

“The Body as an Everyday Material in the 1960s: Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton”

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During the decade or so surrounding and containing Yvonne Rainer’s experimental dance work *We Shall Run* (1963) artists in New York were actively re-imagining what the work of art could be.¹ The results varied widely, but one strategy many of these practices had in common was the incorporation of a quality of “everydayness”—an ordinary material or a mundane movement seemed the surest step towards an art for their time. I am interested in the role the body played in these explorations of everydayness, particularly as it appeared in early examples of performance art. Is the notion of passivity useful for our understanding of “the everyday” as a critical concept? For it is, I will argue, passivity that the body – as a material – contributed to the version of the everyday put forth in art in the 1960s. In order to further this argument, I will compare the work of Yvonne Rainer with that of Steve Paxton.

Both Rainer and Paxton presented everyday movement in their performances, and for both, this meant their performers should adopt a neutral facial expression and move with a low level of effort. They offered an embodied subject who both acted and was acted upon—one who performed, in other words, within an obviously structured program of action. But while Paxton’s work made its case for the value of the mundane by refusing to display any incident that might have been viewed as interesting or moving, Rainer’s choreography made available a softer body, one which frequently gave rise to involuntary movements. As a result, her version of the everyday body—simultaneously confident and vulnerable—was particularly rich. I say this, however, knowing full well that Rainer’s body is no more accurate, as an account of everyday conditions circa 1963, than Paxton’s resolute, boring one. We need them both if we are to understand the period.

Yvonne Rainer had moved to New York from San Francisco in 1958 and within a few short years had transformed herself – kamikaze style – into a modern dancer and experimental choreographer with close ties to the art world.² In her earliest works, Rainer explored movements that suggested insane people, children, and spastics, but she soon left these performing personas behind as another concern became increasingly central for her – how to present the look of ordinariness. She began to explore versions of non-traditional art that did not require the guise of the other in order to be accessed. This happened largely in conversation with members of the Judson Dance Workshop, many of whom began meeting in Robert Dunn’s John-Cage-inspired experimental composition class in 1960.³ The students enjoyed working together so much that when the class ended in 1962 they continued to meet for several years.⁴ During 1962 and 1963, Rainer attended the weekly sessions regularly.

For these young artists in the New York scene in the 1960s – and for their mentors John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Anna Halprin – the everyday was a way to say no to past art’s claim to autonomy, its specialness and separateness from the rest of the world. It also distanced the work of art from the heavy or histrionic emotional content increasingly attributed to the kind of Modernist art deemed “expressionist”—from the angst critics saw in the dances of Martha Graham, or in the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning. Art was not to be elitist and it was not to present mystical emotion, yet it did still have to be sensitive to the particular ways that physical material can be made meaningful in art.

Up until 1963, the “ordinary” had appeared in Rainer’s work, however it was not until *We Shall Run* that Rainer presented an entire dance consisting of non-dance movement which audience members could recognize as similar to their own everyday movement. The twelve dancers in *We Shall Run* just jogged steadily for seven minutes while the Tuba Mirum from Hector Berlioz’s *Requiem* played in the background. Anyone who could be taught to remember the sequence of fairly complex floor patterns could do the dance, without having to look crazy or childlike, and indeed, Rainer used both dancers and non-dancers. They wore their own clothes which, as we see in one photograph of the work by Peter Moore, varied from the printed dress worn by working mother Sally Gross to Rainer’s sweatpants on the far left.⁵

Rainer's first evening-length work, *Terrain* (performed April 1963), combined dance and non-dance movement, but expanded the latter to include the look of "play" as dancers actually played games at various moments on stage—in another photograph by Moore, balls are visible on the floor.⁶ It also presented the look of just standing around, as a traffic blockade found in the street came to function as a station where dancers waited between times of performing. Whatever their bodies happened to do while they stood there was made available to the audience. With *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965), Rainer centered her dance around the manipulation of a stack of mattresses, the thin but not quite fully flexible kind found on institutional beds. She devised various tasks for the dancers to execute: lifting, stacking, rolling the cumbersome rectangles, flinging one's body on top of them, or passing another human body as if it were a mattress, letting the similarities and differences between the two kinds of object/body come forward.

