

Pas de Trois: *Trio A* Dancing Between Performance, Film, and Art

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Abstract: The difference between theatrical performance and performance art has always been a tenuous one, but in the case of Yvonne Rainer's seminal piece *Trio A*, which debuted in 1966, this difference is even more complicated by the existence of a 1978 film of the work. In an attempt to grapple with the unclear border between visual studies and performance studies, this paper looks into how the translation between media re-contextualizes, re-represents, re-members, and ultimately re-forms *Trio A* into two different artworks: a live dance piece and a historic film. In order to explore the difference between the works I look at the transformation of the piece through its performance history, its realization of the ideals in Rainer's 1965 "NO Manifesto", the qualities unique to its performed incarnations, and the inherent semiotic differences between live performance and cinema. Though *Trio A* live and recorded are ultimately two different entities, they both serve different cultural functions.

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It is difficult to distinguish the boundary between performance art and theatrical performance. Both entail a human body (or human bodies) enacting an artistic event in real space and time, along with an experiential transaction between performer and audience. Defining these two art forms becomes even more complex when the possibility of filming these works is brought into play, allowing the work to become more widely available but also removing the necessity for interaction between performer and audience. Yvonne Rainer's seminal work *Trio A* is exemplary of these questions and problems: it is studied by art historians as a performance art piece on film and by dance historians and theatrical scholars as a modern dance piece. The transformation of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* from a dance piece to a filmic piece is representative of the disconnect between visual studies and performance studies as the medium, semiotics, and aura of the piece are ultimately re-contextualized, re-represented, re-membered, and ultimately re-formed into two entirely different works.

The 1960s bore witness to the growth of many radical factions within the modern movement, including the various artists affiliated with the Judson Memorial Church in New York. This included the Judson Dance Theater, which itself spawned multiple influential choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and Yvonne Rainer. It was at Judson where Rainer began choreographing her most well known work, *Trio A*, in 1965, and she first performed it at Judson one year later, in January 1966. No filmic documentation exists of this initial performance, where *Trio A* was situated as *The Mind is a Muscle, Pt I* and danced by

Rainer, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton. Another extended version was performed at Judson again in May of the same year, before the piece was completed and performed at the Anderson Theatre in April 1968.¹

Ten years after the work's completion, *Trio A* was immortalized on film by dance historian Sally Banes. This recording has become by far the most well known incarnation of the work, referred to by Platt as the "canonical 1978 film version".² Due to the inherently ephemeral nature of performance, it is necessary to discuss the formal elements of *Trio A* with regards to Banes's recording of it³. Recorded on 16mm in black and white, the camera sits in a fixed position as Rainer performs her own choreography as a solo (figure 1). The film has no sound, nor do its title cards list any music, so one must assume she is performing without any. She wears all black and has her dark hair clipped out of her face as she performs. The piece is incited by a slight glance toward the camera which flows straight into the next movement, a slight bend of the knees (in ballet, a *plié*). Each phrase of the work is both disparate from and fully integrated into the next; that is to say, her motions flow from one to the next without any anticipation of what's coming or follow through from what just occurred. Her movements border between pedestrian and dancery, not adhering to any particular form but still removed from a mundane physical vocabulary. She walks, rolls, hops, skips, prances, leaps, and even performs a handstand. Her use of the space is quite even yet unpredictable--though she does stay within the areas of the room that are lit. Rainer reveals that the room is Merce Cunningham's dance studio,⁴ meaning that the blank "wall" with wrinkles in its corners is likely some sort of fabric covering

¹Yvonne Rainer, "*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation," *Dance Research Journal* 41 (2009): 12-16.

²Ryan Platt, "The Ambulatory Aesthetics of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*," *Dance Research Journal* 46 (2014): 44.

³ This film can be viewed on the Getty's YouTube channel at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDHy_nh2Cno

⁴ Rainer, "Genealogy," 14.

the room's mirrors. Rainer dances for just under six minutes before stepping back on her right foot and ending just as spontaneously as she began.

It is crucial to point out that Banes's film of *Trio A* is not *Trio A* any more than Magritte's pipe n'est pas une pipe. One is immediately limited in one's discussion of the work by addressing an unseen, unexperienced performance of the work from a hypothetical standpoint, or a film recording of a single iteration of the work. This is where the vast differences between live and mediated performance begin to crop up and must be acknowledged and delved into to explain how *Trio A* is formed. These comparisons will be drawn from the piece's transformativity, its temporality and spatiality, and its presence.

