

“Woman See” by Maida Withers

I did not just sit down and say, “This is going to be a dance in eight parts.” It evolved. When I was finishing the choreography, I visited Josephine Withers (no relation), an historian of women’s art, at the University of Maryland and went through her collection of slides. I wanted to project some of these slides on a large, inflated weather balloon suspended above the dance space. The balloon has the color and texture of human skin, like a breast or a womb, and is very sensual. It also gives the impression of a crystal ball with the film images suspended inside.

“Woman See” begins with a film of me dancing in a vital, ethereal manner in a flesh-colored leotard. I wanted to suggest the unashamed and pure female rendered without character or role through the dance movement of life. So I began with that, and ended “Woman See” with me dancing on film also, but with more complex movement. These two parts are called “Commencement” and “Recommencement” meaning *you are and you are*. You are not just a mother or wife or writer but a continuum. Women have historically relied on their intuitive powers, and so through dance improvisation I wanted to suggest that sense of interior trust, the use of instinct in making choices.

As the first film concludes, the dancers are clustered in a group with quietness and strength, hovering near the floor, coiling and recoiling. I wanted to pay tribute to my feelings about the body whether animal or human, as a high form of intelligence, perhaps even a superior form of intelligence, like that of large cats interacting in animal family groups.

A duet emerges called “Journey in Innocence,” basically an Adam-Eve stage we all go through at some time. When we are first married, for instance, we try out various roles and test new relationships. We follow and we lead. I took the Adam and Eve concept of an environment with no understanding yet of sexuality, anger or joy, a protective state without pain or labor, without risk or responsibility.

PART I: COMMENCEMENT

Like creation, it began with the male squatting and the female hovering over him. He begins to find his breath and finally penetrates the space vertically, defies gravity and stands. The whole duet is beautiful and tender but with no emotion. They begin a journey. The journey leads to new understanding and new realities. He carries her on his back; she pushes him forward. Throughout the duet the woman is behind the man. They recline.

As they recline, the other dancers enter in overt physical gestures with much pelvic movement and sexual implications. They dance over the bodies of the male and female and draw them into a new understanding with emotion and power that can flaunt and exploit itself. They learn to recognize the possibility of self through physical power.

PART II: THE TIES THAT BIND

I personally have never been interested in the motherhood role as an excuse for something or as a way to gain power over my husband. I know it is used as a form of control for women and as a way to give them place and value. I had children because I wanted children, and with each I projected my ability to support them myself, if necessary. The image of power is always there between men and women. In the Mormon theology there seems to be a stepladder relationship: God, man, woman, child. A ladder neither my husband nor I have ever climbed.

