



*Yvonne Rainer. The Mind Is a Muscle, Part I (Trio A). 1973.*

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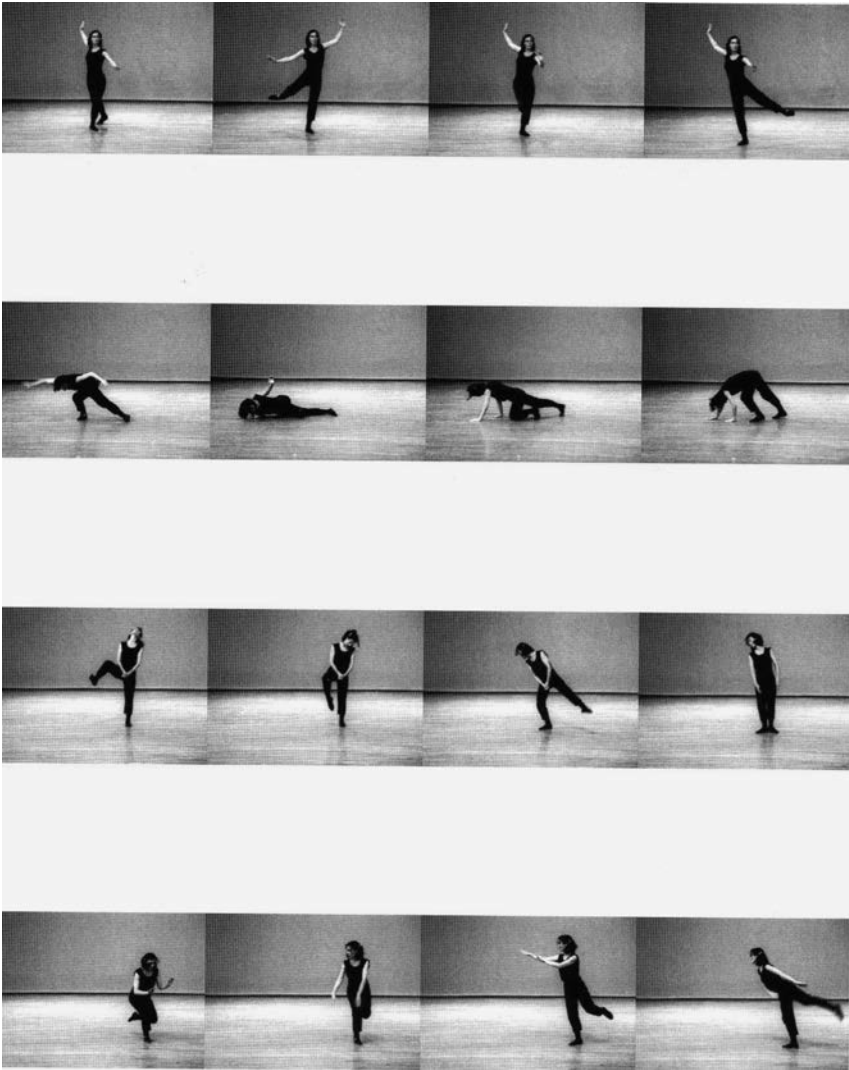
## *Walk On*

This is a text about embodiment and presence, about specters and time. It is about tempo, about slowness, about pacing, about duration, about counting, about the routines we give ourselves to make it through hard times. It is about “going through the motions.” It is, more specifically, about the endurance—one could say haunting—of a single set of motions, routines, and gestures: Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A*. Choreographed over a six-month span in 1965, and first performed in 1966, the dance has been understood as inaugurating a new field of practice that embraced laconic movements and ordinary bodies, and helped usher in postmodern, task-based dance.<sup>1</sup> In addition, *Trio A* has refigured what it means to talk about the medium—or mediums—of contemporary art.

Though many are familiar with this now-canonical work, here is some basic descriptive ground: in *Trio A* the performers—often a mix of dancers and non-dancers—generally wear normal street clothes, usually dance without musical accompaniment, and perform the same movements together, but not in unison.<sup>2</sup> The sequence of unpredictable actions, ones that disregard dance conventions of phrasing and climax, runs about four and a half to five minutes long, but since there is no musical beat or rigid metronome to keep people in sync, inevitably each performer ends up dancing for different lengths of time. It premiered as a work-in-progress at Judson Memorial Church in New York City in 1966, featuring Rainer, Steve Paxton, and David Gordon as part of a larger work, *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part I*; since then, it has been danced in dozens of diverging versions (initiated both by Rainer and by others). Some of its other iterations have been included at an anti-war protest exhibition in 1970, the “People’s Flag Show,” in which it was performed by naked dancers with U.S. flags tied around their necks; a back-

1. I would like to extend my thanks to Ian Carter, Mel Y. Chen, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and Richard Meyer for their insightful comments on this text. Special thanks to Yvonne Rainer for her patience and assistance. The literature on *Trio A* is rich and voluminous; for more on its connection to postmodern dance in particular, see Sally Banes, *Terpischore in Sneakers: Post-modern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); and Jill Johnston, “Rainer’s Muscle,” in *Marmalade Me* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971).

2. For a history of this increasing “canonization,” see Jens Richard Giersdorf, “*Trio A* Canonical,” *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 19–24.



