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Learning about the 60s: Choreography as a Practice of Archiving

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Abstract: In this article I suggest looking at the choreographer from the position of the archivist. I will do so by contextualising a video entitled *Learning about the 60s*, a piece that came out of a practice-based research project that I undertook together with three second year BA dance students in March 2012. Within a time period of four weeks (thirty hours) we looked at different creative strategies and choreographic methods and processes for translating *Trio A* (1966) by the American choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer. The project initially set out as an enquiry into the relationship between movement and language, which arises from a concern with how meaning is created from what we see and hear when we watch a performance. Over the duration of the project I questioned the piece's prominent place in postmodern dance history and both its legacy and relevance to contemporary dance practices. This shifted the focus of the project towards an ontological investigation. There are several specific research questions that emerged in the course of the project: How can I offer an alternative reading of *Trio A*, one that goes beyond what we already know about it? How can I dialogue with what I see as an 'object' that has primarily presented itself to me as video documentation? If *Trio A* has become an object, how can I comment on the fetishization of it? How can I challenge, destabilise and/or interrupt the 'thingness' of *Trio A*? Finally, how do I place my work next to Rainer's?

Keywords: postmodern dance, Trio A, Yvonne Rainer, dance and objecthood

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Learning about the 60s: Choreography as a Practice of Archiving

Antje Hildebrandt

In this article I suggest looking at the choreographer from the position of the archivist. I will do so by contextualising a video entitled *Learning about the 60s*, a piece that came out of a practice-based research project that I undertook together with three second year BA dance students in March 2012. Within a time period of four weeks (thirty hours) we looked at different creative strategies and choreographic methods and processes for translating *Trio A* (1966) by the American choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer. The project initially set out as an enquiry into the relationship between movement and language, which arises from a concern with how meaning is created from what we see and hear when we watch a performance. Over the duration of the project I questioned the piece's prominent place in postmodern dance history and both its legacy and relevance to contemporary dance practices. This shifted the focus of the project towards an ontological investigation.

There are several specific research questions that emerged in the course of the project: How can I offer an alternative reading of *Trio A*, one that goes beyond what we already know about it? How can I dialogue with what I see as an 'object' that has primarily presented itself to me as video documentation? If *Trio A* has become an object, how can I comment on the fetishization of it? How can I challenge, destabilise and/or interrupt the 'thingness' of *Trio A*? Finally, how do I place my work next to Rainer's?

Trio A is such an interesting work to look at because it is, and simultaneously is not, a 'thing'. On the one hand, it is certainly an object with a fixed and distinguishable character, style, label and history attached. On the other hand, as it is continually reproduced, represented, reconstructed, reinterpreted, re-enacted and re-performed throughout the years, *Trio A* also exceeds being an object, as it exists in multiple bodies. This idea undermines the argument that *Trio A* can ever fully be present as a 'thing' or object. On the contrary I argue that the piece can only ever be present partially, existing in a tension between absence and presence.

Trio A is a crucial piece to engage with because it represents a critical moment in dance history which opened many doors for future engagement with the art form by asking questions about the nature, significance and potentiality of dance and choreography. Its specificity and set character, its definite order and structure, allow for an in-depth analysis unlike other pieces of the era that are based on scores, tasks and improvisation. As a piece that is short but rich in content and movement material, it can be read as a critique of everything that came before (for example ballet, Graham or Cunningham technique), but it is also

preoccupied with its own time and ideas (for example, everyday ‘pedestrian’ movement), all of which are referred to in the dance. *Trio A* is one example of a work that stands for a period of new ideas in the 1960s, and it can be argued that it ‘represents’ a group of dancers/choreographers (Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Deborah Hay, Douglas Dunn, and others) and their (post-modern) beliefs at the time. *Trio A* is probably the best-known choreography from the Judson Church era, and according to Sally Banes, ‘the signal work both for Rainer and for the entire post-modern dance’ (1987:44).

