A Dancer Writes: Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* Now



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Figure 1. Pat Catterson performing Trio A *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009. © 2009 Yi-Chun Wu/ The Museum of Modern Art.*

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I Promised Myself I Would Never Let It Leave My Body's Memory

Pat Catterson

From Jill Johnston to Sally Banes, Susan Leigh Foster, Mark Franko, Ramsay Burt, and, most recently, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, dance historians and theorists have extolled the qualities of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) and discussed its significance in dance history. My relationship to this dance is unique. I first saw it at the Billy Rose Theatre in New York City in 1969, and in the same year I learned and performed it at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. In November of 1970 I first performed it retrograde, and I first taught it in the summer of 1971. In the forty years since, I have continued to perform and teach it. One of the high points in this odyssey was performing it in a duet with Yvonne at Judson Church in *Trio A Pressured,* a 1999 piece that marked her return to dance after a twenty-five-year hiatus as a filmmaker.

What is it about this dance, beyond its ideas and groundbreaking methods, that has kept me wanting to perform it and others wanting to see and learn it? And how is the experience of doing it different from that of viewing it? How has it changed for me and across generations over the years? I must go back to that first experience with the dance to begin to answer these questions.

When I first saw it as the closing event of a long evening, featuring work by both Yvonne and Deborah Hay at the Billy Rose Theatre,[1] I knew nothing about its ideology. I just saw a dance. Being a dancer and a fledgling choreographer (poised to present my first full evening of work at Judson in late 1970), I saw it differently, perhaps, from someone who was not a dance practitioner. Whenever it is performed, Yvonne typically presents this dance more than once, usually three times in a row, and the Billy Rose show was no exception. First, her main group of five dancers did it, then ten or so nondancers, and lastly she along with all fifteen of them did it again to the Chambers Brothers rendition of "In the Midnight Hour." I remember this experience vividly. I knew I was seeing

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something new as well as seeing in a new way. This had been true of the whole evening, but this tripled *Trio A* made the strongest impression of all. In fact, it was thrilling. From the moment it began I was taken by it. It was the look of it, the way it was done, the feel of it, and it was the way all of this resonated for that time and my generation.

Many, including Yvonne, talk about how difficult this dance is to see because—and Yvonne purposely set it up this way to maximize this difficulty—nothing in it repeats. It is one distinctive movement after another for about five minutes, depending on the performer. What Ellen Goodman, my first New York City friend, who accompanied me that evening, and I saw that night emblazoned itself in our memories. It was the uniqueness of the moves themselves that enabled their capture in our minds' eyes, so much so that, on the way back home, we tried to remember everything we could from it, demonstrating these fragments to one another and spurring one another's recall as we walked down the street, waited for the train, and got to her apartment. We wanted to hold onto it, for it spoke to us in some way.

The dance's shaping of the upper body against the lower body and the clarity and complexity of its relationship to space reminded me of Merce's work, but it wasn't from his abstract, technically polished body-land, nor from the fairyland of ballet or the heroic myth-land of Graham. Instead, this was a land I knew. It was accessible but just as beautiful to me as dances from those other lands—perhaps even more so. We saw ourselves in it. I dubbed it "the people's dance."

The late 1960s was a time, in many arenas, of framing the ordinary, celebrating the natural, questioning the status quo. The manner in which *Trio A* was performed was as unique as its moves. There was no hailing of the audience to it, no bravado, no seduction by personality, dramatic expression or flashy display; there was only the concentrated doing. It was like watching the ease, calm attention to detail, elegance, efficiency, and flow of someone doing anything in life that is practiced and familiar. It was like seeing my mother make a bed, or a cobbler fix a pair of shoes, or a store clerk ring up and bag your groceries, or someone fold her laundry and noting the beauty of that doing, that performing. It was a different definition of performing for me—that is, performing as just normal doing, not a special way or being that happens when one is on stage. And the nondancers were equally, if not more so, as captivating as the trained dancers. I think it was their unabashed pure concentration on the act, uncontaminated by other motivations or stylization. It felt so right for the egalitarian impulse of the times. And the last version with the Chambers Brothers song sent it over the top. In those days one didn't see modern dance to popular music. Yet it wasn't danced to the music; rather it was alongside it in the way Merce's dances were simultaneous with Cage's and others' more esoteric music. Hearing my generation's music with this dance made it all the more relevant and situated in my regular life. The contrast of its driving beat next to the dance's unfettered continuous flow reinforced its calm and mirrored our efforts as the generation still reeling from the assassinations and enraged by the lying of our government during the Vietnam War to stay "cool."

