

Performing the Everyday:  
The Postmodern Aesthetics of *Trio A*

This paper examines the postmodern qualities of Yvonne Rainer's 1978 solo performance of *Trio A*. I set up Rainer's piece within the tumultuous social and political context of the 1960s and '70s in order to understand its importance as a reflection of and response to the emerging values of democracy and participation in this historical era. Turning to the significance of performance art as embodied practice, I then analyze the choreography of *Trio A* employing mundane movements drawn from the everyday in order to dissolve the barrier between art and life, democratizing the idea of art. Its reduced aesthetic starkly counters the body language and display of modern dance, and echoes the unspectacular, object-like presence of Minimalist sculptures. By analyzing these groundbreaking aesthetics of *Trio A* in the tumultuous political and social context of the 1960s and '70s, I aim to situate this piece as a critical milestone in the emergence of postmodernism. Through appropriating banal daily movements into the realm of performance art, Rainer defamiliarizes what is accepted as normal and leaves her viewers in a state of uncertainty, marking *Trio A* as a fundamentally postmodern piece.

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The 1960s and '70s were a time of transformation in the United States, both in the realm of politics and correspondingly in the arts. In the era of the dreadful Vietnam War and Nixon's Watergate Scandal, the American public rallied together to voice their opposition. This was manifested often in mass demonstrations and collective actions, taking place in the streets and other public places. Overall, these responses to the political events of the 1960s marked an emergence of a more democratic and participatory politics. Coming together to organize, protest in the streets, or lobby local governments, people began to feel a sense of agency in politics through these various forms of participation. These more democratic social relations illustrate not merely a political shift, but an intense period of cultural change.

The strong emergence of political values of democracy and participation was reflected in art through the stylistic shift from rigid modernism to utilitarian and everyday aesthetics, articulating a more democratic understanding of art and meaning as something that was produced and understood by everyday people, not reserved for an elite class of patrons.<sup>1</sup> Many artists were inspired by way people used their bodies to perform politics collectively, such as in protest actions, and extended the idea of performance further to include banal actions of the everyday shaped by an embodied existence in the political situation of this tumultuous period.

Performance art thrived through rich communities such as the Judson Dance Theater in New York, where several notable performance artists, such as Robert Morris, Merce Cunningham, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer, choreographed and performed.<sup>2</sup> These 1960s performance artists revolutionized the art scene by addressing the dialectic between the abstract and the

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<sup>1</sup> Sally Banes, ed., *Reinventing Dance in the 1960s: Everything Was Possible* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

concrete in their embodied practice.<sup>3</sup> They challenged modern dance conventions of rigid technique, taking inspiration and material for art making from everyday life in an attempt to bridge the gap between art and life, using the body as the material to draw their artworks closer to real human activities.<sup>4</sup> In this paper, I will focus specifically on the work of Yvonne Rainer and how her choreography and 1978 solo performance of *Trio A* starkly counters the body language of modern dance in its deliberate use of a reduced, unspectacular aesthetic drawn from Minimalist sculpture and the mundane movements of everyday life. By analyzing the groundbreaking aesthetics of *Trio A* in the tumultuous political and social context of the 1960s and '70s, I will situate this piece as a critical milestone in the emergence of postmodernism.

In examining the shift from the aesthetic conventions of modernism to postmodernism, it is crucial to address how performance art was a specific medium that was instrumental in propelling this moment. In the context of political and social upheaval in the late 1960s, the body was a tool for exercising politics through protest. It was no longer just the elected officials making decisions, but the random person in the street who commanded power to demand change.<sup>5</sup> Performance art acted as “a metaphor, like the gesture of the sit-in protestors, for the sensuous human activity that takes place at the meeting point between particular and general, individual and society, material and structure.”<sup>6</sup> The lofty modernist systems of communication that asserted codified, constant truths were dissolved by the immediate physicality of performance art, which drew art and the production of meaning closer to everyday, embodied, real human practice.<sup>7</sup> At the forefront of this groundbreaking transition, Rainer not only took

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<sup>3</sup> Elise Arhcias, “Introduction: When the Body is the Material” and “Hurray for People: Yvonne Rainer,” in *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 1-29.

