

'Don't give the game away': Rainer's 1967 reflections on dance and the visual arts revisited.

In April 1967, Yvonne Rainer published an article 'Don't give the game away' in *Arts Magazine*. Although she had been asked to discuss new developments in dance, she wrote instead about Andy Warhol's film *Chelsea Girls* and the sculptures of Robert Morris. The aesthetic qualities that Rainer perceived in Morris's sculptures and the rules and structures governing the performative behaviour that she detected in Warhol's films correspond to key aspects of her own avant-garde deconstruction of choreographic processes. These avant-garde concerns have persisted in the works Rainer has created since her return to dance-making in 1999, and their influence can be traced in the work of progressive European dance artists during the 1990s and 2000s who, like Rainer, have a sophisticated knowledge of art theory. In the article, Rainer describes Morris as her husband, having moved in with him in 1962 after the breakup of her marriage to the 'hard-edged' painter Al Held. Rainer was therefore writing as an art world insider. A photograph taken at a party from around the time she wrote this article shows Rainer with Warhol and the art historian Barbara Rose taken at a party in the early 1960s. Rose's 1965 essay 'ABC Art' is recognised as one of the first to offer a theoretical explanation of minimal art and briefly mentions Yvonne Rainer's work. My aim today is to use Rainer's 1967 article to explore the relation between Rainer's own dance work and debates in the visual art world around that time.

Current interest in revisiting Rainer's early work derives from the way it articulated a moment of transition between an older modernist tradition and a more conceptually-oriented approach to art making. Much of the writing in the US about Judson Dance Theater has stressed its formalist, modernist qualities with reference to

ideas about modernism developed by the art critic Clement Greenberg and art historian Michael Fried. Challenges to so-called Greenbergian high modernism by a subsequent generation of art historians such as Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss in the US and Tim Clark and Fred Orton in the UK created a binary division between modernism and postmodernism. In her 1967 article, I shall show, Rainer responds to a particular essay by Michael Fried, differing from him in many areas but not entirely disagreeing with him.

To put this in context, Rainer's article is symptomatic of a shift that was taking place among progressive dance artists away from an alignment with new music and towards an exploration of progressive ideas shared with visual artists, particularly those working in the fields of minimal and conceptual art. In both the visual and performing arts, in Manhattan during the 1960s, artists were themselves beginning to use writing as a way to map out a theoretical context in which to locate their work and that of their colleagues. Hence visual artists like Robert Morris, Donald Judd and Robert Rauschenberg wrote reviews and articles for magazines like *Artforum*, while, under Richard Schechner's editorship, *The Drama Review* published writings on Happenings and Fluxus by artists like Allan Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, and George Macunias as well as essays by innovative theatre practitioners like Eugenio Barba. Rainer's so-called 'no manifesto' is part of a 1965 essay published in *The Drama Review*. By the early 1970s, Rainer, Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk and others were presenting performances in major art museums in New York at a time when their work was largely rejected by the main theatres presenting modern dance. Rainer's 1967 article in *Arts Magazine*, offers insights into the way advanced practice in the visual arts in the 1960s appeared from the point of view of a dance artist. Revisiting it in 2012 opens up opportunities for re-

evaluating the shifts that were taking place in both dance and visual art in the 1960s. Rainer's article begins with a brief discussion of her response to reading what was then an unpublished, experimental novel *Anticipation* by the art critic Frederick Ted Castle. What she admires in it, she writes, is its attention to precise detail in its descriptions of ordinary, everyday experiences. This approach to observation, in her view, makes one tolerant, even appreciative of other things. Things that inspire this approach, she says, have redemptive qualities. In the rest of her article, it is these redemptive qualities that Rainer seeks in Warhol and Morris's works. Understanding what Rainer meant by redemption, I shall suggest, is useful for re-evaluating the art of the 1960s

In her discussion of Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, Rainer praised the consistency of the film's depravity and the strangeness of its acting or non-acting. She wrote: 'I had never seen people behave that way before in front of an audience; I thought they were all high' (Rainer 1967: 45). *Chelsea Girls* is a three and a quarter hour film made in 1966 -- the title referring to the Chelsea Hotel in New York in which some of the action was supposedly filmed. It consists of twelve reels of film, each of which is an unedited episode. Members of Warhol's entourage at the Factory were set in front of the camera and told to stay there and do something until the can of film ran out. Four of these episodes are in colour, the rest in black and white, and all were recorded in sound. The film is shown with two reels projected simultaneously side by side. Apparently Warhol gave no instructions about which reel should be shown with which, or in what order, leaving this initially up to the projectionist. Because only one sound track could be played, the projectionist was therefore also left to decide when to switch from the sound of one reel to the other. However a set running order subsequently emerged.

