

SUNDAY, MARCH 5, 2000

ART / ARCHITECTURE

His Canvas a TV Screen, His Brush a Camera

By MICHAEL RUSH

MERCE CUNNINGHAM once told Charles Atlas: "When approaching a new work, ask yourself, 'What are the possibilities of this situation?' Go as far as possible. Work with all the possibilities." Mr. Atlas (known by his friends as Charlie) was with Mr. Cunningham as protégé and collaborator for more than 13 years, during which they invented what Mr. Atlas calls "mediadance."

Not pure dance or pure video or film, mediadance is perhaps best understood by what it isn't: it is not documentation of a dance nor a film about dance. It is dance conceived for the filmed image, dependent as much on camera work and editing as it is on choreography. The best example of it remains one of Mr. Atlas's first works with Mr. Cunningham, "Blue Studio: Five Segments" (1975-76), in which Mr. Cunningham appears to float through a galaxy of colors and sculptured forms unfettered by gravity.

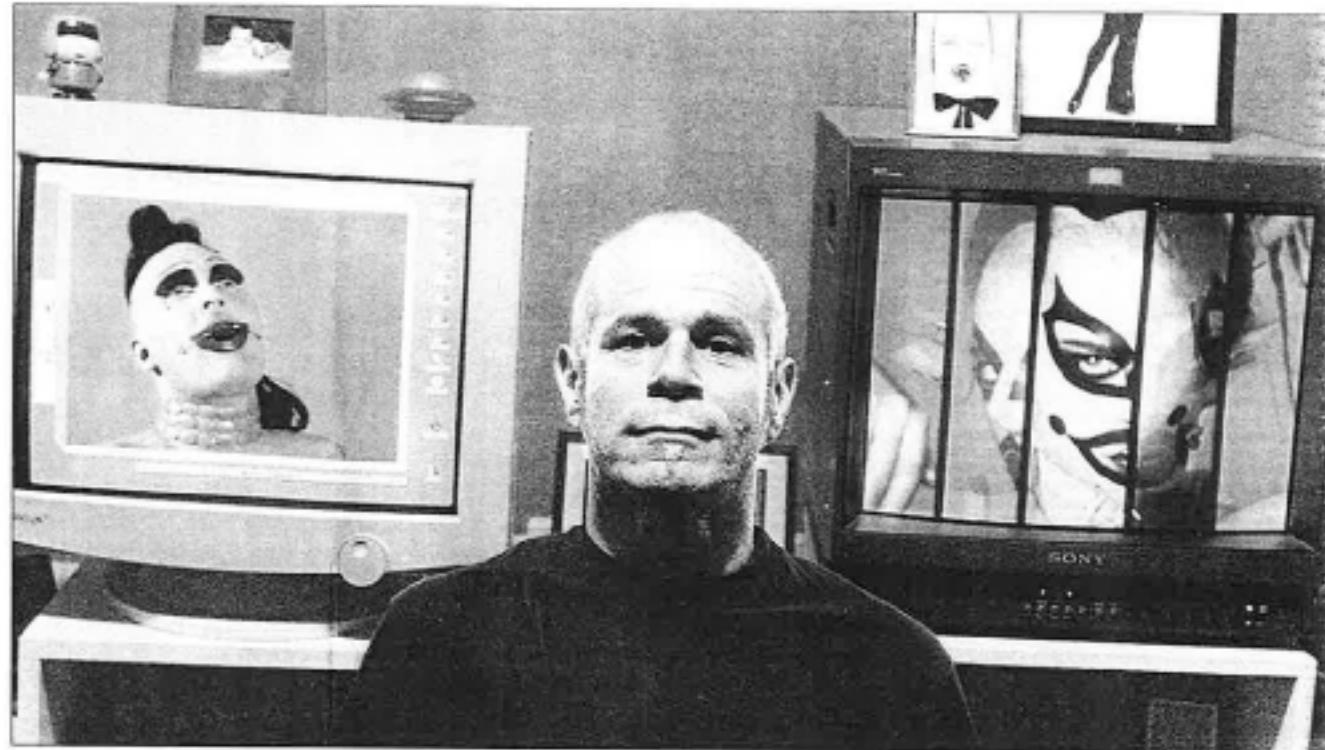
In the last 30 years, Mr. Atlas has created scores of videos, films, performances and set and lighting designs for opera, theater and dance. From Friday through April 1 he returns to the Kitchen in Chelsea, where he first performed a short dance in a 1974 series that also featured the artists Joan Jonas and Hannah Wilke. His current appearance is as a video-installation artist with two new works, "As If You Like It" and "10," both of which will fill the walls of the Kitchen's large second-floor gallery with digitally altered patterns of mesmerizing movement by elaborately costumed performers. Mr. Atlas thinks of himself as a portraitist, probing the edges of identity through abstract scenarios staged for the camera.

