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From Choreo-graphy to Cinemato-graphy

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Chantal Pontbriand

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YVONNE RAINER: FROM CHOREO-GRAPHY TO CINEMATO-GRAPHY

Cliché is, in a sense, the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity.

Leo Bersani

(quoted in first frame pf "*Lives of Performers*")

Yvonne Rainer has been a prominent figure in the American avant-garde since the sixties. She came from an anarchist milieu of European origin from the West coast and eventually left San Francisco for New York in 1956. She began attending art events (such as a performance of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*) in her hometown and was already prepared to confront the New York avant-garde when she emigrated. She first studied as an actress before studying dance where she found a more adequate environment for herself, her personality and her capacities as an artist. One of these adequacies was the fact that a woman could occupy a position of strength at that time in the dance world more than in most other art disciplines. She was also more prone to dance, as she had difficulty assuming role-playing, that "being-another" which was conditional to acting. This rejection of the notion of representation has followed her throughout her lifework. From 1957 to 1971 (age 23 to 37), she was a dancer and choreographer, first with the James Waring Dance Company and then as part of different groups or associations such as the Judson Church Dance Theater and then with a group she founded called Grand Union. In 1972, she finished her first feature films, based on previous choreographies of the same title, *Lives of Performers* quickly followed by *Film about A Woman Who...* in 1974. Five other feature films have appeared since then: *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), *Journeys from Berlin/1977* (1980), *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985), *Privilege* (1990), *MURDER and Murder* (1996). She almost never created dance pieces after turning to film, except when Mikhail Baryshnikov asked her to choreograph a new piece for a show he was putting together in 1999¹. Her change from choreography to film was radical, determined and non-equivocal. In film, she had found a way of expressing certain artistic ideas she had been dealing with in dance in a more sophisticated manner. What strikes me is the radicalism of this change



at that period in time. Today, it seems so evident for artists of all disciplines to turn to media at a certain point in their artistic evolution. In the beginning of the seventies, Yvonne Rainer's change was innovative, and even radical, although many visual artists were turning to film or video in order to express some of their ideas, none that I know of made a definite switch to film or video that early in time. And certainly, no choreographer on the scene was at that time that interested in the moving image and none other ventured into filmmaking in such a committed, forward-looking manner.

The particularity of this change, of this metamorphosis must be looked at more insistently by the fact of this uniqueness. It makes Yvonne Rainer and her work certainly distinctive amongst choreographers of her time and amongst filmmakers also.

One of the aspects that is particular to this endeavor and which on the first hand, links the work in dance and the work she did in film is the body. Should I say the body in movement? Dance is characterized by body and motion, just as is film in some aspects. Rainer came to dance at the contact of John Cage and Merce Cunningham's environment. Cunningham had already formulated a response to Modern Dance with an insistence on the materiality of the body in space, and on the singularity of bodily movement versus other elements in the dance such as music or sound and sets or accessories. Cunningham also did away with characterization, role-playing. Instead of working on interpretation, Cunningham insisted on the notion of task, which will have been taken up by the next generation of which Rainer was to become an important player.

If one looks at some of the choreographic pieces that Rainer created such as the important *Trio A*, one realizes that the dance is based on a sequence of movements, which can be executed without any particular technique or style. The sequence of movements is abstract, precise, but cannot be related to any particular emotion of a psychological nature. In *Continuous Project — Altered Daily* (1969), this approach is made more complex as the piece comes out of a series of task like instructions that are distributed among the participants. The piece is a continuous rehearsal in the sense that the purpose of it is not to master its delivery, as much as to master the rules of the game playing that is going on. What is there to see then? What is there to make of what is being seen?

The piece is much about real time and what happens in real time



when real bodies are moving about in space. Attention is directed towards small changes, often minute unexpected changes that happen during the piece. The complexity involved in daily maneuvers is enhanced by the performance whose structure and protagonists are made to change on an everyday basis.

The materiality of the bodies is put forward, just as the accessories that are involved are also: pillows, mattresses, boxes, wooden box-like structures appear in Rainer's pieces. These are objects that are lying around. They are part of the New York day-to-day environment during that period. Rough, almost-detritus like leftovers from New York's industrial urbanity. Plywood structures, limited lighting. Availability is the key notion. The performances take from this quotidian environment closeness to the way life carries on, the way it enacts itself in a "normal", urban flow. This flow defines performance, qualified by a sense of time, which is *presentness* itself, being in the present, and living in the present tense. One performance that impressed Rainer a great deal as it did much of her contemporaries is a concert of John Cage's *4'33* (1952). Here the public is asked to witness an enactment of nothingness, a concert of no sound, a performance of no sense. A nothingness that turns into plenitude, into an act of listening to the world-as-is. The spectator is asked to be him(herself) as is by being presented with the void, the apparent void of silence.