Rainer wrote that she admired two things about *Chelsea Girls*, both of which can be related to her own work. She admired the visual effect of juxtaposing two screened images side by side. Often in her pieces, as in Cunningham's work, spectators were presented with two or more activities happening simultaneously and had to choose which to watch. In a few works made after *Chelsea Girls* Rainer included photographic slides or film projected side by side with live action on stage. According to the programme, the first part of *Rose Fractions* (1969) included several live and projected elements that could happen in any order or combination. This included two films: a commercial pornographic film, and *Trio Film*, directed by Rainer, which shows Paxton and Becky Arnold in the nude playing with a white balloon on and around a white sofa. During one of the performances at the uptown Billy Rose Theatre, both films were shown simultaneously on each side of a live trio on stage. The theatre management objected and soon switched off the pornographic film, whose showing was severely criticized by the dance critics.

The other aspect of *Chelsea Girls* which Rainer admired were the rules which she thought established limits with which or against which individuals acted: []

One very soon begins to see that there is a strict protocol governing most of the interactions, which when defied produces jarring results, as when Hannah tells Superstar, "You aren't *supposed* to like it," or Ondine gets upset when told he's a phoney. The rules of the game narrow down to 'maintain your character' and 'don't give the game away'. (Rainer 1967: 45, emphasis in original)

The latter is of course the title of her article. To say Ondine got upset is an understatement: he viciously slapped the woman who insulted him until she was so shocked that she ran off the set. The spontaneous, unself-conscious way in which she

does this is, I believe, the kind of behaviour which impressed Rainer. Her description of this is non-judgmental and abstract. It is hardly surprising that, having made so many group works with game-like structures, Rainer should be sensitive to this aspect of the film. What is significant, however, is that these are rules governing behaviour. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Rainer moved away from dance performance and became increasingly interested in the sorts of possibilities that film making offered, behaviour became increasingly interesting to her. Thus, while working on *Continuous Process Altered Daily* (1969-70), Rainer observed, in the middle of a letter to her fellow performers after a rehearsal: []

As you see, I am talking about behavior, rather than execution of movement. It is not because I value one over the other, but because the behavior aspects of this enterprise are so new and startling and miraculous to me. Only on TV does one see live 'behavior'. Never in the theatre. (Rainer 1974: 149)

As I have pointed out, Rainer had responded similarly to the range of behaviour in *Chelsea Girls*. What interested her in Warhol's film was not just the behaviour but the structures that produced it: []

The knowledge that they are playing the game according to the rules, hence that they know both what they're doing and when they're not doing it, is reassuring, projecting a sense of order and economy. This particular set of limitations – working within them and treading dangerously at their outer edge – evokes an extravagant logic and provides much of the dark humour of the film. (1967: 45-6)

This casts a new light on Rainer's so-called *No Manifesto*. This contains 'no to seduction of the audience by the whiles of the performer', a statement often linked to the fact that,

in her best known piece *Trio A* (1966), the dancer's gaze is choreographed so that s/he can never make eye contact with the spectator. Some have interpreted this device as proof that Rainer's concerns were purely formalist – stripping dance down to its purest essence by foregrounding pure movement itself without any performative behaviour that might distract one from seeing it. This is to categorise Rainer's choreography as modernist in the way that the art critic Clement Greenberg and the art historian Michael Fried were then theorising it. Rainer's comments about *Chelsea Girls* and her later rehearsal notes suggest, however, that she was interested to find out what new kinds of performative behaviour might be presented on stage if she set rules that forced the dancer to break with habitual modes of performing. Such concerns are far from the purity that Fried and Greenberg prescribed.