*Rainer. Trio A. 1978.  
Cinematography by Robert Alexander.*

wards or “retrograde” version; one with Rainer in tap shoes; one in which the performer was confined to a small platform; one danced by a group of students on the sidewalk outside of Rainer’s hospital; one set to the Chambers Brothers’ song *In the Midnight Hour*, etc.<sup>3</sup>

The recent widespread availability of a previously somewhat obscure 16-millimeter film of Rainer dancing *Trio A*, produced in 1978 by Sally Banes, has provided greater visual access to the dance’s basic contours than the still photographs alone. Inspired to use these captured motions as a guide, many have learned *Trio A* by following Rainer’s filmed body; for instance, in 2010, artist Lindsay Lawson commissioned a dancer to learn *Trio A* by repeatedly watching the 1978 recording that had been made into a digitized video and posted on YouTube. The dancer, Elisa Vazquez, then executed the motions in front of a projection of Rainer, so that her body and her shadow performed a trio with the flickering historical image behind her; Lawson entitled this piece *A.Trio*.<sup>4</sup>

In the past few years, *Trio A* has been subject to a wealth of interest, including the substantial scholarly analyses of two excellent books: a focused look at *The Mind Is a Muscle* by Catherine Wood, and a monograph on Rainer’s wider body of work in the 1960s by Carrie Lambert-Beatty.<sup>5</sup> In addition to live performances around the world, the dance has garnered visibility in an array of other venues and contexts: from its presence in the online community Second Life, where it was learned by a group of virtual avatars, to its 2010 appearance in an exhibition about avant-garde drawing, *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century*, at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. The museum displayed a large-scale projection of the 1978 documentation, and curators Connie Butler and Catherine de Zegher justified its inclusion in this show based on the fact that here the dancing body draws in space.<sup>6</sup> *Trio A* has long been, in Rainer’s words, her old “warhorse”;<sup>7</sup> but in recent years it has generated a storm of attention, and is recruited as a signature piece for an ever-widening number of histories as it scatters across media (it is at once a dance, a set of instructions, a performance, a drawing, a film, a digitized video made of the film, etc.).

This flexibility underscores that *Trio A* might be understood as an example of what Rosalind Krauss termed the “post-medium condition” in contemporary art. According to Krauss, the “medium” of art can no longer be reduced to its technological support, as artists have reinvented what the means and methods of

3. *The Mind is a Muscle* first appeared in its totality at the Anderson Theater in New York in April 1968. For a more comprehensive list of some of its versions, see Yvonne Rainer, “*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation,” *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 12–18.

4. Choreographer Andrea Božić has also used *Trio A* as a departure point for questions of mediatisation; in her work *After Trio A* (2010), she instructed dancers with no previous knowledge of the piece to learn a portion of it by watching it on a television monitor for one hour.

5. Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind Is a Muscle* (London: Afterall Books, 2007); Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008).

6. Cornelia H. Butler, “Walkaround Time: Dance and Drawing in the Twentieth Century,” in Catherine de Zegher and Cornelia Butler, *On Line: Drawing in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp. 137–203.

7. Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings are Facts—A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), p. 465.

art-making might look like, often focusing on a conceptual idiom by deploying a range of materials.<sup>8</sup> It is worth asking, then, how *Trio A* functions among and across different media: where does it reside, and how do we come to know it? How is each iteration both a fresh interpretation of an archival act and a reenactment—or reactivation—of a repertoire? These questions point to the limitations of medium-specificity; what is more, they go to the heart of why and how *Trio A* has been understood as a dense cultural, historical, political, and artistic act.

### *Turn Head*

It has been argued that *Trio A* presents a special case in terms of its challenge to the spectator. As is often noted in the literature, viewers have a notoriously difficult time mentally “tracking” this dance, as it repeats few phrases and unravels assumptions about internal through-lines. I have taught documentation of Rainer’s work for years, in contemporary-art classes that focus on everything from Minimalism to performance to political art. Having studied many photographs, screened the film numerous times for my students, and read incisive written accounts of it, I thought I had a pretty good sense of what it entailed. I was wrong. I now approach the question of the medium of *Trio A* differently, because in the fall of 2008, over the space of about six months, I took a class from Rainer at the University of California, Irvine and learned *Trio A*.

To be clear: I am not a trained dancer. I have never taken a dance class in my life, and have always been pretty clumsy—as a child I clomped around, constantly walking into tables and bruising my shins. I had not, in fact, initially intended to take the class. I showed up the first day to the dance studio thinking I would silently observe and take notes. Given UCI’s highly regarded MFA program, its popular dance major, and the iconic status of *Trio A*, I imagined dozens of students would want to seize this rare opportunity and clamber to enroll. But because of a clerical error, the class was incorrectly listed in the UCI course catalogue, and few people on campus knew that Rainer was spending the quarter teaching *Trio A*. In the end, only six people showed up, including my colleague, artist and professor Simon Leung; three undergraduates (Rachel Pace, Amanda Prince-Luboway, and David Gutierrez); and an MFA student, Caryn Heilman, who had danced professionally for ten years with the Paul Taylor company. I was wholly unprepared for what came next: Rainer, with virtually no preliminary explanation, introduction, or discussion, started teaching the opening movements and assumed we were all there to learn. Though I was not sure I was prepared to flail around alongside students, it seemed like madness not to join in.

Any dreams I might have had about preserving my professional dignity vanished as we all began to follow the initial motions: you walk onstage, stop, turn your

8. Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 289–305; and “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition,” *October* 116 (Spring 2006), pp. 55–62.