With *We Shall Run*, Rainer made a dance much closer to the style of Steve Paxton's work than any of her previous work. Rainer's exploration of ordinary movement during 1962-63 took place very much in dialogue with Paxton, a fellow student in Dunn's class and a Judson Workshop participant. He presented overtly everyday activities in his dance *Proxy* (1961), which he, Rainer and Jennifer Tipton performed; the dance's legibly ordinary actions included eating a pear, drinking a glass of water, and walking. In fact, the dance consisted mostly of walking. The dancers would repeatedly enter and exit the space in front of a curtain, circling it, just walking past. Then at times they would pause on a square of tape on the floor and eat the pear or drink the water.⁷ At one point, Tipton stood inside a basin outfitted with a hidden layer of ball bearings. She stood in a ballet *passé* position (one knee forming a sharp, flag-like triangle perpendicular to her other, straight leg), while Paxton rolled her around the space on the ball bearings. *Proxy* also included sequences based on sports photographs from the media. Dancers moved slowly into and out of a sequence of legible, athletic poses.

Paxton had come from Arizona, and chose to study with Cunningham at the summer academy of modern dance at Connecticut College in 1958 because he was the most experimental of the school's various teachers.⁸ He was attracted to Cunningham's reputation for composing his works using such "chance" operations as tossing coins.⁹ The appeal of Cunningham for Paxton was the promise of a relinquishment of authorial control and importance. He offered the hope of working in a way that had, as its goal, something other than the egotistical wish for audience approval and public recognition. However, studying

with Cunningham and eventually dancing in his company from 1961-1965, proved disappointing for Paxton and only hardened his resolve against hierarchy.¹⁰ For Paxton, although Cunningham had included ordinary movement a couple of times in certain dances, his style was still too much about impressive glamour, and functioned as a point of contrast rather than a source to imitate in his own work. In a 1980 interview Paxton explained:

In fact, that was maybe the surprise and the humor of it, was how ordinary [my work] was in the face of the glamour of Cunningham and the speed and the pacing and the Rauschenberg costumes and the Chernavitch [sic] lighting and, you know...All of that dazzle. I mean it was dazzle. It was high-class goods and I'm not putting it down or saying it was in any way a pretense. But it was, at the same time, stunning, a stunning experience.¹¹

Paxton's own work, by contrast, was intended to have a less altering effect on the viewer's senses:

There was very little momentum to the work, you know. There was no, nothing to get a kinetic kick out of unless you were interested in looking at ordinary walking, ordinary standing still. They were complex compositions, but they wouldn't take you on kinetic highs at all.¹²

For Paxton, then, including everyday actions dismantled the hierarchy of dance in general, a hierarchy in which impressive skill traditionally took precedence over lesser skill, but it also dismantled the hierarchy established by his own attention to his body:

It had to do with invisibility. The ordinary is, in a sense, un- visible, invisible, because it's...ordinary. The senses tune it out. [...] ...what I thought was that one spends so much time in one's body ignoring it, being with other focuses. And I was real interested to see, to examine and to question what was going on when one was doing this activity that was really setting one's set most of the time. I might spend five or six hours a day working on my body and working on dance.... and yet all the rest of the time my body was just carrying on by itself and I became really interested to see what was happening on that level. I felt it was important.¹³

There is a sense that Paxton understood his dances to be fighting for the "little guy," the little body, the one to whom no one pays attention; he would bring to it the visibility that it deserved, not because it was better, but simply because it existed. He wished his work to right a sort of injustice or imbalance, and did not speak of a particular effect he wished it to present or have on his audience. In his conceptual project, the dance was a vehicle for, or driven by, ideas he wanted to put forth, whether the audience liked them or not.