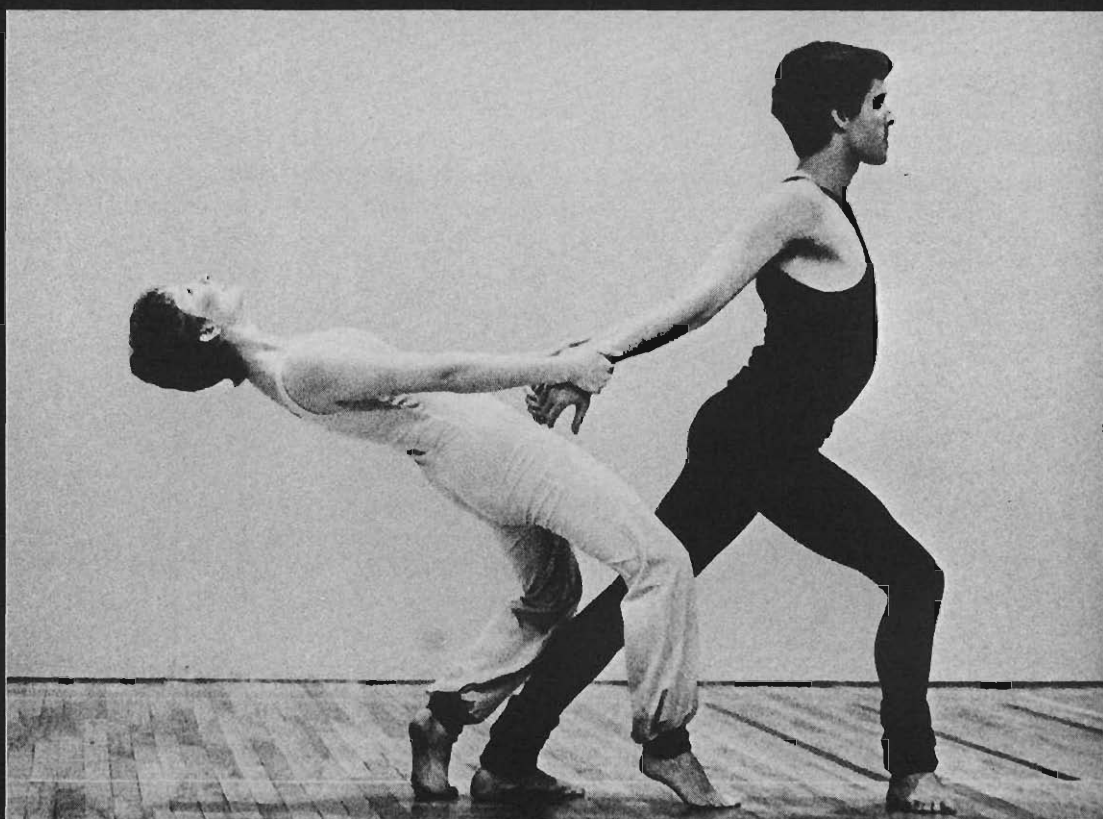
"Ties that Bind" is a high-risk duet that begins with an umbilical image of power through birthing. A long rope is tied around my waist that I fling to my partner. He takes the rope and drags me, resisting, around the room. Eventually he takes the rope and I discard it. He also discards the rope, and our relationship moves to a physically manipulative duet where I hammerlock his arm; he throws me, I roll him. The dance finally resolves itself with the two of us lying down feet-to-feet as in a cemetery—a resignation, a burial, a realization that force will not work as the base for a relationship.

PART III: DEITIES AND OTHER SECRETS KEPT

Humor has been a large part of my survival system. As with many Mormons, ideas coupled with laughter seem less threatening. In this section, a multicolored taffeta parachute was hung over the shoulders of a man riding on the shoulders of another man. Three women dancers under the parachute ballooned it out to make an awesome promenade of power. Many cultures parade their deity images. A carnival attitude then goes with it. So I had this glorious, rosy-cheeked man ride around on the others. The ones giving him volume and the appearance of power were, in this case, women. Gradually each one drops out of supporting the figure—dropping out from the bottom