The four-and-a-half minute to six-and-a-half minute solo (depending on the dancer’s timing and physical inclination) was first performed as a trio by Rainer, David Gordon and Steve Paxton, who were dressed in casual clothes and trainers, as part of an evening titled *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part I* at the Judson Church on January 10, 1966. Later that year it was performed as *Lecture*, in which Peter Saul executed a balletic solo version with pirouettes and jumps; another version in 1968 was performed by Rainer in tap shoes. Since then it has been performed on numerous occasions, two of which Rainer refers to frequently in articles and interviews. It was performed by Rainer, who was recovering from a serious illness at the time and was thus dressed all in white, referring to hospital dress code, as a solo titled *Convalescent Dance* at Angry Arts Week in 1967 (Rainer, 2009). In 1970 it was performed at the opening of the *People’s Flag Show*, where Rainer and four others danced it nude with five-foot American flags tied around their necks. This was a protest against the arrest of the gallery owner Stephen Radich, who had been accused of ‘desecrating’ the American flag (Rainer, 2009). I give these selected examples to emphasise the breadth of contexts in which the piece was performed and in order to highlight the potential for multiple meanings that the piece brings forth.

When one looks at the dance historical context of the work, *Trio A* can be read as a statement against notions of the spectacular, the theatrical, the virtuosic and the elitist in dance. It can be read as a critique of the technically demanding, disciplined and rigorous training regime, one that values the aesthetic of the expressive body against dance as an intellectually demanding practice. Banes has argued that, with this piece, Rainer turned dance from something breathtaking, admirable and specialist into an action that anyone and any *body* can do (1987, 1993). The dance artists that worked as part of the Judson Dance Theatre were deeply suspicious of the notion of dance as a form of expression of the body, or a (special) form of non-verbal communication with the audience. Furthermore, *Trio A* can be interpreted as the antithesis to the theatricality of the minimal sculptures and installations of Rainer’s once partner Robert Morris, which demand a physical engagement from the viewer.

In contrast, it can be argued that the choreography of *Trio A* does not ask the viewer for her/his physical commitment. This often paradoxical relationship between sculpture and dance and the interdisciplinary nature of artistic practice in the 1960s are an important reference point, as it marks the beginning of an engagement between material and choreographic artistic practices.

Since it functions as a crucial interdisciplinary reference point, *Trio A* has received a considerable amount of attention from various fields, for example dance historians (Banes, 2003, 1993, 1987; Burt, 2009, 2006, 2004; Franko, 1997), curators (Wood, 2007), choreographer-philosophers (Sigman, 2000), art historians (Bryan-Wilson, 2012; Lambert-Beatty, 2008, 1999), art philosophers (Carroll, 2003), but also from Rainer herself in *A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A* (1968). As *Trio A* becomes more and more recognised for its importance for dance and art history, it also becomes a fetish, an object, a product, a fixed moment in time.

This is particularly true when we look at the rigour and insistence on precision with which *Trio A* is currently passed on and which seems paradoxical to its initial proposal from the 1960s. Rainer herself is aware of this contradiction between the ethos of the dance in the 1960s, which models itself on notions of participation and non-elitism, and its current status as an iconic canonical piece of dance history. She writes:

In the spirit of the 1960s a part of me would like to say, "Let it go." Why try to cast it in stone? Why am I now so finicky and fastidious, so critical of my own performance, so autocratic about the details – the hands go this way, not that way, the gaze here, not there, the feet at this angle, not that? In the last decade I have become far more rigorous – some might call it obsessive – not only with respect to the qualifications of those whom I allow to teach the dance but in my own transmission of its peculiarities. In the presence of the Laban notators in the summer of 2003, it became increasingly clear to me that here was an opportunity to set the record as straight as possible and forget, at least for the moment, my scruples and caveats about fetishization and immortality.

(Rainer, 2009:17)

Rainer is aware of the dilemma yet falls into a trap by desiring *Trio A*'s 'thingness', by insisting that it is only taught by qualified and authorised teachers and by demanding that dancers undergo a workshop and rehearsals (and in some cases an audition) before they are allowed to perform it in public. It is important to note Rainer's relief about the fact that *Trio A* now exists through Labanotation. There is no doubt that Labanotation is currently the most

accurate method of recording movement, yet only few dancers and choreographers can actually read and interpret it.