<sup>4</sup> Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Sally Banes, *Reinventing Dance*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-19.

inspiration for *Trio A* from everyday life, but declared through the pedestrian aesthetics of her piece that everyday life *is itself* art.<sup>8</sup> *Trio A* does not merely seek to represent the everyday, but actually embodies the shared experiences of its audience.

The distinct style of Judson dancers such as Rainer marked a definite departure from modern dance. They broke away from the formalism and conventions of modern dance, characterized by rigid technique and impressive displays of strength and grace, by employing “found” or pedestrian movement from the streets.<sup>9</sup> This method served to help bridge the gap between art and life by bringing the everyday into the realm of art, and by doing so also responded to the changing meanings and conditions of existence under a corrupt system of global capitalism. Rainer described her own work as an articulation of the feeling that “the world disintegrates around me. My connection to the world-in-crisis remains tenuous and remote.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Rainer was framing her work within the context of the social and political upheaval of the 1960s, reflecting on a moment of uncertainty and instability in the midst of a period of rapidly growing global capitalism. The Judson dancers’ new styles and techniques of embodiment that featured elements of everyday life served as a response to the political instability of their era.

One of the visual tactics Rainer uses in *Trio A* to relate to her audience and dissolve the boundary between art and life is wearing plain street clothes during her performance. In the black and white film footage of Yvonne Rainer’s six-minute performance of *Trio A* in 1978, she appears to be wearing all black. She wears a loose sleeveless black top and loose black pants that end at her mid calf where her black socks emerge and tuck into her flat black shoes. Her clothes

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<sup>8</sup> Roselee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art Since 1960*, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Rainer, “The Mind is a Muscle,” in *Work 1961-73* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

and shoes are plain street attire, not a formal dance outfit. Her hair is also black, loosely falling just below her shoulders and pinned back with two white hairclips on either side of her head. Dressed in black, her body stands out against the light grey background of the plain, unfurnished stage she dances on. The stage appears a flat light grey in the performance footage, and there is a thin black line on the horizon where the plain light grey wall in the background meets the floor. The stage area is about four meters wide and three meters deep, and Rainer uses the whole thing, walking, rolling, scooting, or prancing to each side and corner throughout the performance. The dull stage and Rainer's dark black clothes provide a contrast to her pale white skin that highlights the parts of her body that remain bare, namely her face and arms.

Rainer's plain clothes draw no distinction between the performer and audience. This move to dissolve the performer-audience divide was revolutionary in that it presented the performer in a totally unspectacular and un-heroic way. This marked a radical departure from the conventions of modern dance, in which performers wear special dance attire and orient their physical display toward their spectators.<sup>11</sup> In *Trio A*, Rainer democratizes the idea of dance by looking just like her audience and using the stage area in an unconventional way that does not recognize it as a space that is above the viewers.

The significance of the absence of hierarchy between the performer and audience is extended by Rainer's movements. She doesn't bother to point her toes or extend her fingers elegantly in most of the movements she performs. Instead, her arms, hands, legs, feet, and even her head hang in a relaxed manor. They are not floppy, but assume a posture that references the nearly effortless execution of everyday movements. Her arms float stiffly when she extends them forward, backward, or to the sides, but because she keeps them slightly bent at all times, she still

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<sup>11</sup> Sally Banes and Noël Carroll, "Cunningham, Balanchine, and Postmodern Dance," *Dance Chronicle* 29, no. 1 (2006): 49-66.

looks relaxed. Her precision, confidence, and calmness paired with the awkward movements that do not resemble traditional dance movements place the feeling of the piece somewhere between clumsy and graceful. While there is continuity between the movements, performed in a discrete sequence, they are not particularly elegant.<sup>12</sup> Her movements oscillate between looking cramped and fluid, angular and curved, repetitive and sweeping, uncomfortable and graceful. Her seemingly random movements often include elements of bending slightly at the waist, moving the head and neck out of sync with the body, and keeping the arms and legs bent slightly so that her body is relaxed and ready for her next move whether it be sudden and sharp or more swooping and gradual.