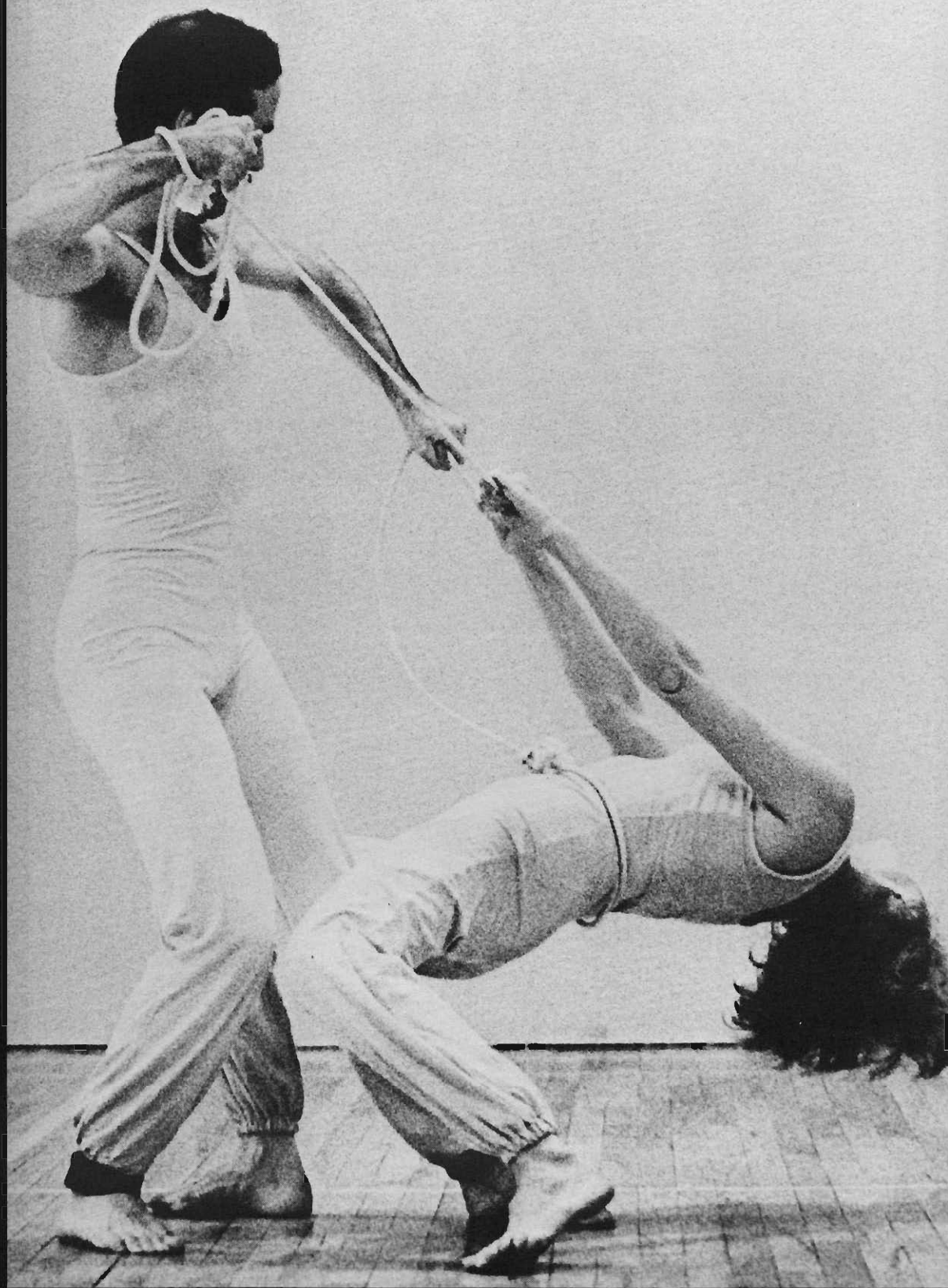


"Commencement" —Frances Babb, Dale Crittenberger, Jeffrey Strum, Heather Tuck



"Journey in Innocence" —Frances Babb and Kim Curtis

"Ties That Bind" — Jeffrey Strum and Maida Withers



of the parachute in clumps wearing shrouds and veils. The deflated god became a head looking up from a river of fabric.

When I was choreographing "Woman See," Khomeini took over in Iran. There was the threat that Muslim women would have to be veiled and have to retreat to those closeted places where women stay with the children. Shrouded women in my piece became a comment on what happens to a system if women stop supporting it, if women recognize that they have power to deflate or to build up. I think of the Wizard of Oz—the idea that as long as we keep pumping it up, it will hold, but it cannot hold itself up. I am not saying that the idea of God is nonsensical as in a carnival. I am saying that there is much myth and that the ideas of men and women get attached to the myth.

Placing a mask over the male's head, we created a new image of a female god, propped her back up and promenaded with her. Eventually the whole thing collapsed.

PART IV: HE AND WE/SACRED SISTERHOOD

This scene is a combination of polygamy and other biblical images. Narrative is read by a very tall woman wearing cowgirl boots. She has the choice of ordering two pages of statements, reading where she feels it is appropriate. She quotes Ellis Shipp's diary and other writings: "Everyone here knows I'm a Mormon but I don't talk about my involvement in polygamy. No one understands . . . I don't know if I do." "You're a woman, you're to follow my counsel. I forbid you to go." "Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness because they were given unto him and he abode in my law." "His wives were selected with attention to heredity, education and absence of defects." "Give my love to Kate and Margaret and kiss all the babies for me."

The dance was scored for a man to cross the stage on a diagonal, moving assertively with one woman following. Before the second crossing, a woman enters and steps in front of the woman, yet behind the man, and they repeat the crossing as a trio. The ritual is repeated when a third woman steps in front of the two women and the crossing becomes a quartet.