The other way of recording movement is photographic and video documentation. *Trio A* was documented by Banes in 1978 (12 years after its initial performance), yet Rainer insists that one cannot learn the dance from the video. Her resistance seems largely based on her dissatisfaction with her own performance in the video, as she could not physically execute certain movements like she wanted (2009). Her 'vanity' raises interesting questions about documentation, archive, preservation and legacy in dance particularly; issues that played a key role within this research project. It is understandable that Rainer's specific memory of the actual performance in 1966 clashes with the recorded performance, yet I argue that this clash is apparent to her alone. Most people who did not have the privilege of witnessing the performances of the piece in the 1960s and 1970s will come across *Trio A* via the video documentation which is accessible through YouTube.¹ As part of my project with the dance students I wanted to work out what happens when one attempts to learn *Trio A* from the video. I therefore proposed to the three dancers to learn the dance to the best of their abilities from the YouTube video within a time frame of eight hours.

In the process of learning it became quickly apparent that one important feature of the dance is the use of the gaze or focus. As Rainer says herself, 'Two primary characteristics of the dance are its uninflected continuity and its imperative involving the gaze' (2009:12). In *Trio A* the eyes of the dancers never meet the audience, as Rainer has carefully choreographed the movement of the head and uses devices such as looking down or closing the eyes in order to follow the task she set for herself. Theoretically, the denial of the gaze meeting the 'other' is to be equated with the denial of an easy, straightforward relationship between performer and audience. In *Trio A* there is no acknowledgement from the performer that this is a performance, in the sense that it is a special kind of activity to be looked at and differentiated from the rest of the activities in the world. The denial of a relationship with the audience proposes to me that *Trio A* cannot be seen as an art object. Rather, it would be more appropriate to see *Trio A* as a way of doing, or rather being in the gallery, on a stage, in the world.

In Rainer's original programme notes she states her ambitions for the dance: 'I wanted it to remain undynamic movement, no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just *do it*' (1974:71). This task-based performance of *Trio A* refers to the

¹ Please see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZwj1NMEE-8> (Accessed: 13 Apr 2014).

mode of performance rather than an actual, task-based movement vocabulary, as the material itself is indeed quite challenging to learn and perform. Pat Catterson, who is one of Rainer's official transmitters of *Trio A*, has performed it in various different contexts in Europe and the USA over the last forty years, and also knows a 'retrograde' (backwards) version, points out the liberation that the performers must have felt when they did it back in the 1960s: 'It was a different definition of performing for me – that is, performing as just normal doing, not a special way of being that happens when one is on stage' (2009:4).

As I was pondering about the task-like activity, the 'non-performance', the denial of the gaze, the continuity of movement and the issue of documentation of *Trio A*, I began to think about how I could both emphasise as well as critically interrogate the performative realities of this now iconic piece. After the eight-hour rehearsal time was over, I decided to tape a camera to a different body part of each dancer (leg, arm and stomach) and to record a performance of *Trio A* from the perspective of each dancer's body. This rather experimental use of the camera resulted in an unedited 6'36" video piece, which I titled *Learning About the 60s*. With the piece I intend to ask questions around ownership, authorship and gaze (it is hard to watch the piece as a spectator but in a different way than watching *Trio A* is),² (non-) performance (the dancers are talking to each other as they are trying to help each other remember the movements), continuous movement (the actual movements of the dancer's body are amplified by the camera often producing jerky and sudden changes and breaks) and documentation (I suggest that the piece is not documentation, but a distinct artwork in itself). At the same time the project as a whole aims to questions what it means to practise *Trio A*, what is means to learn and to perform it. In the piece I suggest *Trio A* as a process, a method, a concept, an ideology and a way of thinking. The video draws attention to the embodied experience of studio-based learning (so-called 'learning-by-doing') and acknowledges experiential knowledge as a valid form of research.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, who calls Rainer 'a sculptor of spectatorship' (2008:9), writes about the paradoxical nature of the body, as it is both exterior and interior, it sees and it is also seen. *Learning about the 60s* is an attempt to show exactly this paradox. It attempts to show what it must feel like to dance *Trio A*. It is shot from the dancer's point of view and gives us her perspective of the space. We see the world from her point of view, through her eyes. The viewer is invited to occupy and share a privileged 'inside' perspective, an internal space. Through the choreography of the camera the piece attempts to bring the viewer closer