*Trio A*'s pedestrian-like movements are performed in complete silence, letting the sound of Rainer's body hitting the stage and the shifting audience come to the surface as she performs. This awkward silence contributes to an almost intimate mood of *Trio A* as she confidently performs these odd movements in silence. The lack of music helps center the focus on the physical performance and also accentuates the reduced aesthetic of the piece as a whole.

Rainer's use of mundane aesthetics and actions of the everyday as material for dance choreography set her work apart from traditional forms of dance performance. She designed her movements not to display the body in any spectacular manner, but to focus on the materiality and temporal presence of the body as if a sculptural object.<sup>13</sup> To achieve this effect, Rainer meticulously concerned herself with energy distribution, interested in countering the spectacular, swelling bursts of energy in modern dance with an evenly distributed, task-like, and continuous sequence of movements.<sup>14</sup> Rainer explains one strategy she uses in *Trio A* as choreographing

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<sup>12</sup> Ryan Platt, "The Ambulatory Aesthetics of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (2014): 45.

<sup>13</sup> Carrie Lambert, "Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*," *October* 89 (1999): 87-112.

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work*, 63-106.

movements such that “the body is constantly engaged in transitions” between actions that never repeat, making it impossible to identify any pattern or interpret a narrative into the performance.<sup>15</sup> Through the consistently unspectacular energy of her continuous movements, *Trio A* denies the authority of presentness inherent in theatrical display that usually serves to separate the audience from the performer.<sup>16</sup> Instead she implies a level of sameness with the audience in her ordinary movements that never repeat, discretely following each other seamlessly and mimicking the actions of daily life, such as walking.<sup>17</sup> Rainer’s use of this pedestrian aesthetic draws explicit attention to everyday systems of meaning legible to anyone and thereby challenges traditional symbolic representation under the crisis condition of consumer capitalism.<sup>18</sup> In its focus on the unstable and everyday production of meaning, *Trio A* can be seen as a postmodern artwork. Postmodern performances such as Rainer’s *Trio A* acted to bring contradictions to the surface and make strange what was considered normal, especially in blurring the lines between art and life and in transforming the relationship between audience and performer.

In her plain clothes and simple movements, Rainer appears not as a representation of her audience, but as one of them. Further than just relating to its viewers, *Trio A* makes them active participants in the piece alongside the performer. The dance relies on the presence of spectators to create its meaning, unlike objects of modern art which dominate their viewers and claim to transcend temporality and have a constant meaning.<sup>19</sup> In this sense, *Trio A* can be understood in relation to Minimalist sculpture in that it does not assert a coded truth or rest on a pedestal as

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Platt, “Ambulatory Aesthetics,” 41-60.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 41-60.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance*, 50.

high art separated from its viewers. Modernist art critic Michael Fried rejected Minimalist sculpture as well as postmodern performance art for the exact reason that each of these styles “aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such.”<sup>20</sup> This similarity between performance art and Minimalism is a parallel that Rainer herself drew, commenting on the “literal,” “neutral,” and “human scale” qualities of both Minimalist sculptural objects and her choreographic technique.<sup>21</sup> Some Minimalist sculptors collaborated closely with the Judson dancers. For example, Robert Morris, who worked intimately with Rainer, often put on performances of his monolithic, grey, rectangular sculptures plainly occupying an otherwise empty stage for a specified period of time before the curtain closed.<sup>22</sup> Morris’s sculpture performances assert the object as a body.<sup>23</sup> In the sculptures’ obvious presence and unmasked objecthood, they “were meant to hold viewers in a real-time experience of both the objects’ materiality and their own physical location as they viewed them,” requiring the presence of a spectator to make them meaningful.<sup>24</sup>

Rainer flips this strategy, using the body-as-object in her pieces by performing work-like movements that evoke machinery. Her choreography counters the display of technical skill and ostentatious performance characteristic of modern dance. The importance of her work moves beyond the realm of dance into the greater context of postmodernism as an approach to art making in that her works, such as *Trio A*, also reject the modernist conception of meaning. Just as Minimalist sculptures were criticized for being “not self-sufficient and self-referential,”

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>21</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work*, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind is a Muscle* (London: Afterall, 2007), 16.