Throughout its performance history, *Trio A* has maintained a sense of mutability, appearing in various forms and incarnations. In her tracing of the work's genealogy, Rainer details several variations of the work that occurred either through her own invention or through the involvement of collaborators. She mentions a "balletic" rendition by Peter Saul that included leaps and pirouettes, as well as her own performance in 1968 wearing tap shoes.⁵ Platt mentions *Convalescent Dance*, a *Trio A* performed by Rainer after a serious illness.⁶ Cat Patterson recalls her own contribution to the dance as the first person to perform the choreography backwards (figure 2), an event closely tied with the work's enactment at the *People's Flag Show* where the *Trio A* was presented by dancers clad only in American flags (1970, figure 3).⁷ At certain occasions the piece was performed to the Chambers Brothers' "In the Midnight Hour", other times in silence, and Lambert mentions that the first performance was "accompanied by the

⁵ Rainer, "Genealogy," 12.

⁶ Platt, "Ambulatory Aesthetics", 53.

⁷ Catterson, "I Promised Myself I Would Never Let It Leave My Body's Memory," *Dance Research Journal* 41 (2009): 6-7.

rhythmic clatter of wooden slats dropped to the stage from a balcony above.”⁸ Throughout her “Genealogy”, Rainer also follows to whom she taught the dance and when, noting how for its first ten years of existence she would teach it to anyone and allow it to be passed down quite freely. Ever since the piece’s inception, Yvonne Rainer has allowed *Trio A* to be a mutable entity that can be modified to fit cultural needs and generational shifts--and the majority of these shifts were incited by Rainer herself, evincing this mutability as authorial intent within the performed work. The filmed *Trio A*, however, lacks this feature so central to the work’s history, distancing it considerably from the various performances and performed variations.

Rainer began choreographing *Trio A* the same year as her work *Parts of Some Sextets*. *Sextets* was a radically different work, involving a stack of mattresses and various 30 second phrases of movement with names like “Bird run”, “Formation #2 (with ‘bug squash’)”, and “Swedish werewolf”. In the postscript of her retrospective writing on this piece, Rainer posited a one paragraph manifesto that rivals *Trio A* for iconicity. Deemed the “NO Manifesto”, in it Rainer outlines the “rules and boundaries of my own artistic game of the moment” with a series of “no”s, including: “NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe [...] no to involvement of performer or spectator [...] no to moving or being moved.”⁹ With the publishing of this piece in 1965 and the debut of the then incomplete *Mind is a Muscle, Pt I* in 1966, it is not a far leap to assume that *Trio A* is the fruition of these “no”s. The lack of spectacle is made manifest in Platt’s description of *Trio A* as “four unremarkable minutes”,¹⁰ while the rejection of “involvement” and “moving”/“being moved” are easily traced to Rainer’s

⁸ Carrie Lambert, “Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A*,” *October* 89 (1999).

⁹ Yvonne 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 (1965): 177-178.

¹⁰ Platt, “Ambulatory Aesthetics,” 44.

own description of the piece's two primary characteristics: continuity and the avoidance of the gaze.¹¹ Both these qualities that exemplify Rainer's manifesto are pretty easily found within *Trio A*, but simultaneously they do not do much to affect the filmic rendition. The movement of the filmed *Trio A* is easily arrestable through the ability to pause the video, which takes away from the effect of Rainer's automatic continuous motions; meanwhile the nature of film as the documentation of the past makes less exciting or interesting the unreciprocated gaze, as Rainer is simply avoiding looking at the camera instead of having to elude eye contact with another human. *Trio A* is the fulfillment of Rainer's ideals for dance as a medium, and through removing the piece from its medium one removes it from its context in a way that mars understanding.

Similar to the relationship between *Trio A* and Rainer's "NO Manifesto" making the dance about dance as a medium, both Platt and Lambert further explore *Trio A*'s mixed media connection with photography and film. Lambert argues that *Trio A* loses its unspectacular quality--i.e., presents itself as spectacle--when photographed (figure 4) due to Rainer's subversive creation of dance phrases. Rainer describes traditional phrasing as being created through a "formula of attack, suspension, and recovery" which creates a central focus point for the spectator within each segment of the dance.¹² Without this framing technique within the dance but instead the constant, task-like momentum that the viewer cannot properly trace, Lambert argues that the human materiality of the piece cannot be accurately translated across to a still medium, instead being intended to be witnessed live. This approaches Platt's argument, which draws from Lambert, that *Trio A* cannot properly translate across media to photography or cinema because it effectively replicates the effects of a filmic work. He focuses on ambulatory

¹¹ Rainer, "Genealogy," 12.