² One audience member told me that she became motion sick when watching the piece.

to the experience of dancing rather than making an attempt at any accurate reconstruction of *Trio A*. In the actual footage however we get an external rather than an internal view through the external viewpoint of the camera filming the space. In *Learning about the 60s* we can hardly see any actual ‘dance steps’, but what we are left with is the movement of the camera. During the six minutes we never actually see the dancing body fully. The only things we see are body parts and fragments of movements. This emphasises the difficulty of the dance to fully appear or to be present. This partial presence is emphasised in *Learning about the 60s*, as there is no repetition (the same as in *Trio A*). Repetition makes a dance more object-like, more present, since we can grasp a structure, possibly a beginning and an end, which helps us to follow better and to see the actual material easier. In *Learning about the 60s* we are denied this pleasure.

Conceptually, the piece draws attention to the circumstances of its production (by which I mean the situation in which dance is traditionally taught, learned and rehearsed) and proposes the dance studio as a place where the dance happens (rather than on stage). The video makes visible the work that went into learning *Trio A* (you can literally hear the dancers trying to remember the movements) and by doing so it shows the production, the labour and the effort associated with performing the choreography. It proposes the dance studio as a performative place and a performance space, a site that is more about progress and process than about a final product.

Furthermore, and to come back to the beginning of this article, the video illustrates the role of the choreographer as archivist. She is to be there, to be present, but not to manipulate, to command, to control. She has no preconceived idea and no real choice over what the outcome will look like. She surrenders her authority in order to give space for different kinds of possibilities to emerge; possibilities and connections that she might not have thought of before. Unexpectedly, *Learning about the 60s* is the antithesis to *Trio A*. Whereas in *Trio A* movement is approached from an analytic and minimal point of view, *Learning about the 60s* is emotional and excessive. Whereas in *Trio A* dance is approached from a structured, clear and precise point of view, *Learning about the 60s* is physical, chaotic and messy. If in *Trio A* movement is hard to see due to its non-repetition and ‘out-of-synchness’ (especially when performed as a trio), *Learning about the 60s* is even more impossible to see. In *Learning about the 60s* it is difficult, if not impossible, to follow or even make out the movements from *Trio A*. One can catch a few glimpses, a few hints and traces here and there.

Yet, I want to highlight that it is both in the traces as well as in the practice of *Trio A*, in its rehearsal, repetition and duration that the full potential of the dance lies. Julia Bryan-Wilson proposes *Trio A* as a ‘complex discursive site that invites, demands, and necessitates practice’ (2012:65) or in the words of Catterson: ‘learning and doing this dance can give some understanding of it in a way that nothing you read or see about it can. Its history is embodied in its doing’ (2009:10). It might be used as a pedagogical tool for performers and non-performers alike, since it requires a continuous process of learning from both. Non-dancers might be learning complex movements, which are technically demanding and difficult to coordinate, whereas dancers might be challenging their training and performing habits and question their perceptions about what dance and dancing means to them (Bryan-Wilson, 2012). In this way, *Trio A* accumulates value through its persistence in time, as Jens Giersdorf states: ‘*Trio A* exists as a true living archive of an era through its continuous performances, but more importantly it requires a transmission from body to body reminiscent of oral cultures’ (2009:23).