*Yvonne Rainer teaching  
Trio A. 2008.*

head to the left, and bend your knees. It took me an embarrassingly long time to do that right. I could not always reconcile what I knew to be the required gesture (such as a modified version of an arabesque that the trained dancers could leap into with little prompting) with the limitations of my body as I wobbled, tripped, and fell. My knees didn't bend the way they were supposed to; my sense of my center of gravity and balance was totally off; and as Rainer once said to me, her brow furrowed with concern, "Do you even know how to run?" For it turns out that most of our received ideas about this dance are slightly misleading; it is not full of "everyday" actions (for instance, it includes a free handstand in the middle of the room, and balance *en demi pointe* while wearing tennis shoes). Rather, it is exhausting, it is strenuous, it is very physically challenging, and Rainer has incredibly precise ideas about the ways the body needs to configure itself, where exactly the gaze should land, how even the fingers should be positioned. One does not sloppily move through a series of somewhat improvised or random motions; every tiny movement is prefigured, and it takes a great deal of concentration and work. Far from a free-form, unstructured terrain of unconstrained movement, Rainer's instructions were a reminder that dance, though it can be deeply pleasurable, is equally a discipline, concerned with techniques of training and regimes to shape the body.

My eagerness to do right by *Trio A* was further complicated by my

occasional unsteadiness simply being in Rainer's physical presence; this has something to do with the subtle, ever-shifting erotics of pedagogy. As students, we want to please. What is more, photographs of Rainer taken decades ago have long hovered like ghostly afterimages in my own imaginary, and libidinal, version of the 1960s and 1970s as a time of experimentation both artistic and sexual. Suddenly this fantasy version of history—a kind of peculiar romance, really—intertwined (and sometimes clashed) with the current moment. Rehearsing a dance innovated many years ago by a figure who has come to be a queer hero of mine, cast me, as her student, into a curious vexation of past and present. Rainer was affiliated with gay and lesbian activism long before she actually had a female partner. She was not queer-identified when she first choreographed *Trio A*, but later came out of the closet and now calls herself a lesbian, as well as, even more queerly, an “a-woman.”<sup>9</sup>

One could say, then, that *Trio A* can be understood as a queer dance (narrowly understood here as a dance produced by a queer-identified maker)—but that would be misleading, as retroactively attributing queerness to Rainer in the 1960s erases a richer, more complicated story. In fact, the arc of *Trio A*'s success might be tied, in some respects, to its very *lack* of identifiable matter related to gender or sexuality, and hence is reliant in part on a kind of straightness. As Rainer has commented, “There is no doubt in my mind that the extent to which I can be called a successful artist can be directly traced to a life as a white heterosexual...It is also interesting to speculate how my career might have fared if the content of my work—both dance and films—had focused on lesbian subjects and subject matter throughout the sixties and seventies.”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, Rainer's early work refused to explicitly thematize queerness, though its use of three performers in its initial incarnation—its “trio”—as opposed to the heterosexual binary implied by the traditional duet possibly opens up a queer space. Still, I am not sure what might be gained by reinscribing *Trio A* as “queer,” for any insistence on continuity or identity as it resides in the body of the maker does an injustice to the rangy vicissitudes of desire (queer and otherwise), and cannot account for the openings that queer theory has provided that move away from intention into the realm of interaction, promiscuous circulation, and unlikely affective modes of reception.

I am more interested in how my own revisiting of the dance in 2008 could be seen as a kind of “temporal drag,” to invoke Elizabeth Freeman's term. For Freeman, temporal drag invokes both cross-gender performance as well as the “pull of the past on the present”; she defines it as the “stubborn identification with a set of social coordinates that exceeds [our] own historical moment.”<sup>11</sup> These sorts of trans-temporal

9. Rainer, “Working Round the L-Word,” in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video*, ed. Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar, and John Greyson (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 12–20.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

11. Elizabeth Freeman, “Packing History, Count(er)ing Generations,” *New Literary History* 31 no. 4 (Autumn 2000), pp. 727–44.

crossings have been extensively theorized by queer thinkers like historian Carolyn Dinshaw, and one could say, following her lead, that learning a dance from 1965 was a queer way of “touching the past.”<sup>12</sup> Of course such “touchings” can only ever be partial and phantasmatic. My spectral relationship to Rainer-in-the-past was overlaid and vitalized by my recognition of her as a living being in the present. How might queer anachronisms, delays, lags, and other backward-formations apply, then, in the case of the return to *Trio A* in 2008?

This temporal drag—and the decision to insert oneself bodily into motions from the past as an experiment to test out the discontinuities between a *then* and a *now*—is deployed by current queer artists such as Sharon Hayes. In her series *In the Near Future* (2004–ongoing), Hayes wields protest signs—many of them anachronistic slogans from the 1960s and 1970s—in locations that are removed from their original geographical context but loaded as cultural spaces. For instance, she held the *I AM A MAN* sign from the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York (an important site for AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s). Hayes has commented that her actions necessitate that she physically hold the signs herself; that is, she must place herself “in the space of enactment” as a way of examining how “history is rupturing in the present moment.”<sup>13</sup>

Wresting the sign from its context in 1968, Hayes (a white woman) resignified *I AM A MAN*, leaving open the possibility for a transgender interpretation. As the notion of temporal drag helps make clear, trans-temporal crossings potentially echo other kinds of gendered trans-ing and gender refusals. To return to Rainer, the score for *Trio A* might be gender-neutral, but it is not necessarily neutral in terms of how its motions are translated by a range of gendered bodies. It may be instructive, then, to consider the gendering of *Trio A* as danced by Rainer when she taught it in 2008. Her present, more androgynous or butch appearance (having undergone the inevitable shifts brought about by aging, as well as by her more robust queer self-styling) more visibly registers her identification as an “a-woman.” *Trio A* was in part a backlash against Rainer’s modern-dance training under Martha Graham, who once told her, “When you accept yourself as a woman, you will have turn-out” (i.e., achieve the proper hip rotation).<sup>14</sup> Rainer goes on to write: “Prophetic words. Neither condition has come to pass.”