But wait a minute. What about that name, Charles Atlas? Did this tall, lean, 50-year-old St. Louis native with the close-cropped bleached blond hair assume the famous body builder's name as a prank or a fantasy when he came to New York after two years at Swarthmore College in the late '60's?

"I'm the real Charles Atlas," he protests during a recent interview in his Chelsea apartment. "The other one was born Angelo Sordillo, and he changed his name to Charles Atlas." Charlie's father was born an Atlas in Lithuania and immigrated when he was 3 to the United States, where the later worked as a traveling salesman. Charles is the Anglicized version of Sordil, the name of an uncle who died in the old country.

"Dance was never what I wanted to do," Mr. Atlas says, sitting next to stacks of magazines with names like *Dance* and the *Face*. "I always thought of myself as a media artist who sort of fell into dance." Captivated is more like it. In 1970 he took a job as an assistant stage manager with Mr.

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The media artist Charles Atlas in his Manhattan studio, with still photographs on either side from his video installations "Teach," at left, and "99 (Johanna)." One Sigma Charles/The New York Times

Cunningham's company. By the time he left, in 1983, he had been production manager, lighting designer, sometime costume designer and, most important, filmmaker-in-residence. During those years he directed more than 30 videos and films, not only with Mr. Cunningham, but also with many others from the pantheon of downtown dance, including Douglas Dunn, James Waring and Yvonne Rainer. After growing tired of touring and wanting more time for his own projects, he left the company (and its regular paycheck). "Three people took my place," he says, not boasting, but just specifying the facts.

Among the highlights of his works since then are collaborations in film and video with artists like Bill Irwin, Marina Abramovic, Karole Armitage and Leigh Bowery (best known as a model for the British painter Lucian Freud) and a collection of tapes made for the Martha/Mother performances, organized by the Martha Graham impersonator Richard Mote at the neighborhood Mother in the meatpacking district.

In 1987, Mr. Atlas conceived "As Seen on

A Merce Cunningham protégé, Charles Atlas offers colorful patterns of performers in motion he calls 'mediadance.'

TV" with Mr. Irwin for Public Television's "Alive From Off Center," the adventurous avant-garde series that lasted only a few seasons. A riotous sendup of the chaos and burlesque associated with an open casting call for an unnamed theatrical event, it stars Mr. Irwin as a Chaplinesque performer who, while waiting his turn to audition, wanders into a room that has a video camera and television set. Through a series of cleverly rendered mishaps with the camera, Mr. Irwin ends up inserting himself in network television shows in progress: news reports, sports events, soap operas, ballets and "Seinfeld Street." The program, which

became the basis for Mr. Irwin's Broadway show "Largely New York," was for Mr. Atlas "the one time I had enough money to do all the things I wanted to do as a director and editor."

Mr. Atlas's association with the Belgrade-born artist Marina Abramovic has yielded a number of daring videos and performances, including "Dekolossal" (1990), during which Ms. Abramovic, wearing only a sheer plastic costume and black stockings, stands inside a glass-enclosed set, lets loose 400 rats that were hidden under a rug. A meditation on death and decay in war-torn Bosnia, this theater piece followed the two artists' 1989 video, "855," in which Ms. Abramovic wore a Medusa-style headdress made of real snakes.

Mr. Atlas explored the humorous limits of human endurance with Mr. Bowery in several tapes made before the performer's death in 1994. In one, Mr. Bowery, decked out in garish drag, à la John Waters's star Divine, pierced his cheeks with large safety pins so which he attached fake red lips and then struggled to mouth the words to Aretha Franklin's "Take a Look." As touching as it

is disconcerting, the tape celebrates artifice as Mr. Atlas leaves unedited his own gaffes and off-hand comments from behind the camera while Mr. Bowery, a study in vulnerability, performs close to the topic.

AMONG Mr. Atlas's many influences are Warhol's films, especially "The Chelsea Girls" (1966), Hollywood romances from the 30's and 40's and, currently, television. His self-described devotion to channel surfing is evident in the racing images of his "Martha" tapes, many of which are compilations of clips from forgotten films like "Rhythm on the Range" (1936) and "Around the World" (1941).

From "Little Strange," a brief sketch with actors and a cat performed in a downtown loft in 1972, to an elaborate 15-channel video installation, "The Raaged One," that filled a castle outside Amsterdam in 1987, Mr. Atlas continues to seek and find new possibilities. But what he would really love to do, he says, is "bring back Leigh Bowery and film him in 3-D IMAX!"