It has been frequently remarked that Paxton made the most “severe,” “rigorous,” and “boring” work of anyone at Judson.¹⁴ “None of Steve’s pieces ever worked,” Deborah Hay reported in a 1983 interview for the Bennington Judson Project,¹⁵ “But it was a freedom, a process of creating something that never got quite created... Nobody ever knew what was happening in Steve’s pieces.”¹⁶ Robert Dunn remembered Paxton’s work as “anxiety-provoking”:

I don’t know. His pieces were just so wide open and so slow and they did not take any standard psychological form. I can just feel the effect on my nerves. They were wide open and unencompassable....I don’t know whether it was so much their provocation or lack of provocation that made you feel anxious as much as the fact that they couldn’t be encompassed by the recipe. You had to look at what was happening, the basic elements of dance, of theater, of light, of space, of sound. There was nothing very much to grasp onto. You just had to undergo them.¹⁷

Paxton’s interrogations of impressiveness in dance played out in an attempt to remove the particularities of personality from his dancers. In *Word Words*, performed with Rainer on the same program as *We Shall Run* in 1963, his decision to perform nearly naked was the end result of a series of rejected strategies devised to make them look as alike as possible, including gorilla suits and a failed attempt to hold a “zombie-like” facial expression.¹⁸ For the final dance, Rainer performed a sequence of movements while Paxton leaned against the wall and watched. Then Paxton performed the same movements while Rainer watched. Then they both danced the movement together. It lasted about twenty minutes.¹⁹ Anne Wagner noted how oddly alike the two look in a photograph by Robert McElroy of Paxton and Rainer standing. The exposure of all of their physical differences improbably rendered them anatomical specimens rather than a sexualized pair, similarly muscular and lean, equally capable of executing a moderately athletic feat. The fact, apparent in the photographs, that they did not look at each other or otherwise interact further downplayed their gender difference—it decreased the chance of seeing anything they did in terms of gendered roles.

On the one hand, nudity—without context, unexplained, and inspiring seemingly no embarrassment—made *Word Words* strange, neither everyday nor classical. Yet on the other hand, nudity was what allowed Paxton to present the body matter-of-factly. Viewers are more likely to notice the absence of sexual *frisson* where they would expect it most. Naked, but firmly outlined and tough, the body here is a term made plural—Word plus Word equals Words—any body will do to make this point. The piece seems to want to show its viewers a level of basic, casual embodiment on which all bodily experience is the same.

Rainer’s dances did not work against the appearance of difference in this way; on the contrary, her version of the ordinary made room for it. Rainer was drawn to Cunningham for slightly different reasons than Paxton when, in 1960, she began taking technique class at the Cunningham School.²⁰ In the tribute to him included in her 1974 book, *Work 1961-73*, she described the unique quality she first saw in his way of moving as “the coordination of a pro and the non-definition of an amateur.”²¹ She later wrote, “[T]hat the performing human body is in and of itself an emotion-conveying instrument, [was] something that we who had studied with Merce intuitively absorbed and accepted.”²² Seeming to place this first encounter with Cunningham as background to the creation of *We Shall Run*, Rainer noted, in her tribute, that the only movement she could execute with his level of confident ease was “running.”²³ What she wanted from Cunningham—more than the exact shapes that his body formed—was the feeling his body conveyed, through the unintended movements that signified a quality of “body-ease.”²⁴

Like Paxton, Rainer rejected the virtuosity in Cunningham’s dances, but she was not as interested as he in completely foregoing the theatrical. She presented a group running en masse, shifting and changing direction like a school of fish so that no one person occupied a central or front-row position. She placed all of this, however, in contrast to the swelling, bombastic sounds of Berlioz’s 300-person choir, and the firing of a cannon. In *We Shall Run*, though the movement was very simple and the facial expressions fairly calm, with eyes generally cast downward, the bodies do convey a feeling of serenity, united in their shared purpose, chugging along with matter-of-fact confidence in their capacity to complete the fairly straightforward task they have been given. And critics responded accordingly. Jill Johnston, dance critic for the *Village Voice* during these years, was often moved by Rainer’s work; *We Shall Run* led her to cheer, in her review, “Hurray for people.”²⁵