### *Bend Knees*

*Trio A* is often characterized as full of pedestrian motions, especially since it is meant to be danced by both professional dancers and non-dancers. It is

12. Carolyn Dinshaw, “Touching the Past,” in *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Post-Modern* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 1–54.

13. Hayes further discusses her relationship to queering the past in my interview with her, “We Have a Future: An Interview with Sharon Hayes,” *Grey Room* 37 (Fall 2009), pp. 78–93.

14. Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, p. 183.





*Rainer teaching Trio A. 2008.*

described in the same language as other Judson Church pieces, such as Rainer's work *We Shall Run* from 1965, in which its participants jog for seven minutes onstage wearing regular street clothes.<sup>15</sup> Such task-based movement sought to counteract the prevailing conventions of dramatic modernist dance by aligning itself with "found" motions, rather than refined, spectacular phrases that only a talented professional could possibly execute. A "found" or task-based motion means to visually index the exact amount of energy it takes to execute it, rather than partake of the myth of effortlessness. In *Trio A*, the body is further made intentionally awkward: the head is thrown back; shoulders hunch and the mouth gapes; arms are inelegantly arrayed; the body jerks and hops and rolls and heaves through a series of actions that are strenuous but do not require specialized balletic training.

The very structure of the dance emphasizes return: once a performer moves through the entire sequence, she starts over and exactly repeats the entire dance—sometimes it is danced again, a third time, with each dancer following his or her own internal pacing and tempo, none in sync with the others. Each time, they create different configurations on the stage together. Like Robert Rauschenberg's dual pieces *Factum I* and *Factum II*,

15. For more on this dance, and Rainer's relationship to Steve Paxton, see S. Elise Archias, "The Body as an Everyday Material in the 1960s: Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton," *Wreck* 3, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1–5.

from 1957—in which the artist attempted to contest myths of spontaneity in painting by matching the brushstrokes and drips of two canvases—this repetition within *Trio A* underscores that what might appear to the casual viewer like random improvisation is actually carefully thought-out, highly deliberate movement. (However, as with Rauschenberg’s works, these motions are far from robotic, and give way to slight variations and differentiation as the dancer moves from one cycle of the sequence to the next.)<sup>16</sup>

*Trio A* heralded the arrival of an unprecedented vision for what dance could look like, and what sorts of bodies were allowed to participate in it—in this, it was a significant moment in what Sally Banes has called “democracy’s body.”<sup>17</sup> It was claimed to be populist, egalitarian, and nonhierarchical, not only in its inclusion of non-dancers but also in its lack of a narrative, its evenness, and its lack of interest in classical emphasis, climax, and retreat. Dancer and choreographer Pat Catterson has called it “the people’s dance.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps the most signifi-



*Rainer teaching Trio A. 2008.*

16. Branden Joseph discusses how Rauschenberg’s *Factum I* and *Factum II* were simultaneously constructed, so neither was a “copy” of the other; Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), p. 191.

17. Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962–1964* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

18. Pat Catterson, “I Promised Myself I Would Never Let It Leave My Body’s Memory,” *Dance Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 3–11.

cant aspect of the dance—or at least the one commented upon with the most frequency—is that at no point does the performer look at the audience. The gaze is always averted, and in many instances, the gestural logic commands the body to follow the eyes—in other words, the face first turns and then the arm will follow; or the hand gently curls at the hip and the eyes dip down in response towards the palm. The dancer is primarily concerned with attention to her own flesh. In the one moment in the dance when the performer's face is directly angled towards the viewer, her eyes are closed. Practicing the dance in front of a mirror turned its reflective surface into a substitute for the audience. To consistently look away from the phantom viewers was also a reminder not to get caught in constant self-checking or self-correcting; avoiding its presence meant a furthered attention to the body as enfleshed, rather than as represented.

The studied avoidance of eye contact with the audience and the careful, blank neutrality of expression were central to Rainer's critical intervention while composing this dance. As mentioned, she had studied modernist movement with Martha Graham, and *Trio A* was a polemical, assiduous rejection of some of modernist dance's primary tendencies. As she wrote in her famous "NO Manifesto," from 1965: "NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to the involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator no to the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved."<sup>19</sup> This manifesto has much in common with contemporaneous sculptural work, as has been pointed out by Lambert-Beatty and others, most notably the Minimal forms that her dance soon became affiliated with. The elimination of phrasing and development meant that every movement was equally important, and flowed from one to another, somewhat akin to Donald Judd's "one thing after another."<sup>20</sup> In addition, both Minimal dance and Minimal sculpture raised questions about the ethics of spectatorship: this is Lambert-Beatty's incisive characterization of Rainer's dance, that it is "difficult to see" in that it provokes a heightened awareness in the body of the viewer. The very absence of phrasing means that the sequencing of time—the logic of how something just past continues into the ever-approaching future—is challenging to keep in order.

*Trio A* has been characterized as both photographing spectacularly well, but also as importantly resistant to documentation.<sup>21</sup> Much of the literature on *Trio A* is concerned with this question of memory, disappearance, and documentation—how to look at the photographs, for instance, or how much weight to give the filmed ver-

19. Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called *Parts of Some Sextets*, Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965," *Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965); repr. in *Yvonne Rainer, Works 1961–73* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), p. 51.