During *Performance Demonstration* in September 1968, Rainer taught Becky Arnold *Trio A* live on stage. The programme consisted of extracts of her evening length piece *The Mind Is A Muscle* (1968) for which *Trio A* was initially choreographed. Rainer and Arnold's on-stage rehearsal was preceded by two performances of *Trio A*, the first by Steve Paxton, accompanied by the Chambers Brothers' song 'In The Midnight Hour', and then by Frances Brook who danced while a taped lecture about the trio was played. So, by the time Rainer came to teach it to Arnold, the audience should already have begun to be familiar with the piece. But to make things more complicated, Rainer arranged for fifteen people, who were not trained dancers, to invade the stage during Arnold's lesson. As Rainer describes it, they 'walked back and forth and picked up books and small articles that they had brought with them then left when the buzzer sounded' (1974: 113). While this was taking place, Arnold and Rainer 'went bravely on' with their rehearsal.

Trio A, as Rainer and others have acknowledged, is choreographed so as to be difficult to watch. Teaching it on stage offered the audience further insights into it. But, the audience had first to separate out the activities of the two women from the stage invasion, in order to follow the exchanges between Arnold and Rainer. Since Arnold was herself learning it, she was using the filter of her own perception to select from the dance information offered to her, and trying this out, all the while knowing that the audience knew that this was what she was trying to do under almost impossible circumstances. Here again, as in *Chelsea Girls*, there was a particular set of limitations within which Arnold and Rainer were working that were being pushed to their outer edge. To paraphrase what Rainer wrote about Warhol's film, this evoked an extravagant logic and provided much of the dark humour of the performance. Rainer returned to this idea in her 2006 piece *AG Indexical With A Little Help From H.M.* During this, Sally Silver copied a male solo from Balanchine's *Agon* by watching a video recording of it on a monitor that she had wheeled on stage with her. Here, again, the dancer was sticking to the rules in an almost impossible situation whose logic produced humorous effects. These questions about rules and behaviour also arise in Xavier Le Roy's *Product of Circumstances* when he performs the 'Chair Pillow' section from Rainer's *Continuous Process Altered Daily*. I will return to this later in my paper.

Having discussed *Chelsea Girls*, Rainer then turns to Robert Morris's sculpture, reflecting on her response to it. She does not talk about any piece in particular but speaks in general terms. Because she is constantly seeing it around her in their house, Rainer says its familiarity makes it particularly difficult for her to write about it. She therefore tries to adopt the kind of focused, precise observation that she had admired earlier in Frederick Castle's novel in order to analyse her own sense of embodiment as

she beholds Morris's sculpture. It occupies space, she says, in different ways to other sculptures. His work doesn't 'aspire', she writes: ¶

It squats. It looks the same from every aspect. You know you won't see anything different if you go to the other side, but you go to the other side. [...] you don't quite believe that another vantage point won't give you a more complete, more definitive, or even altered, view of it. It doesn't. (46)

For Rainer, it occupies as much space as it needs and no more. She then relates this to her experience of her own body, quoting something she had written while taking the drug LSD: ¶

The exquisite containment of my body. I can't say its euphoria or ecstasy. But yet still I have this strange sense of limits [...] Perfect containment. Something to do with a finely-attuned awareness of just how, what, something to do with my own particular mass and volume. It (my body) occupies as much space as it needs and it doesn't need any more than its got. (46)

Rainer's sensitivity to embodied experience is central to the development of her minimalist choreography. In her 1968 essay, whose long title begins 'A Quasi Survey of some "minimalist" tendencies...', Rainer draws up a table comparing qualities in minimalist sculptures with equivalent ones in minimalist dance movement. In her earlier use of her description of her drug-heightened experience of embodiment, the connections between Morris's minimalist sculpture and Rainer's minimalist choreography are already apparent.

What is at issue here can be demonstrated by comparing the dancers in *Trio A* (1966) with any of Morris's minimalist sculptures. As Rainer observes, his work looks the same from every aspect. ¶

Its flatness and grayness are transposed anthropomorphically into inertness and retreat. Its simplicity becomes 'noncommunicativeness,' or 'noncommittal.' Its self-containment becomes 'silence'. [...] I wait for the object to 'look back' at me, then hold it responsible when it doesn't. (47)

Something similar occurs when watching *Trio A*. [start video] Although often performed by only one dancer, *Trio A* is essentially a solo danced simultaneously by three dancers – hence a trio. When it is performed by a group, there is no unison since the dancers generally start at slightly different times and proceed at their own pace so that they can sometimes catch up with one another only then to get out of sequence again. The spectator in *Trio A* is able to recognize the sameness of the material that each dancer is executing one after another. [pause] In terms of temporality, the effect is comparable to the spatial effect of looking at Morris's work from a different point of view. With *Trio A*, the spectators might think that they will get a more complete, more definitive, or even altered sense of the dance material when they watch the same movements performed a little later by another dancer, but they don't. Comparing her own choreography with Morris's work, Rainer asks:

Have I (along with other people working in the theatre today) created 'theatre-objects' that don't look back at the audience (therefore making 'excessive' demands on them), and if so how is that possible where human performance is involved? (47)

This contradiction arises as a consequence of sticking to the rules of not looking back at the audience and not giving the game away. [stop video]

The presence exerted by minimalist sculpture and the demands this makes on the spectator is the main focus of the critique of minimal art that the art historian

Michael Fried makes in his 1966 essay 'Art and Objecthood'. For Fried, aesthetic appreciation of painting and sculpture is an instantaneous process whereas minimalist sculpture, in his view, generates a presence that makes a demand on the spectator to recognize it as art. A true work of art, however, in his view, is complete in itself, and this can be appreciated in an instant. The demand that the spectator take time to see a minimalist work and recognise its presence is, for Fried, theatrical. This led him to make the much cited assertion that: 'The success, even the survival, of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre' (Fried 1969: 139). Theatre, here, is the audience's sense of the object's presence as if it is looking back at them, inhibiting the sense of detachment and absorption that, for Fried, is at the centre of aesthetic appreciation. Rainer is also concerned with questions about detachment and absorption. Her article begins with an quotation from the French novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet: 'Man looks at the world and the world does not look back at him' and this idea of looking back is a central concern in the dialogue Rainer's article initiates with Fried's essay. Towards the end of her article, Rainer observes: ¶

You feel you can sit back and observe *Chelsea Girls* with a certain amount of detachment, certain that you need bring nothing more to the experience than your ability to observe it. Perhaps this detachment is more characteristic of most movie or theatre experiences than it is of the static object experience, contrary as that may appear. *Chelsea Girls* does not demand participation, *whereas a Morris sculpture does*. Or so it would seem at this point in art history. (47 emphasis in the original)

By art history, I assume she means Fried's essay. ~~(Fried himself makes a similar point about the difference between the experience of watching film and beholding painting or~~

sculpture.) Although Fried himself considered theatricality to be a negative quality, ironically it has been adopted as a useful evaluative terms by artists, critics, and historians not only for the analysis of minimal and conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, but also in discussions of a broad range of late twentieth century art. Fried himself subsequently acknowledged this during a panel discussion in 1987, commenting: 'Boy, was I right about art moving towards theatre! There's a sense in which everything new in art since then has happened in the space between the arts which I characterized as theatre' (Fried in Foster 1987: 84). Rainer's 1967 article proves how deeply involved she was at that time in investigating this space between the arts.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Rainer, Morris, and Warhol's work at this time rejected all the kinds of formal qualities that Fried admired. It is more useful to think of them as situated at a turning point between the kind of modernist formalism that Greenberg and Fried valued and the postmodern move towards theatre and interdisciplinarity that Fried was acknowledging in 1987. Where Rainer's dance is concerned, the stripping down of choreography to basic arrangements of simple shapes, gestures, and movement tasks might be seen as in line with the progressive, modernist purification that Greenberg advocated; however the demands made by the actual presence of the object-like dance material could be seen as detrimental to the quality of absorption that Fried valued. The use of rules and structures to generate new kinds of experiences during performance might be progressive; the fact that the logic behind these rules, however, was deliberately pushed to the limits, often in an ironically self-conscious way, troubled the optimism implicit in such progressive aspirations.