<sup>23</sup> Virginia Spivey, “Sites of Subjectivity: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and Dance,” *Dance Research Journal* 35, no. 2 (2003): 113-130.

<sup>24</sup> Carrie Lambert, “Moving Still,” 98.

relying on an audience to gain meaning, the meaning communicated by Rainer's *Trio A* is just as unstable.<sup>25</sup>

Like Minimalist objects, *Trio A* exhibits a democratic style in the way that it relies on viewers to help construct it. It is not complete without the eye of the audience collaborating with the dancer to interpret meaning into the piece.<sup>26</sup> At the same time that the viewers help construct the performance as an art piece, Rainer's banal appearance and mundane, relatable movements put them in the same kind of observer relationship with the performer as they would be with any other person on the street in casual, daily life.<sup>27</sup> This unremarkable, casual relationship was carefully assembled by Rainer. Her choreography for *Trio A* is quite unspectacular, with flat energy and simple machine-like movements, never confronting her audience in any way.

During the whole performance, nearly six minutes in length, Rainer does not acknowledge her viewers in any way, never making eye contact with the camera that films her or even bothering to orient her movements to face the front of the stage. She moves about the stage and faces in all directions throughout the piece. Rainer's seemingly free yet awkward movements, her confidence, the plain aesthetic of her clothing, and her non-acknowledgement of the viewer give the impression of comfort and ease—Rainer looks like she is in the private comfort of her own house, relaxed and moving how she pleases. This choreographic strategy intentionally creates a “worklike rather than exhibitionlike presentation.”<sup>28</sup> In *Trio A*, Rainer appears as “a neutral doer” and does not execute any movements that require trained skill, successfully subverting any possibility that the dancer and her movements could become a

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<sup>25</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>27</sup> Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work*, 67.

spectacle.<sup>29</sup> In fact, she actively critiques modern dance as being narcissistic for displaying the body in grand ways that put the dancer above their spectators.<sup>30</sup> Rainer's flat energy, accessible movements, and plain costume maintain a democratic relationship with her audience.

The intentional rejection of the dancer as spectacle can be understood as a fundamentally postmodern strategy. In everyday life within capitalism, Situationist Guy Debord posits that "the spectacle is an organ of separation" that functions through the abstraction of meaning.<sup>31</sup> Coming from an angle of democratic '60s politics, Rainer combatted the abstract, coded, elite meanings of modern art by centering her practice in performance, a concrete articulation and construction of meaning accessible to the common person. Her appropriation of banal pedestrian movements into performance art is a strategy of making the normal strange. By placing the everyday in the context of art in *Trio A*, Rainer defamiliarizes the automatized conventions of daily life. Out of their everyday contexts where they are accepted as normal, actions such as walking, turning around, and bending down become visible and can be examined through a new lens.<sup>32</sup> *Trio A* transforms the movements taken for granted on the street into a statement that celebrates common people.<sup>33</sup>

Rainer's choreographed "heroism of ordinary people" is part of the 1960s shift towards democratic and participatory politics, but her political messages are not entirely clear.<sup>34</sup> Despite Rainer's explicitly articulated stance against the Vietnam War and consumer capitalism, *Trio A* does not communicate a specific political agenda or solution, but dwells in the uncertainty and tenuousness of the "world-in-crisis."<sup>35</sup> This uncertainty is a key marker of postmodern practice,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>31</sup> Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body*, 22.

<sup>32</sup> Sally Banes, *Reinventing Dance*, 4-10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>35</sup> Yvonne Rainer, *Work*, 70.

maintaining a state of skepticism and constantly questioning accepted norms and systems. Rainer uses banal aesthetics to lessen the gap between everyday life and art, thereby challenging the categories of what is accepted as normal. However, by calling the everyday into question, Rainer does not necessarily transcend the cultural norms she points out with *Trio A*.<sup>36</sup> She offers no clear alternatives or solutions to the political moment that her piece responds to, leaving her audience sitting with her awkward performance and reevaluating everything they had taken as normal.

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<sup>36</sup> Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance*, 61; Ryan Platt, "Ambulatory Aesthetics," 47.

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