In the premiere performance when the narrator said, "Everyone here knows I'm a Mormon," I felt a real shock. The word "Mormon" had finally been said aloud in one of my performances. I suddenly became aware of my closeted culture, its secrecy and my instinctive protectionism. I felt the shock of the public quality of that even though it is generally known I am a Mormon. I thought as I was dancing, "They all think that this concert is about me."

Actually, "Woman See" is not autobiographical. Although I grew up in a Mormon family, my background is not polygamous. But the idea of "sacred sisterhood" is still contemporary among Mormons; many still regard it as an eternal principle.





"Deities and Other Secrets Kept" —Dale Crittenberger

PART V: WOMAN WAITING

This solo was introduced by a film of breadmaking projected on the balloon. A woman of the 1940s is wearing an apron and kneading the bread. Women have long used breadmaking to work out their feelings of aggression and creativity. Well, I like domestic work myself. I like the mundane work that puts me in touch with the concrete realities of life. I like the physicality of it, but I refuse to be consumed by it.

For this work, I looked at some photographic images of Mennonite women (late 1800s). In the early stages, I referred to this solo as "View from the Front Porch" because of these pictures of women sitting on the porch and leaning on buildings and talking to each other in hushed voices. As a child, I used to sit on our front porch and shell fresh peas for bottling—the porch was the workplace. Heather Tuck, mother of three-year-old Emily and a wonderful breadmaker, was cast as the soloist. She dances it magnificently.

As a mother, one of the hardest things (although it was also an idyllic part of my life—the innocence and beauty and the interplay with children, the innocence that was like the spontaneity of dancing) was the *waiting*. Waiting until they grew out of diapers, waiting for them to climb the stairs. You have a choice. You can carry them up the stairs, saying, "You better learn to climb up the stairs because tomorrow I'm going to be bored with carrying you," or you can wait until they do it themselves. It is an eternity of waiting.

"Women Waiting" also has to do with waiting for the vote, for the priesthood, for the right moment. There is a rhythm to it: a filling up of the lungs, a gathering in followed by an explosive, controlled release. One of the realizations I had about the women's movement while I was choreographing this is that women are no longer willing to wait. They are moving.

PART VI: PITFALLS AND PEDESTALS

An aqua-metal refrigerator door out of the fifties when everything seemed to be painted aqua serves as a pedestal for this male-female duet. In the fifties it was possible for women to have more leisure and for men to do more for women and families than before in Mormon culture. There was more money too.