20. See Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, p. 95.

21. Lambert-Beatty considers this issue in depth in her "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*," first published in the pages of this journal in 1999; a revised version appears in *Being Watched*.

sion as “authentic.” Rainer’s abiding physical presence is crucial to maintaining the details of the dance, but as she ages—when she taught the dance in 2008, she was 74, and could still perform with agility most but not all of it—this memory vessel is less and less secure. Rainer has been afforded some measure of relief now that the dance has been officially notated in the Labanotation system, a graphic charting system that archives choreography by translating it into a written score and thus renders it into a script can be, at least in theory, followed quite exactly.

After decades of having a fairly laissez-faire attitude towards those who took up and performed *Trio A* without her to oversee the process, Rainer admits that she has begun to feel uneasy with its widespread dissemination and the many variables of its replication. As she wrote in 2009,

When I hear rumors of people learning *Trio A* from the video, I know that they have achieved only a faint approximation of the dance with little understanding of its subtleties. Precision has always been an important component of *Trio A*. Its geometric floor patterns, governing direction of feet and facing of hips, is exacting and not to be trifled with. For example, the final diagonal with all its twisting perambulations, though not literally drawn, constitutes a directive as rigorous as any issued by Balanchine, Cunningham, or Lucinda Childs.<sup>22</sup>

Having it notated within the Laban system allowed Rainer to “set the record straight” and be as fastidious and scrupulous as possible about the minute gestural demands of the dance, but even this scientific method has its limitations; the version learned by students at the Laban Center in the U.K. who used the score alone needed, as Rainer notes, “not just fine-tuning but gross adjustments.”<sup>23</sup> Instead, Rainer foregrounds the one-on-one pedagogical encounter, the importance of the interpersonal transmission of the dance’s motions that become, as Catherine Wood puts it, a “living archive.”<sup>24</sup>

The question of how performance endures through time, and the paradox of capturing ephemeral events, have been central to work on live art—including arguments by Phillip Auslander, André Lepecki, Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, and others, and I will not recapitulate those important debates here. Instead I propose that we think about *Trio A* as a complex discursive site that invites, demands, and necessitates *practice*—as obvious as that might seem, given that it is a dance that is rehearsed and repeated. However, the term *practice* could use more attention beyond the meanings delimited by Pierre Bourdieu (who uses the word to theorize social ordering as it “unfolds in time”) and Michel de Certeau (who thinks through the procedures and modes of everyday behavior).<sup>25</sup> Recently the word, commonly used in contemporary art criticism to signify post-studio artistic work that is difficult

22. Rainer, “*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation,” p. 16.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

24. Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind Is a Muscle*, p. 93.

25. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 9; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

to pin to one medium, has come under some scrutiny. An article by Roberta Smith in the *New York Times* in December 2007 called its use “lamentable” and “pretentious,” a sanitization of art-making that aligns it with the work of those white-collar professionals who need licenses to practice such as “lawyers, doctors, and dentists.”<sup>26</sup>

Smith overlooks something critical; *practice* as a way to describe artistic labor that is wide-ranging and difficult to categorize has its uses, as it signals that art-making (which might not adhere to any one medium) might continually be in process. Against Smith’s claim that the term professionalizes art, Andrea Phillips in her article “Education Aesthetics” argues that “practice” strains the definition of artistic labor by distancing it from an expectation of production or remuneration, placing it rather in the flow of process, learning, or procedure.<sup>27</sup> (Rainer’s insistence that *Trio A* be transmitted through teaching prefigures the wider “educational turn” in contemporary art.) Historically, Herbert Marcuse used the phrase *political practice* in his 1969 *An Essay on Liberation* to refer to attempts to forge new forms of experience that move both the political and the aesthetic realm away from the automatic and the engineered. He writes: “Such a practice involves a break with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things so that the organism may become receptive to the potential forms of a nonaggressive, nonexploitative world.”<sup>28</sup> The literally repeated practice of *Trio A* might, counterintuitively, connect to Marcuse’s notion of a political practice that offers a way out of routine.

### *Swing Arms*

During my experience with *Trio A*, “practice” took on new levels of meaning. I set myself the task of learning something I had read about and studied for years from a radically transformed perspective—suddenly I was thrust from the role of witnessing scholar (ostensibly removed by a historical distance) to a body on the scene. It felt, in part, like trying an alternative research methodology, what Donna Haraway has called “situated knowledge” at its most literal, as I sited myself within and among Rainer’s rigorous paces. “We need to learn in our bodies,” wrote Haraway in her call for a critical feminist epistemology.<sup>29</sup> What, too, about *unlearning*? Many of the actions in *Trio A* are slight tweaks on ballet movements such as the *rond de jambe* and the arabesque, but made more ordinary, their dynamic range toned and tamped down, the flourishes and emphases taken out. Former professional dancer Caryn Heilman told me during one rehearsal that the hardest thing for her was to stop putting accents on the movements, to stop stylizing her ges-

26. Roberta Smith, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Art,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 2007, p. 2.37. Further, Smith does not discuss how “practice” could be viewed as an element of praxis.

27. Andrea Phillips, “Education Aesthetics,” in *Curating and the Educational Turn*, eds. Paul O’Neill and Mick Wilson (London: Open Editions, 2010), pp. 83–96.

28. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 17.

29. Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), p. 581.

tures—in other words, to stop dancing too much. But at least she knew the basic moves that Rainer was perverting: as a non-dancer, I found learning *Trio A* akin to learning a language so foreign that you not only don't understand the words or the alphabet, but you can't even distinguish between consonants and vowels.