Rainer’s work, as with Paxton’s, displayed an interest in the times when the body was “just carrying on by itself,” but her intentions can nonetheless be distinguished from his. She has written of her resistance to the hope for transcendence latent in some of Paxton’s ideas about dance.²⁶ There was no moment of transcendent justice intended when Rainer presented jogging, moving a mattress, or leaning on a traffic blockade—no triumph of the little body. There was only what she called “the implicit... emotionality of the human body,” and this was hard to make truly, spontaneously available.²⁷ The use of ordinary movement in 1963 was thus a strategy for Rainer, a means of achieving a

particular physical effect in and on the substance of the body. Her dances with actual tasks during these years put a frame around small, unintended or awkward movements and the rise of emotional states in her performers that were rich without being extraordinary.²⁸ What do people look like when they are actually mentally and physically engaged by an activity? The patterns on the stage in which her performers ran in *We Shall Run* were just complicated enough to engage them on a level of thoughtful investment: one person's comportment suggests to me "I'm-going-to-get-it-right; I look for another that says, "I'm making a mess of this," and think I may see it there in Robert Rauschenberg, notoriously uncoordinated, hovering just behind Robert Morris, third from the left. Rainer presented a body that was alien to the dance stage, but familiar to the average person.

Paxton's dancers walked because those were the instructions. If his performer was actually thirsty when he or she went to drink the glass of water in *Proxy*, then perhaps some small signs of pleasure or satisfaction would have become visible in the dancer's body, but this would have been more of a triggered thirst than anything rightly called spontaneous or accidental. He gave his dancers no engaging reason for doing what they were doing. Thus Paxton's everyday movements were, in general, emotionally emptied, truly separated, like locust shells, from the everyday living world that he intended to honor. The everyday was turned into a recognizable concept. Art became the site of rigor. Feeling happened privately – each viewer was left to his or her own. Rainer's work, in contrast, is as much about everyday feeling as the look of the ordinary, and for feeling, the way she understood it to take form in art, she needed material – she needed a little bit of accident. She contrived situations within a theatrical setting that would trick her performers passive bodies into producing the effects she wanted to put on display. As it developed, this became an important metaphor in her work.

Comparing Rainer and Paxton allows us to see two quite different versions of the everyday that were coming out of the Judson Dance Theatre in 1963. In both artists' work, the bodies were clearly executing a repetitive movement-script, and thus appear passive to some external control. Yet, in Paxton's bodies, even when naked any aspect of vulnerability in that passivity is only implied. He offered a body that was externally controlled, but then appeared materially and emotionally as if there were nothing very unruly to control in the first place. In Rainer's work, the vulnerability in passivity—in the body giving into gravity, in giving off signs of spontaneous thought, in its not knowing and controlling at every moment exactly what it was doing—was

not foremost, per se, but it was made available as a positive, as something significantly true about the ordinary body. The elements that signaled passivity were inextricably tied to the actions themselves. The task contained the vulnerability.

The differences between Paxton and Rainer reveal the different models of art under which they were operating. Paxton's model is more conceptual or minimalist – an idea guides a process, and the viewer is thrown back on herself to supply the work with emotional content. Rainer's model is closer to that of modernist abstraction from the first half of the 20th century: interesting, sensual relationships between material and structure are arranged within a frame, available for the viewer to get caught up in and feel. What was different, and notably "sixties," about her version was the inclusion of ordinary actions, gestures, and things, among her materials and a notion of structure that operated independently of established formulae.

Working with a modernist model, Rainer was, I believe, very much aware of the risks involved in letting the everyday into art. The risk, of course, in doing away with beauty, specialness, and what counts as such, is that for many viewers there will be no art anymore—there will be no compelling formal language. If one furthermore wants—as Rainer did—to be critical of the everyday reality of a consumer society in the mid-twentieth century United States, a society waging serial wars, then by focusing so exclusively on the ordinary, one ran the risk of reproducing that society's empty images, its exhausting rhythms, its constraining structures, and banal insensitivity. At what point does the everyday become so familiar that the viewer is merely recognizing rather than looking and thinking? Thus in her works of the later 1960s, launched with her famous four-minute dance *Trio A* (1966), Rainer pursued a quality of everydayness in choreographed movement, rather than limiting herself to straight-up recognizably ordinary movement. I would suggest that the basics of what she sought for art are to be seen in the placement of a passive and unruly material within a structure, and these can already be found in the early Judson works, territory mapped in relation to her friend Steve Paxton, the withdrawn idealist.

(Endnotes)

¹ This paper is based on research completed for my dissertation, "The Body as a Material in the Early Performance Work of Carolee Schneemann, Yvonne Rainer, and Vito Acconci," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), advised by Anne M. Wagner.

² Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006): 185.

³ Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre 1962-1964* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 7.

⁴ Dunn taught one more composition class in 1964. See Don McDonagh, "Robert Dunn: Educating for the Future" [interview], in *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1990): 48.

⁵ Sally Gross, interview with the author, Spring 2004.

⁶ The fourth section of Terrain was titled, "Play." Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York: New York University Press, 1974): 22.

⁷ Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 58-60; Robert Morris, "Dance," *The Village Voice*, 3 February 1966, 8, 24; Yvonne Rainer, email correspondence with the author, June 7, 2008.

⁸ Sally Banes, "Steve Paxton: Physical Things," *Dance Scope* 13 (Winter/Spring, 1979): 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12-13. Banes lists "tossing coins" as one of Cunningham's methods in the introduction to Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977, 1978, 1979): 7.

¹⁰ Banes, "Steve Paxton: Physical Things," 13.

¹¹ Nancy Stark Smith, "Trance Script, Judson Project Interview with Steve Paxton (1980)," *Contact Quarterly* (Winter 89): 18.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ Stark-Smith "Trance Script, Judson Project Interview with Steve Paxton (1980)," 18-19, first and third ellipses in original.

¹⁴ Rainer refers to the work as "severe and rigorous," in Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 241. Gretchen MacLane remembers being "bored out of my mind. But it wasn't bad being bored in those days," quoted in Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 51. Paxton describes his own work as "tedious" for audiences and describes certain viewers as "provoked and bored. They were angry and bored" in Stark-Smith "Trance Script, Judson Project Interview with Steve Paxton," 17-18.

¹⁵ "Deborah Hay," interviewed by Sally Banes, *The Judson Project*, Bennington College, 1983, videocassette.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ McDonagh, "Robert Dunn," 53-54.

¹⁸ McDonagh, "Steve Paxton: People," in *The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance*, 79. John Herbert McDowell tells how "very interesting" *Word Words* became once the dancers removed their clothes, after it had been "pretty boring" in rehearsal. See "Judson: A Discussion," participants: James Waring, John Herbert McDowell, Judith Dunn, Arlene Croce, Don McDonagh, *Ballet Review* 1, no. 6 (1967): 41.

¹⁹ Jill Johnston, "Judson Concerts #3, #4," *The Village Voice*, 28 February 1963, 9.

²⁰ Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 188.

²¹ Rainer, 327.

²² Rainer, "A Fond Memoir with Sundry Reflections on a Friend and

Her Art" (October 11, 2001), in Trisha Brown: *Dance and Art in Dialogue 1961-2001*, 52. Rainer writes similarly of the "implicit humanity and emotionality of the human body," apparent in Cunningham's work in *Feelings are Facts*, 170.

²³ Rainer, *Work*, 329.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 328.

²⁵ Johnston, "Judson Concerts #3, #4," 9.

²⁶ Rainer writes: "Though I disagree with some of his ideas about freedom which smack of transcendental flight, I can only admire the way in which he lives his life." See Rainer, "Backwater Twosome/ Paxton and Moss" (1978), *Dance Scope* 13 (Winter/Spring, 1979): 8. Originally published as "Paxton Untitled," *SoHo Weekly News*, 16 November 1978, 31.

²⁷ Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 170.

²⁸ Susan Leigh Foster describes the emotional richness in the following, insightful way: "[B]y focusing on the performance of movement as a neutral activity, the dance allows feeling to appear tacitly at the margins of the body and the dance. Although human sentiment is not the subject matter of the dances, nor do the faces or bodies of the dancers give themselves over to the display of feeling, emotion nonetheless enjoys a full, rich presence in these pieces. The individual dancer who is not expressing archetypal experience can instead express the body both as a physical structure and as a subject. Because the dancer's self is not concerned with self-presentation—it does not tell the body how to move or how to express its feelings—but rather participates fully in the activity at hand, that self creates an aperture through which it can be viewed. The subject-body thus presents itself as its own passionate message." See Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 181. For an argument, via the lens of Michel Foucault, that something more than the body is needed to ground a politics, see my dissertation, "The Body as a Material," Chapter 3.