¹² Lambert, "Moving Still."

performance or ambulatory motion, a sort of appropriation of pedestrian or quotidian manner of movement, and states that *Trio A*'s constant, ceaseless chugging along replicates the experience of observing images through cinema. He forwards the idea of *Trio A* as an indexical symbol, constantly signifying what has just been through a physical relationship to it without being able to properly represent it, always just barely evading the eye as it slips past.¹³ Both Lambert and Platt address the necessity of liveness for *Trio A*, specifically through the failure of both photography and film to properly capture its nature. Though they both posit that *Trio A* is a performed piece that enacts the work of mediatizing itself, both writers must grapple with the underlying reasoning that *Trio A* cannot be removed from its live context without being lost in translation.

Through Lambert and Platt one approaches the fact that the semiotics of *Trio A* are re-formed when it undergoes a mediatized transformation. Both writers argue that the underlying effects of the piece are only properly transmitted from a live performer to a live spectator, and though they focus on the specific formal qualities of the movement--the ceaselessness, the phrasing--the outcome leads one to Nunn's interpretation of the inherent differences between the semiotics of theatre and film. He states that presence is the central difference between theatre and film and that the meaning-making of both media hinge upon that quality. Images in film are always already signs because they are the projections of photographic imprints of existing images, whereas images in live performance must achieve signhood through extra-daily performance. Dance is inherently extra-daily, being a form of movement removed from the pedestrian or quotidian,¹⁴ which Nunn believes creates a problem when put on film, trying to

¹³ Platt, "Ambulatory Aesthetics," 50-52.

¹⁴ Ibid.

achieve a symbolic nature that one has already achieved by being recorded.¹⁵ Thus, the attempt to transfer *Trio A* onto film exactly as it was performed live cannot be regarded in the same manner as either film or performance, not truly achieving the full effect of either. Rainer is not pleased with that status of Banes's film, either, stating: "The difference between the two performances [the first performance and Banes's film]--one in my memory, muscles, and photos, the other on screen--is immense!" She is critical of both her own performance in the film and the fact that this is the lasting, "canonical" version that circulates: the tendency of the film is to "foreshorten", "lack the precision", and "reveal only the merest indications" and therefore botch the choreography it's attempting to document.¹⁶ This is doubly problematic within Nunn's context of filmic semiotics, which he summarizes as communicating to the audience "like this, exactly".¹⁷

Having covered the necessity of liveness to *Trio A* as a seminal dance piece, it is still worth looking into what is gained through sharing a time and space with the performer. In his tirade against minimalist or "literalist" art, a movement into which Rainer is often placed, Fried places art in opposition to theatre and theatricality. He states that theatre exists for an audience and that art degenerates as it approaches the conditions of theatre due to attempt to confront or coexist with the viewer in time and space.¹⁸ This also bears resemblance to Benjamin's account of the aura, which cannot be ignored in the context of live performance versus film. Both Fried and Benjamin argue against the necessity of presence, opting instead to eradicate the concept altogether, but in doing so reinforce its importance. Jerzy Grotowski, theatre theorist and

¹⁵ Robert Nunn, "Flickering Lights and Declaiming Bodies: Semiosis in Film and Theatre," *Theatre Research in Canada* 17 (1996).

¹⁶ Rainer, "Genealogy," 16.

¹⁷ Nunn, "Semiosis."

¹⁸ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art Forum* 5 (1967): 18-19.

director, puts it differently: “[Theatre] cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, ‘live’ communication.”¹⁹ If *Trio A* is unable to translate properly in any context other than that of live performance, then it begs the question of why it has been situated into the canon of visual studies.

Trio A is a dance piece and its existence hinges upon the live interaction between dancer and spectator. It has been reinvented throughout its performance history, including into a filmic representation of the work. Through this translation, the work has been re-contextualized, re-represented, re-remembered, and ultimately re-formed into two different works: *Trio A* the dance piece and *Trio A* the film. The two may coexist, as they serve different functions within their media and semiotics, and maintain different forms of the aura of Rainer’s oeuvre. The filmic piece serves to underscore the necessity for live performance, in addition to allowing for further dissemination of Rainer’s work to the masses.

¹⁹Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, 19.

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Figure 1. *Trio A* performed by Yvonne Rainer (still). By Sally Banes, 1978.



Figure 2. *Trio A* performed by Pat Catterson. By Yi-Chun Wu, 2009.



Figure 3. *Trio A* performed at *People's Flag Show*. Photographer unattributed, 1970.



Figure 4. *Trio A* performed by Yvonne Rainer. Photographer unattributed, 1974.

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