Learning *Trio A* expanded and enriched my relationship to time. It slowed things down (all that exertion only took five minutes?); it sped things up (we only have a few more minutes to go?). It was the last thing I thought about before going to bed, and the first thing I thought about when waking up. Its chain of motions, which progress uninterruptedly with very little emphasis, functioned like a mental string of worry beads that I would go over to calm myself. Through Rainer's infinite patience, and over many, many hours of rehearsal, I slowly managed to put the pieces together into a "good enough" version. (Rainer acknowledged that her small UC Irvine troupe in 2008 "worked their asses off."<sup>30</sup>) Still, though eventually I could do it just right in my own mind, my body did not always comply. The disconnect between my perfectly executed mental motions and my actual flubbings were a reminder of the disjunction between visualization (how the mind sees the self) and material embodiment (how the body performs its own incoherence).

Even if you "know" the dance, there are endless things to refine, to polish, to finesse—dozens of little tricky weight changes to maneuver, for instance. In addition, it offers the absorbing experience of focusing attention onto your own limbs while also negotiating around the dancers who share the space with you. When you dance it, it is hard to think of anything else but dancing it. You can't focus on where the body has been or anticipate by more than a few seconds where it will go. As my fellow dancer Amanda said, "I am more in the present in those minutes than I am in any other part of my life." Strikingly, this idea of "presence" echoes Michael Fried's famous formulation about Minimalism from his 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood."<sup>31</sup> Still useful for its crystallizing polemic, Fried's argument asserts that minimal sculpture demands that the spectator remain self-aware at all times. His grimly negative assessment of this "theatrical" art contends that it is such awareness that defeats art, which is meant to suspend duration in order to take one out of time. As he writes in his well-known concluding sentence, "Presentness is grace." Yet in my experience of the Minimal dance, *Trio A* is specifically about heightened presentness, as one must be fully conscious of time unfurling from second to second (although I might revise his dictum in my own plodding case to read "presentness is gracelessness").

A letter from John Bernard Myers (director of the Tibor De Nagy Gallery in New York) to Rainer from 1968 articulates more about the possible corporeal and political stakes of *Trio A*:

My reaction was to see the whole "ballet" as a form of "preaching":  
"This is what the body is about." The body is cool, or it sweats, it cannot

30. Rainer, "Trio A: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation," p. 17.

31. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), pp. 12–23; reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 116–47.

ignore gravity, best to give in to it. The body leaps; it falls down. We balance ourselves, but only for a moment or two. The body gets tired. . . . But can you understand my kind of shocked awareness that a dancer and choreographer has set out to “teach” the public what the Body is all about? . . . The questions your art proposes are very hard to face. Should the public be asked to face them? The answer of course is a resounding “Yes!” But my dear Yvonne, I hope you are prepared to accept that fact that they may kick like hell . . .<sup>32</sup>

What, for Rainer, is the medium of the body about? She has many metaphors for the dance, most of them mechanical: an airplane coming in to land, a motorized machine for flapping the ears. When teaching, Rainer said that one of the things that makes it so very hard to learn is that “there is more energy where you wouldn’t expect it and less energy where you would expect it.” But it is a faulty machine, she admits, unruly and bizarre, with potential for failure and humiliation and foolishness and fragility and vulnerability. Thus at one point she instructs that you “scramble up however you can.” Body parts scatter and disperse: they become unfamiliar and disembodied, as if they had minds of their own. You “unspool your arm from your body,” or your foot “skitters along like a mechanized bug,” or you lean back as if your leg had suddenly become leaden and were too heavy to lift.



*Rainer teaching Trio A. 2008.*

Myers notes that the dance teaches the public something of crucial importance. Why might the public in 1968 have needed this lesson? Then, as now, the contested terrain of the body has everything to do with questions of embodiment, of fleshy presence, and all its ramifications: gender, race, ability, age, and sexuality (the very terms thrown most into question during the social movements of the mid- to late 1960s, when Rainer choreographed *Trio A*). The body is the very grounds on which social and public identity is fought.

### *Step Left*

During the fall of 2008, the months in which I learned *Trio A*, the materiality of aged, raced, gendered, and differently abled bodies came to matter quite pointedly within the heated rhetoric of the presidential election: think of John McCain’s war wound, Sarah Palin’s beauty-queen self-presentation, and Barack

32. Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, p. 303.

Obama's mixed-race heritage. Bodies, with their specificities, have always played an important role in U.S. political life, but in this election season, the scrutiny seemed ever more intense. While in the full grip of my fixation on rehearsing *Trio A*, I noticed how commonly dance metaphors were invoked—Obama, for instance, was depicted in numerous caricatures as a slick, smooth tap dancer (a trope that is racially loaded). What is more, the idealist politics of the 1960s that provided such fertile ground for experimental movement had significant echoes in the 2008 election, as both campaigns worked to mobilize the successes and failures of the civil-rights era and the Vietnam War.

When *Trio A* was performed in 1968, it was accompanied by an artist's statement that detailed Rainer's "horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV—not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western. My body remains the enduring reality."<sup>33</sup> As Lambert-Beatty has argued, Rainer's work was in critical dialogue with the culture of media and televised images of the Vietnam War. In this argument, the dancing body is posited as an antidote to televisual death, some sort of counterproposal to a distant horror. But I am not sure that the presumed dichotomy or tension between mediatization versus presence still works forty years later.