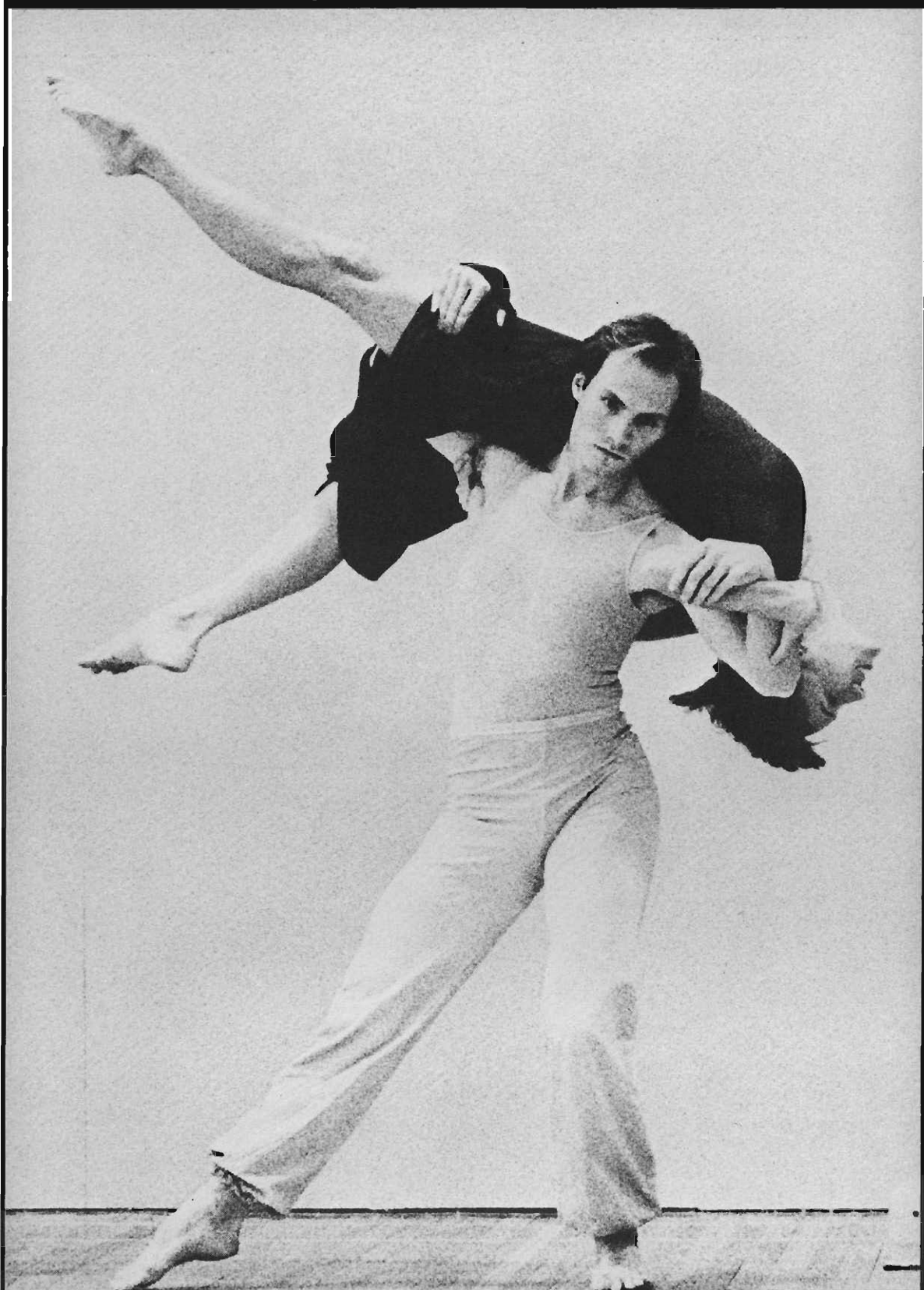
The piece is scored so that Dale puts Heather on the pedestal, and she stays on it until he takes her off. Originally the dance was improvised through one rule. She couldn't get on until he put her on; she had to stay on until he took her off. He was tender and loving. She was amused, perplexed and limited to her 12" by 12" kitchen space.