Looking is an act that is fiercely investigated at this time in the history of art just as performing is. The act of performing is questioned by a series of strategies that put the performer and the viewer in different postures, states of being geared towards exploring *presentness*.

In some of her choreographies, such as *Two Trios*, Rainer starts incorporating slides and eventually film. Slides of texts appear for example, such as in *Inner Appearances* (1972) (solo with a vacuum cleaner) or *Film about a Woman Who...* (1974). The use of text is interesting as it is a visual device that gives one the possibility of expressing inner thoughts. The process of thinking is thus exposed and transferred to the screen, captured by the eye. Rainer is obviously fascinated by text: her interest in words constantly challenges her use of the body and of the image in work.

The strangeness of being there, of being here is at the heart of this work, the questioning of the notion of being, of what is real, what is unreal is investigated throughout the work. In her choreography, Rainer is much preoccupied with space and the way to inhabit space: how the individual body itself or how bodies collectively occupy a space. She is also interested in what lies in between, and in the course of her work, which tends to minimize all performative elements other than the body itself, what lies in-between is a matter which takes up more and more room. The mediated image, which she brings in her work at one point, only veers to enhancing the in-between, the space of the other, or rather the space that lies beyond and in between bodies in space. (Please refer to Laura Mulvey's recent essay *Inorganic Bodies*, published in the *Video Dreams* catalogue, for an exhibition in Graz.)

The context in which she is working when she elaborates her choreographic pieces is an America that is quite different from that of today: it is an America still under the guise of its great principles of freedom and democracy, but it is also an America where there is a lot of rage and revolt amongst the black, the young, the politicized. The Vietnam War exacerbates these existing tensions. The art world is very much a part of this movement which consists of questioning values in the post-war period, of turning precepts inside out in order to develop or uncover new perspectives on the world, new ways of being, if not of doing.

Rainer's work rises from a very basic materiality of the body and of things in space, of space itself, dealing with a raw environment as she does, to considerations of an immaterial sort which she definitely seeks to work out in a materialistic way. Thoughts are dealt with as mentioned before through text in live performances. But soon, this seems not to be enough to put through the complexity of all the artistic material that turns up in the



midst of the processes that her work demands. This complexity, which a simple relationship to space, in space, does not succeed in characterizing, in naming, she turns to the moving image to put forth. A few short films, integrate the performances. These show simple gestures: one film shows a close-up of two feet in running shoes moving a soccer ball around on a wooden floor; another show a girl, seen from the back, drawing a line on a bare wall and eventually turning her smiling face back to the camera; a couple, nude, sitting on a couch—nothing really happening. These very simple films are extremely important as they define an aesthetic that is so very different from what cinema is at that time, and still today. In a set of very short and simple statements, they make of the notion of *presentness* the essential notion of what film is about, the essential notion of what, even more so, being-in-the-world is about. Being here, moving. And in every instance, the structure of this couple changes, as does the world around us, as does the world in us. These moments define life as Proust had discovered with his Madeleine. But in Rainer's works, no need for a Madeleine, the gesture reveals the time we are in, a living present time, a time of *presentness*.

What made Yvonne Rainer move from dance to cinematography? Other than both having to do with *graphy*, inscribing oneself on a surface, creating a territory for oneself, marking out in space, the mediated image for one is a major factor. What is it in film that she could explore more readily than in real-life situations? One of the parameters involved in dance is that it is an art, which not only is based on the body, but it is an encounter with the other: the other in oneself, the others out there. Her first feature film (long-métrage) is *Lives of Performers*. It begins with a sequence where a group of male and female dancers are rehearsing a piece with Yvonne. It starts with dance and from this dance emerges a





complex web of inter-relations between the protagonists of the dance. From the simple narration of the event that the rehearsal is a part of, emerges a whole film which consists of descriptions, interactions, fictions mixed with facts, fantasies, all of which finishes—must there be an end?—with 22 tableaux, reenactments of stills by the protagonists from Pabst's *Lulu* (which in fact are very humorous). This *mise-en-abyme* consecrates Rainer's detachment from representation, emptying out the narrative, *Lulu*'s narrative, by presenting her performers in similar positions, similar positioning, or rather, one *vis-à-vis* another: man/woman, man/woman/man, woman/man/woman, woman/woman, all combinations form a narrative in itself.