*Student learning Trio A. 2008.*

In the fall of 2008 (again a time of a brutal and spectacularized war), the polarization of documentation versus liveness was made increasingly unstable. During practice, the other students and I would bring our laptops or iPods to watch the 1978 filmed version (which Rainer finds inaccurate and was constantly striving to correct) to compare ourselves against or to remind us of certain transitions. *Both* the live body of Rainer and her filmed body were our guides. To practice *Trio A* in the fall of 2008 was to exist in a heightened present but was also to try to retell, however provisionally, a text from the past, as a way to have a palpable, affective relationship to a charged previous time. The toggle between the "original" dance from the 1960s and the version we enacted was framed, however, by our constant connection to the "now"; we checked the election polls at breaks on our electronic devices and then got back to work.

There is something in dance called "muscle memory"—the capturing of

33. Rainer, "Statement" from *The Mind Is a Muscle*, Anderson Theater, New York (April 1968); repr. in *Work, 1961–73*, p. 71.



movement within your flesh so thoroughly that when you move, you can do so without much conscious thinking. The body can contain and store thought, history, and meaning; it is capable of holding and learning and even teaching the mind. Seeing dance can arguably work to imprint its motions within the observer; in fact, dancers healing from injuries are encouraged to watch others dance, as it is claimed that simply witnessing the movements helps prevent their muscles from forgetting.<sup>34</sup> Now, when I see pictures of *Trio A* from past versions, somatic triggers remind me of exactly when in the sequence they were taken; I can feel the motions in my legs or torso that lead to what comes after. This is not to privilege my experience, but to note that performers become specialized types of viewers, with somewhat altered relationships to documentation.

Might it be this muscle memory that is at the crux of *Trio A*'s haunting of contemporary art today, for it posits an alternative model—something that might augment writing, or traditional research, or photography, or digital technologies—to help us rethink the construction and reconstruction of the past as it continually reappears in the present? In this sense, I invoke the “medium” of *Trio A* to indicate that, re-reflecting Krauss’s notion of the “post-medium condition,” the dance also functions as a *medium*—to dance it is to travel to another time, to conjure like a mesmerist or spirit guide images or moments or gestures that have (only spectrally) passed. The name for a person who has learned a dance from its maker and is officially authorized to teach it to others is the custodian, reconstructor, or “transmitter.”<sup>35</sup> Yet she is also the carrier of its hard-to-index traces—she transmits its information within her body; it is a profoundly intimate exchange, this taking in of an archive and holding it close to revivify it for the future. Perhaps Rainer was so strict with us at UCI because she has grown more aware that when she teaches it, she is actively creating within her students a living archive that will exist alongside the many photographs, the film, the virtual versions, the Laban score, and the written descriptions.

This sort of embodied, temporal “holding” might be understood as queer. As theorists like Molly McGarry, Elizabeth Freeman, and Judith Halberstam have argued, the untimely—and affective—interweaving of the past and the present could be called non-normative or queer time.<sup>36</sup> As Freeman wrote in her introduction to a 2007 special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* explicitly dedicated to “queer temporalities,” “time has, indeed *is*, a body. . . . [T]his sensation of asynchrony can be viewed as a queer phenomenon—something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to

34. This is a common dance convention, but such a presumed psychophysical response based on spectating has been questioned by Susan Leigh Foster in her *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011).

35. Rainer, “*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation,” p. 15.

36. Molly McGarry, “Secular Spirits: A Queer Genealogy of Untimely Sexualities,” in *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008), pp. 154–76; Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University, 2005); and Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2010).



*Rainer: Trio A in Ten Easy Lessons. 2009. Dancers: Julia Bryan-Wilson, David Gutierrez, Caryn Heilman, Simon Leung, Rachel Pace, and Amanda Prince-Luboway. Photograph by Rose Eichenbaum.*

express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will.”<sup>37</sup>

### *Spread Hands*

Though I came into the experience thinking that my not-quite-rightness at *Trio A* would be my own private shame to shoulder, it was soon made clear that for Rainer, the point of a dance is to make it public. Just because the dancers are mandated to avoid gazing at the viewers or meeting their eyes does not negate those viewers. With this, another stereotype about *Trio A* was shattered: though the performers avert their gazes, the dancers are there to be looked at. Indeed, it is crucial that the dance be witnessed; as Wood writes, “its primary purpose was to hold the audience’s attention, to be seen.”<sup>38</sup> The culmination of our obsessive practice was a series of performances at UC Irvine, February 5–8, 2009, as part of a larger program that highlighted the work of the dance-department faculty and was a wider tribute to choreographer Donald McKayle. The six of us performing this version of *Trio A*, which Rainer entitled *Trio A in Ten Easy Lessons* in a nod to the ten-week quarter, had formal rehearsals, tech checks, and a dressing room in which we shared space with the dancers changing into costumes for a piece by William Forsythe. It seemed a logical endpoint, for though the dance is so

37. Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” special issue, “Queer Temporalities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 1–2 (2007), p. 159.

38. Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind Is a Muscle*, p. 24.

much about the impossibility of seamlessly holding the past within the present, it is also always looking ahead. Think of how the eye first looks to where the body then follows—the entire sequence is a series of anticipatory gestures that move towards the future. The received notion that *Trio A* renounces the spectator is simply incorrect—when someone in our class asked, “Do we bow at the end?,” Rainer replied, “Absolutely. I never said no to bowing.”