In this article I have sought to address issues of ephemerality, documentation, archive and memory, which are core concerns for ‘preserving’ dance and securing its future. One of the challenges to traditional textual discourse has been to accept and validate the body as archive. The desire to document live performance is grounded in the fear that ‘without efforts to preserve the history and heritage of the art form it will forever languish as trivial and not worthy of serious research’ (Potter in Reason, 2003:83). There is a tension or gap between the official record, mostly archived by dominant institutions, or in the form of a history written by critics, and the embodied experience and memories of the performers, which are hard to preserve or document and which are often thought of as ephemeral and non-reproducible knowledge (Rubidge, 2001). Matthew Reason advances an argument against objectivity, accuracy and completion and instead speaks in favour of mutability and fluidity in the construction of the archive by transparent researchers. He contests the idea of the archive being ‘complete’, ‘authentic’, ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’; instead he conveys the idea of ‘the archive as empty, the researcher actively creating meaning, rather than simply finding it in the archive: the researcher is also constructing, selecting, editing, and speaking for the archive’ (2003:85). Indeed, if we agree with Reason’s conclusion that ‘if you value live performance because of its liveness, then memory must be a more appropriate site for any trace or afterlife than the frozen and unchanging archive’ (2003:86), we might ask whether we could see the choreographer and dancer as an archivist who absorbs, stores and disseminates knowledge through his/her body. A traditional approach to archiving often

tends to want to fix events or objects as discrete instances in order to make sense of them, whereas this performative approach suggests that all meaning is contingent. The ‘object’ of *Trio A* lies in the subjective (aesthetic) experience of spectators and performers. Here we might attend to Rainer’s *No Manifesto* (1965) and her *A Manifesto Reconsidered* (2008) as a prime example of how meaning changes over time:

No Manifesto, Rainer, 1965

No to spectacle
 No to virtuosity
 No to transformations and magic and make-believe
 No to the glamour and transcendence of the star image
 No to the heroic
 No to the anti-heroic
 No to trash imagery
 No to involvement of performer or spectator
 No to style
 No to camp
 No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer
 No to eccentricity
 No to moving or being moved

A Manifesto Reconsidered, Rainer, 2008

Avoid if at all possible
 Acceptable in limited quantity
 Magic is out; the other two are sometimes tolerable
 Acceptable only as quotation
 Dancers are ipso facto heroic
 Don’t agree with that one
 Don’t understand that one
 Spectators: stay in your seats
 Style is unavoidable
 A little goes a long way
 Unavoidable
 If you mean “unpredictable,” that’s the name of the game
 Unavoidable

In a clever, self-reflexive move, Rainer shows the redundancy of her earlier statement and undermines her own thinking forty-three years later. She shows that statements are never finite; they only mark the thinking at a specific point in time and context. Her engagement with the (her) past shows how (dance) history continually reflects upon itself and how meaning changes through time. *Trio A* is then, like any other dance, inherently connected to its historical context, as it always represents a particular moment in time. As an artwork it relates to its own history and discourse and never exists in a vacuum. Amelia Jones writes: ‘There is no singular, authentic “original” event we can refer to in order to confirm the true meaning of an event, an act, a performance, or a body’ (2012:18). *Trio A*’s meaning depends upon its actualisation in time and place, and this changes depending on the cultural, social, political and economic contexts that the piece ‘lives in or through’. It should therefore not be fixed, cast in stone and validated by the canon. Instead it is imperative that we see the piece as marked by absence(s) and as residing in the bodies and minds of the performers and spectators, who construct their own meaning(s) in the encounter with the work. Therefore we can say that there is never a fixed meaning, only multiple meanings that shift depending on the particular moment in which the performance takes place.

Ramsay Burt speaks of a ‘keen and sophisticated, yet idiosyncratic, interest in dance history’ amongst younger generations of choreographers and dance-makers (especially Europeans) who occupy themselves with *Trio A* as it ‘helps them build on what has already been done and makes them aware of a broader range of creative possibilities’ (2009:25). Considering myself to be one of these younger Europeans, I would add that going back to investigate past events, learning through history, allows me to see that past, present and future are inherently intertwined; and that new knowledge is most often built upon prior knowledge. And so it is with fascination but also with frustration that I continue to get involved with *Trio A*, as a choreographer turned archivist.

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