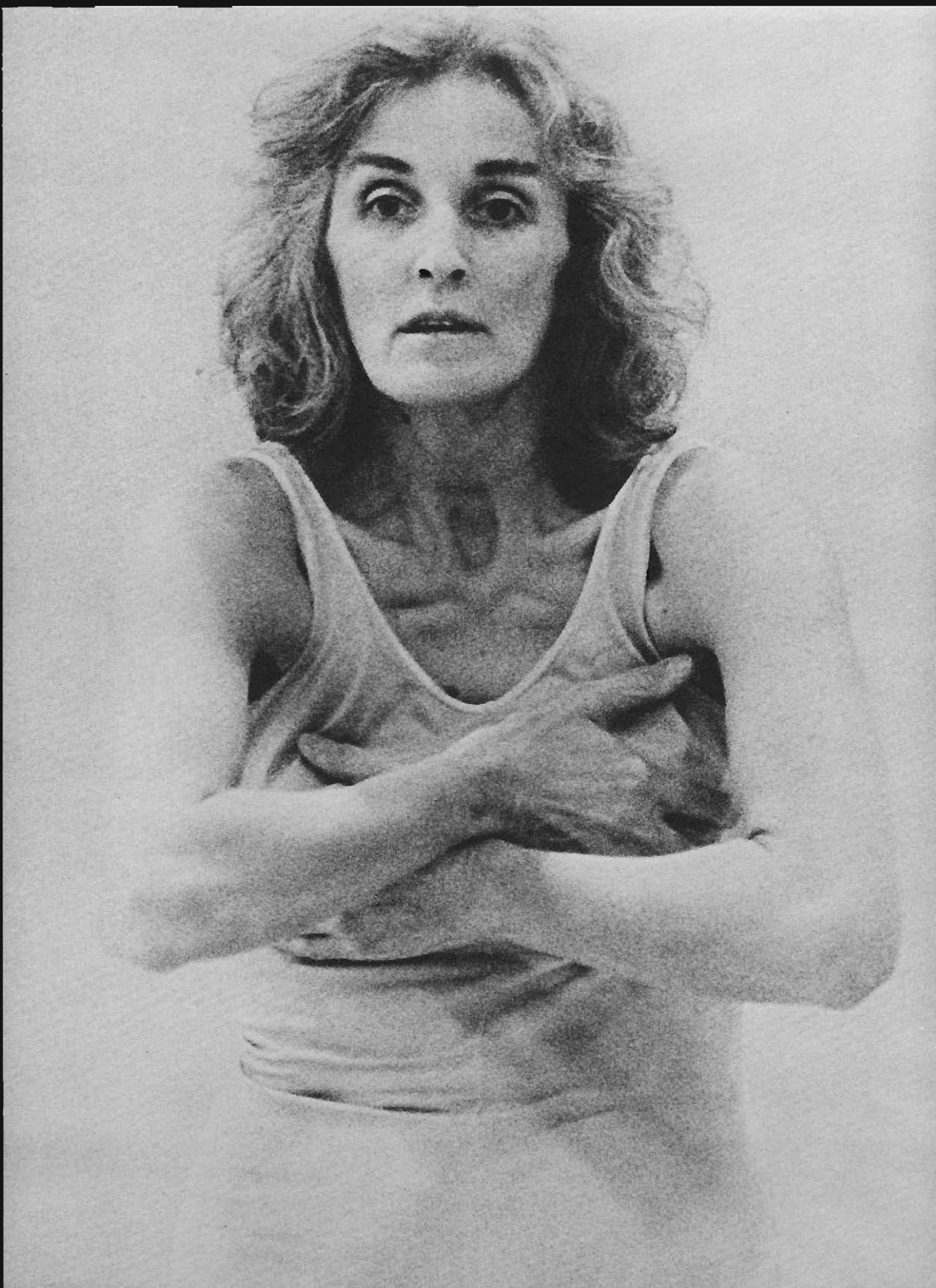
As narrative, I decided to use an information sheet provided by the Archives in Washington, D.C. that describes the extreme measures they take there to preserve the actual U.S. Constitution, methods used to protect "our fundamental charters from harm of every kind." This was my way of introducing the Equal Rights Amendment. Everyone is for equality but not if it must be included in the Constitution.

"Woman Waiting"—Heather Tuck



'Pitfalls and Pedestals' —Dale Crittenberger and Heather Tuck





The dance is very humorous on the surface and the narrative so ludicrous that it brings laughter. It is read by a tall cowgirl in white pants, shirt and boots. Of course she does not fit because the cowboys and Indians of American symbolism have always been male. Although "Pitfalls and Pedestals" is funny, it is one of those layered comments. If you are unaware of the equal rights debate, you see a beautiful duet of loving confinement, and you miss the big picture. Many people missed it!

PART VII: THE GREAT HOLDUP

The next section projects a film close-up of my mouth on the weather balloon, showing me sucking my cheeks, twisting my tongue and other exaggerated and vulgar gestures. This film led to my solo, a broad and blatant statement in which I slap the floor with my foot, put my hands to my breasts and violate other aesthetic conventions of dance. I refer to it as "The Great Holdup" because sex is one of the major things to hold men and women up. I took some of the more crude gestures people have used, like thumbing the nose and slapping the buttocks to show how men and women tend to view sex in our culture. I used the hand gestures of snubbing the nose and shooting a gun. There is a sense of violence, a breaking out of conventional images. Perhaps it also gives a sense of the revolutionary, of women who defy convention. I danced it in tennis shoes and played it in a way that acknowledges the sexuality of the body.

PART VIII: RECOMMENCEMENT

The finale includes material from every section of the work. Both men and women share and exchange movement and roles. Threads of material reoccur throughout with new value placed on movement as it is juxtaposed in new ways. At the end the man and the woman walk together, encircling the space. They watch the image of woman projected on the balloon: She is strong. She is sensual. She is free. She is eternal.



"Recommencement" —Maida Withers and Jeffrey Strum