By the end of the run I was still the worst in the bunch, but I made a kind of peace with that, taking comfort in the notion that there is a generosity in being the worst. (In the photos I have selected to illustrate this text, I have chosen ones that do not include me, or where I am a blurred figure in the background: such is my lasting sheepishness). Rainer has written the following about our UCI performances:

The visible variations in difficulty and struggle, the poignant determination and concentration of the three tyros—set off against the facility of the more “professional” performers—made it possible for me to engage with the dance in a way I hadn’t experienced before. In the past, if I had used untrained people, I had isolated them—that is, had them perform alone or in a group of others with a similar lack of training. But here everyone was operating simultaneously in the same space. . . . The difference between this group and the class I had observed at the Laban Centre lay in the consciousness of the former of both their limits and their struggle with those limits; they knew what they could not do, like balance on one leg convincingly or roll the head around while doing a difficult side step. The Laban people all had some dance training; they knew how to perform. What they didn’t know and couldn’t project was that sense of precariousness and achievement. My UCI “amateurs” had weathered the fire of my obsessive attention, and it showed—in their pride, determination, and self-awareness.<sup>39</sup>

Rainer’s intentional mixing of amateur and trained dancers was also a revelation during the performance. When dancing the work in front of an audience, performing the same movements alone but together, alongside each other but not in unison, I had the sensation of working next to these other students and colleagues in a wholly transformed way. The stage we performed on was much smaller than our practice space, so we had to compress our movements and find ways not to bump into each other. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has described what she calls the “beside”—a realm of respectful horizontal intimacy that is noncombative, porous, and open.<sup>40</sup> Sedgwick’s “beside” is not just spatial, but theoretical—it delimits a space of critical openness in which you assert your ideas *next to* rather than in opposition of other thinkers. Dancing *Trio A* felt very much like that as I moved alongside the other performers and had to negotiate, with great respect and admiration,

39. Rainer, “*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation,” pp. 17–18.

40. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2003).



*Rainer: Trio A in Ten Easy Lessons. 2009.  
Photograph by Rose Eichenbaum.*

their own swooping or jerking or hand-splaying motions.

This essay is an attempt to put into words what this method of experiential learning might mean for a scholar of contemporary art history, a field notorious for its indeterminate starting point as well as for its often uncomfortable blurring between theory and practice, between criticism and history. It feels especially fraught given the proprietary demands about “being there” that sometimes shadow discussions of the 1960s. And, as with rehearsing *Trio A*, I find myself stumbling as I write—in the face of so much strong scholarship on this dance, I grasp for original words, looking for angles that have not been covered before. But the lesson of *Trio A* might be not only mastering the sequence of gestures, the rolling on the ground, the scooting back or leaping forward, but one of collective corporeal negotiation that could be extended to think about how, too, we might practice contemporary art history. The lesson, then, may be about owning what Rainer called “precariousness and achievement.” So this text is very much in the spirit of the *beside*; I work next to (and am very much indebted to) Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Catherine Wood and Connie Butler and Pat Catterson. *Trio A* provides a potent metaphor for group relations, as you must give each other room on the stage, be aware of the other bodies and what their trajectories might be to avoid running into them. The logic of

adjacency in the dance, which is not one of lockstep, put me in mind of Susan Leigh Foster's notion of dance as modeling community or coalition.<sup>41</sup> The blankness of expression is not one of affectlessness, but one of measured awareness, of studied intensity without hysteria, of acting without overreacting. Though one is absorbed by one's actions while doing it, it is a dance against vanity.

During the Vietnam War, *Trio A* was pressed into service specifically as a protest, and I think it continues to register as such, however subtly. It is a protest against speed and acceleration. It is a protest against forgetting. The dance endures not only because of its negativity—its rejective force—but also because of its optimism, its expansiveness, its acceptance of the uncoordinated and its celebration of the awkward, its ability to structure and mark time. In fact, Rainer recently wrote a reflection about the dance that focused on passion:

As far as *Trio A* was concerned, PASSION (shout) was a given; it resided offstage, in the obsessions of the artist, among other excesses and more quotidian expressions of emotion. While no emotions were consciously generative of or relevant to the movement phrases in the ultimate sequence, they remained latent, submerged in the uninflected flow. Now I prefer to describe the mode of that performance as low-keyed impersonation, suggesting a provisional or ambiguous self that is at once produced, erased, and confounded.<sup>42</sup>

As this excerpt indicates, the self that *Trio A* instantiates is not one that merely says no; it also is desirous; it is contingent; it is relational and sensitive to its proximities to others; it does not take itself too seriously. In fact, Rainer has said that her "No Manifesto" has haunted her, and that she "wishes it could be buried."<sup>43</sup> She once told me that she should have written a *Yes* manifesto.

In the wake of learning *Trio A*, here is my provisional version of what such a manifesto would look like: yes to looking to the past for a way to endure the present, yes to inventing mediums and yes to creating new muscle memories and yes to alternative models of transmitting knowledge and yes to potential humiliation and yes to possible failure and yes to passion and yes to aging and yes to the messiness of contemporary art history as an uncertain and vital and undefined platform and yes to queer temporalities and yes to desirous histories and, finally, yes to bowing.

41. Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Protest," *Theater Journal* 5 no. 3 (October 2003), pp. 395–412.

42. Rainer, "Where's the Passion? Where's the Politics? Or, How I Became Interested in Impersonating, Approximating, and Running Around My Selves and Others', and Where Do I Look When You're Looking at Me?," *Theater* 40, no. 1 (2010), p. 49.

43. Rainer, "Meeting Yvonne Rainer," interview with Helmut Ploebst, [corpusweb.net/meeting-yvonne-rainer-3.html](http://corpusweb.net/meeting-yvonne-rainer-3.html) (accessed May 1, 2012).