During the last two decades, Rainer's work has become of particular interest to

European dance artists. In 1996, Quattuor Albrecht Knust, a French-based group, which included Alain Buffard, Boris Charmatz, Anne Collod, Emanuelle Huyn, Christophe Wavelet, and Xavier Le Roy, performed 're-readings' of Steve Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967) and Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Process Altered Daily* (1969-70) at festivals in Avignon, Montreal, and Stockholm. Le Roy, as I noted earlier, went on to include sections from *Continuous Process Altered Daily* in his 1999 lecture performance *Product of Circumstances*. This renewed interest in Rainer's work and that of Judson Dance Theater can be connected with the recent interest in reconstructions, re-stagings, re-enactments, revivals, re-inventions, and re-readings of avant-garde works whose first performances are often still within living memory. The interest in memory that this implies can sometimes have a political dimension because of its potential as a tool for resisting the effects of globalized capitalism in its pursuit of ever increasing economic growth. Thus Philosopher Simon Critchley has recently argued that progress is the ideology of capitalism that is directed towards an ideology of the future. The idea that modernist art is progressively purifying itself is also in line with this ideology of progress towards the future. Critchley, however, argues that 'what we have to do is refuse the idea of the future. What we should be concerned with is the cultivation of the past, of memory' (2011: 116). There is increasing disenchantment with the modernist belief that technological progress and industrialisation will generate ever greater prosperity and thus create the resources with which to solve the world's ills. The collapse of this utopian dream brings with it the danger of falling into nihilism. The cultivation of the past and memory is a way of averting this nihilism and is a first step towards reassessing the modernist legacy and valuing it differently.

Works like *Trio A* and *Continuous Process Altered Daily* were made at a time

when a shift was beginning to occur away from the kinds of aesthetic values that were associated with this utopian dream towards a more critical awareness of the social and political consequences of modernity. I mentioned earlier that, for Rainer, minimal art and dance has a potential to initiate modes of precise, detailed observation of ordinary, everyday experience that, in her view, create redemptive qualities. A clearer understanding of what Rainer understood by this can, I suggest, help in reassessing and revaluing the modernist legacy. The precise, detailed observation of the everyday, that Rainer values, is one that generates a kind of absorption that corresponds in many ways with the quality of absorption that Fried valued. A juxtaposition of statements by each highlights what is at stake here. What Rainer valued in Frederick Castle's novel was: ¶

The attention to precise detail, beautifully simple descriptions of things I have encountered one hundred times and even asked myself – Could you describe that completely familiar thing so that it could be instantly recognized as that utterly familiar things and not turn it into something else, something literary or poetic which then would have to undergo another transformation in the reader's mind back into that familiar thing. (44)

As I have shown, in Rainer's opinion, the spontaneous, unrehearsed behaviour recorded in Warhol's film has this quality of recognizable, unpoetic familiarity, as does the way a Morris sculpture squats and occupies as much space as it needs and no more. The key point here is that the spectator or beholder has access to a clarity of experience in each case through instant recognition without, as Rainer puts it, 'resorting to historical comparisons, or formalist involutions or moral impositions'. Fried also prized an instantaneous experience of artistic value, which he describes as presentness: ¶

It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting, as it were, to the

perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to see the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. (146)

In the 1960s, Fried was a brilliant young, highly educated academic while Rainer was an auto-didact in matters concerning Philosophy. With this qualification, there are some areas of agreement between the two about the instantaneous nature of aesthetic experience. Rainer wants to extend the kinds of situations in which the beholder can experience the rarefied absorption, which Fried discusses, so as to include the ordinary, familiar, and everyday; Fried, however, confines it to modernist work, giving as an example a sculpture by Anthony Caro which he, in effect, places within the canon of Western high culture. The most significant difference between what Fried and Rainer believed, however, concerns the beholder's relation with the work itself. For Fried, absorption is only possible if the beholder can remain separate from the work and contemplate it with detachment. For Rainer, however, the beholder is immersed within an environment in which she or he feels the work's presence. While Fried speaks of being convinced of a work's value, Rainer writes that the beholder's relation with an art work can be redemptive by making her or him tolerant or even appreciative of the otherness of things and by implication of people. This implies an ethical relationship. From a twenty-first century point of view, one might see Rainer's position as one that acknowledges an ecological ethics in which one takes responsibility for one's relation with one's environment. Taking responsibility is an antidote to nihilism. While Rainer herself might not have seen it in these terms at that time, her 1967 article is symptomatic of a shift in attitudes towards the arts that would enable the subsequent

development of cultural practices relevant to the social and political challenges of the twenty-first century. Having started with Robbe-Grillet's statement that: 'Man looks at the world and the world does not look back at him', Rainer finishes her article with the question: ¶

Have I (along with others working in theatre today) created 'theater-objects that don't 'look back' at the audience? [...] and if so, how's that possible where human performing is concerned? (47)

The answer to this lies somewhere in that space between visual art, film, and dance performance that Fried criticised but which the present exhibition and conference about Rainer's work is so fruitfully investigating. ¶