Everything takes place in the studio-loft environment with a few props, chairs, table, couch and mattress that serve to support the actions when needed, and appear very pragmatically only when needed. A lot of the images are close-ups of the bodies and faces. The skin doubles the screen in another form of *mise-en-abyme*, the projected body is just that interface, that skin that separates the real world from the imaginary world of the Gods (something she refers to in the piece *Performance* from 1972).

Mortality and immortality, being, are the object of Rainer's investigations as she makes these "radical juxtapositions" that her work is made of. Collaging words, images, and bodies is an incessant paradigm, which comes up in all the work. One of the tropes still present in even her last work is the image of a couple, man/woman, or woman/woman, lying in bed. This image is ever-present and has a lot to say about Rainer's philosophy. Verticality and the enhancement of verticality has been a major paradigm in the history of Western dance and say a lot about Western values: aiming high and higher. Sixties dance investigating the relationship of the body to the floor meant a lot in reappropriating a type of space that had been synonymous with dirt, detritus, complacency, laziness, etc. Lying down is a reflexive state of being, appropriated by psychoanalysis. It is to be associated with a state of receptivity of inner thoughts, of taking from the unconscious, discovering other realities, other ways of being. Lying down puts one in another state of being, a state made free of conventionality and rationalism.

One major paradigm of Rainer's works remains relationships. The push and pull involved in relationships, the particularity especially in recent work of woman to woman relationships, relationships of woman to the world out there, with problematic of menopause, of breast cancer and of lesbianism have been present in the latter works such as *Privilege* and *MURDER and murder*. In these works, she continues exploring diverse dramatic strategies and narratives, and yet she seems less concerned with exploring visual formal devices such as those present in her earlier works. Rage

and revolution though are ever-present and bring to mind what she once said in an interview for *Art in America* (July, 1997):

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve: *I'd like to end by asking you not about history or recollection but emotion. If you were going to attach an emotion to each of your films what would it be? For instance, Lives of Performers: what's the emotion?*

YR: *This is hard. OK, Lives of Performers is about infatuation.*

TNG: *Film about a Woman Who...?*

YR: *Rage.*

TNG: *Kristina Talking Pictures?*

YR: *Mourning.*

TNG: *Journeys from Berlin?*

YR: *That one's also about rage. Rage projected outward and internalized.*

TNG: *The Man Who Envied Women?*

YR: *Outrage.*

TNG: *(laughter) We're getting a theme here.*

YR: *I mean literally "out"-rage out.*

TNG: *Privilege?*

YR: *Ambivalence.*

TNG: *MURDER and murder?*

YR: *Love.*

This ever-present rage is a basic element of her revolt against systematicism, conventions of any kind, systems that she explores in a Foucauldian manner, such as the medical system, disciplinary artistic codes. Revolt makes revolution in her case. This, she goes on to show in an installation she recently created: *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan: Hybrid* (2002) which refers constantly to dance and film, mixed in with Vienna, Freud and Wittgenstein. She puts back into the world that idea of revolt that seems forever suppressed from the current times. Nonetheless, a notion which is essential to all forms of creativity and change. Rage makes *courage*, in this instance.

CHANTAL PONTBRIAND

Chantal Pontbriand, art critic and curator, lives in Montreal and Paris. She has been founder-director of *Parachute* since 1975. She has curated international contemporary art events: some twenty exhibitions, fifteen international festivals and twelve international conferences, mainly in photography, video, performance, and multimedia installation. From 1982 to 2003, she was president and director of the FIND (Festival International de Nouvelle Danse). Selected publications: *Fragments critiques*, Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, *Communauté et Gestes*, *Parachute*, 2000. Upcoming book and exhibition: *Grand Labo, Contemporary art and Institutions*, and, at the Jeu the Paume, HFI RG [Haroun Farocki/Rodney Graham].

NOTE

¹ See the recent book of Laura Mulvey, *Inorganic Bodies*, published in the catalogue *Video Dreams* to the occasion of an exhibition in Graz.