known as Muilen. It has six parts: two done with hands, two with swords and two with bright flashing red fans that snap open with a pop.

As the women wheel their fans through the April air, the artist Laurie Anderson, behind them, all in black, dangles her legs from the seat of a 10-foot-tall inflatable white nylon wing chair. The chair haunts the scene like a ghost from some great baronial ur-library out of Jorge Luis Borges's mind. Ms. Anderson talks into a hidden microphone while a dozen-odd people a camerawoman, a photographer and a film crew foraging in the inevitable box of bagels hang out in the foreground.

Three long days of filming, plus studio time, will end up as two minutes of television: the opening segment of an ambitious four-part PBS series, "Art21: Art in the 21st Century," which will be broadcast at various times nationally and on Channel 13 in New York at 9 p.m. on Sept. 21 and 28. "Art21" rewrites the possibilities for art on television. Its true subject is inspiration, and its method scraps all the formulas by getting rid of narrators and allowing artists to tell us in their own words how they work and why they do what they do.

On Sept. 21, Ms. Anderson introduces the first hour, "Place," and five artists follow her: Richard Serra, Sally Mann, the team of Margaret Kilgallen and Barry McGee, and the black-Hispanic installation artist Pepón Osorio. The second hour, "Spirituality," begins with a video piece by Beryl Korot and narration by the actress S. Epatha Merkerson from "Law and Order." They're followed by the installation artist Ann Hamilton, the part-American Indian sculptor John Feodorov, the Pakistani miniature painter Shahzia Sikander and the earth artist James Turrell.

In Ms. Anderson's segment, the white wing chair is a stand-in for those gray eminences who introduce programs on public television. The chair alights on a SoHo rooftop, rolls out of a car wash, glides past the Statue of Liberty and caroms down a Japanese supermarket aisle (in New Jersey), all in the space of a breath or two. "How do we understand place?" Ms. Anderson asks in the voiceover. "By moving through it" is her answer. You could say the same about art on television.

Art is best served by long contemplative viewing, but television chops everything into stew meat. A slow art in a fast medium: can it take the pace? To solve the problem, television has always imported talking heads -- Robert Hughes, Sister Wendy -- who interpret for us. Or is pontificate the right word?

A surprisingly simple and effective alternative is to let the artists have the last (and

only) word. That's the prospect that has so energized Ms. Anderson. During a break in filming, she said: "Like I'm the authority here? I mean, please! I mean, let me tell you about place in art?" She rolled her eyes and waggled her head. "It would be hideous to have somebody explaining art."

When the artists do the talking, something fascinating happens. The world opens out and begins resonating with the unexpected. Artists may charm, irritate, instruct, entertain, confound. But they achieve their effectiveness, essentially, just by being themselves. They have made their lives into works of art. Or they have found art within the stuff of their lives. Or both. They have identified what suits them, nurtures them and lets their lives expand. And they will tell you so at length if you invite them. As Maya Lin says, making art involves "everything you've ever known and everything you've ever done, somehow percolating up."

Ms. Lin appears on Sept. 28, in the third hour, "Identity," which is introduced by a dryly surreal opener devised by William Wegman with Steve Martin. In the midst of it, Mr. Martin reveals his secret identity: he is one of Mr. Wegman's Weimaraners. Then Bruce Nauman, on a horse, gallops down through the cactus and dust of his New Mexico ranch. Part rancher, part artist, he is inexhaustibly, drolly surprising. He is followed by the self-styled black classical-history painter Kerry James Marshall, Ms. Lin and Louise Bourgeois.

In the fourth hour, John McEnroe materializes to point out the improbable connections between art and tennis, his image flip-flopping with aggressive graphics by Barbara Kruger on the theme of "Consumption." Although the whole series oscillates between the sublime and the risky, the fourth hour skirts provocation. Michael Ray Charles is a black painter of blackface figures from popular culture (Little Black Sambo, Aunt Jemima): he argues that these images are as white as they are black.

Then the perennially off-the-edge Matthew Barney is seen shooting a video in his "Cremaster" series, a night-of-the-living-dead zombie movie involving harness-racing horses covered in spandex bodysuits so that they appear to be trotting corpses. Mr. Barney's father, who has a small role, says of his son: "Looking back, he wanted to be a plastic surgeon. It's probably better he went into art."

"Art21" concludes first with Andrea Zittel, who constructed a floating island off the coast of Denmark and lived on it one summer, and then with Mel Chin, who has gained national attention for his "Revival Field," a sculpture park that uses special plants called hyperaccumulators to ingest toxic metals from polluted soil, returning the land to health.

Mr. Chin has also worked to transform derelict houses burned in Detroit during Devil's Night, the prelude to Halloween. He is clearly being enlisted in "Art21" to represent the utopian visionary, a role artists have historically adopted when it suited them.

It suits the organizers of "Art21," too. The idea came from Susan Sollins, a founder and former executive director of Independent Curators International, which

disseminates traveling exhibitions to museums. Determined to "de-demonize" contemporary art, Ms. Sollins turned to television, with its vast distribution system. "There has been so much bad press," Ms. Sollins said from her Manhattan office, "politicians using contemporary art as a vehicle for their own purposes."

Ms. Sollins paired up with Susan Dowling, a former dancer and the executive producer of the New Television Workshop at WGBH-TV in Boston. The two producers picked up recommendations from an advisory council that reads like a Palm Pilot Who's Who of contemporary art curators nationwide. Ms. Sollins made the final choices and sat behind the camera at each shoot, invisibly (and inaudibly) prodding artists.

Enlisting the direct gaze out the artist speaking to the camera as if to a friend Ms. Sollins and the directors Catherine Tatge and Deborah Shaffer have created a casual yet radical intimacy. By listening without imposing a narrative, they invited complexity and contradiction. The old method of putting art on television might be called colonial; it installed an overseer (in all senses of the word), whose role was to judge and rule over the unruly aspects of the imagination. In this new postmodernist style, imagination is freed from its overvoice. By opening the ears to a whole cacophony of voices, something happens that is subtly healing.

When you meet people who make art, they prove to be just like the rest of us, only more inventive. Their introversion and arrogance are of a piece with their hunger for the spirit, for expressing the inexpressible. They may have a socially unacceptable side, but also a universality. Occasionally they may be spiteful, but also genial and passionate. Their art is entangled in the whole range of human behaviors because it's made by human beings. To accept what artists do is to accept ourselves in all our own complexity and contradiction, our own tangled darks and lights. It's to accept the possibility of discovering our own freedom, just as they have.

Spreading that message is Ms. Sollins's visionary labor of the moment. "We are being activists about trying to inform people in advance," she said. The "Art21" teachers' guide -- 5,000 copies in the first printing -- has flown out to teachers, museum educators, teacher-training schools, university art departments and PBS stations. There are screenings and artists' dialogues, panels and seminars over the next few months in various locations, including public schools and Indian reservations, plus a handsome book published by Abrams and a Web site (www.pbs.org/art21). "It has been an amazing national response," said Ms. Sollins -- which suggests that, for many Americans, artists may not be the pariahs painted in dirty colors by politicians.

Kay Larson is writing a book about the composer John Cage and his importance for contemporary culture.