Ellen and I were seated in the cheap seats in the highest balcony. At the final curtain call—and everyone in the audience was standing by then—I saw some people in the orchestra seats climb up on the stage and try to do the dance, making the audience ap-

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plaud and bravo even louder! Now I don't know if the volunteer participants were friends of Yvonne's or not, for she doesn't remember this from that night, but their impulse was mine. If I were in those more expensive seats, I would have climbed up myself. I had never seen such a thing happen in a theater performance before or since. I think the audience was of one mind. *This dance captured who we were then, our sensibility, and you wanted to be part of it, feel it, do it.*

In a magazine advertisement, I saw that Yvonne was going to be teaching and performing at the American Dance Festival (ADF), then held at Connecticut College, the following summer. I had to go. I worked two jobs and took out a loan to have enough money. I didn't know then that I would not only see *Trio A* many more times there but would get to learn and perform it as well. Yvonne herself did not teach us *Trio A* but divided our Repertory Class into three groups, led by David Gordon, Barbara Lloyd, and Becky Arnold. At that time, Yvonne gave a little leeway in interpretation. Although it was recognizable as the same dance, all three had different versions of the details and one could immediately tell in class who was taught by whom. I was glad I was in Becky's group because her body structure and athleticism more closely resembled Yvonne's. I loved watching Yvonne perform the dance, and every time she would spontaneously join in, I would watch assiduously.

How much more difficult this dance was to do than it looked to be! Learning anyone else's body logic is always a challenge. For me, its many parallel squats also took a toll on my knees. Although I am very coordinated, I found its combining of body events was not easy, nor was its sequence easy to remember. Yvonne's residency at ADF would last for two weeks, and on the last day was to be our performance of the dance as part of *Connecticut Composite*.[2] At the beginning of the second week the memory problem took hold, and I didn't know if I could take in another new and unique move. Eventually, however, I and the others accomplished the whole of it. The hardest part came at the end when we were trying to master its "pacing," as Yvonne calls it—that is, finishing each move but not stopping or giving more emphasis to any one move over another. This runs counter to the dancerly instinct. One wants to make phrases out of passages of movement and head here or there. One wants to emphasize or favor this over that, to give more expression or to pause and frame one moment over another. I found I had to slow down, be in each moment for itself, that is, not head anywhere but where I was. These tasks are part of the piece's fascination, and doing them became kind of a meditation for me. To get all the details correct and to deliver the whole of the dance with its weighted ease, its presence at each moment, and its continuity is tremendously challenging. In a way it is its own technique, as exacting as any other, an ideal one can only approximate with each performance. Still, performing the dance was like a dream. I loved every second of it. It was the most relaxed I had ever felt performing. The concentration it requires leaves little room for worry. Because the choreography never allows your gaze to be toward the audience or front, you are relieved of the stress of seeing the audience watching you. In fact, when you rehearse it you don't even see yourself in the mirror. People watched but I didn't have to do anything to make them watch. I only had to do. How liberating that was. Though I have been praised from a young age for my rhythmic acuity, this dance offered

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no metric pulse, no syncopation, no counts, no place for me to play between rhythmic accuracy and interpretation. Instead, as I attended to each of its moments equally, I felt an endless ongoing-ness. This was a different sense of time, one more like an embodiment of Henri Bergson's duration. In fact, whenever I got to the end of the piece I just wanted to do it again, for doing it brought me inner calm.

The night of the show, as I walked out of Crozier-Williams West Gym, where we had performed, I stopped in my tracks, thinking about what I had experienced, and privately vowed to myself that I would never forget this dance. It so changed my sense of myself inside my own dancing and performing that I never wanted to let it escape my body's memory. Little did that twenty-three-year-old me know of the significance of that promise.

In fact, my journey with *Trio A* was only beginning. Before I left Connecticut I bought a book containing the article Yvonne had written about *Trio A* in 1968, entitled "A Quasi Survey of Some 'Minimalist' Tendencies in this Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A."[3] Although some of its ideas were talked about as we learned the piece, I had no idea the extent of its theoretical stance. In the spring of 1970 I saw Yvonne's *Continuous Project/Altered Daily* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In those days, *Trio A* often was performed within that piece and, soon after, in Grand Union shows. Whenever it occurred, my eyes were glued on it in order to check my memory and to gather new impressions of its essence.

In the fall of 1970 I responded to an ad in the Village Voice announcing "Post Modern Dance Classes" taught by Yvonne at her loft on Greene Street in Soho. From those classes came the cast for Yvonne's *WAR* and *Grand Union Dreams*[4] and more opportunities for me to experience *Trio A*. Barbara Lloyd decided to teach it in Yvonne's loft on Monday nights, and I took the class as a refresher. Barbara was never officially taught the dance but learned it from watching; this was before video tape, so she learned it by watching live without the benefit of rewind or slow motion—what a monumental task! As a result, there were several inconsistencies between Barbara's and Becky's version of the piece. However, as mentioned above, this seemed to be fine with Yvonne at the time. Barbara liked to experiment with altering our perceptions, actually having us do it blindfolded one night. It was fun. I luxuriated in the possibilities of the play back and forth between the versions I knew and the differences I observed from watching Yvonne or David Gordon or Steve Paxton or Douglas Dunn perform it. All of these experiences deepened my engagement with the dance.

On November 9, 1970, Yvonne, along with David Gordon, Barbara Lloyd, and Lincoln Scott, performed *Trio A* nude, save for six-foot American flags tied biblike around their necks, at Judson Church. It was done at an event in support of an artist and a gallery owner who were arrested for desecrating the flag because the artist had used an image of the flag in his exhibited work. All the invited artists presented works that included an image of the American flag. With the Vietnam War raging, Yvonne's nude-flag *Trio A* was an apt, and no doubt intentional, antiwar gesture. The contrast between the performers' vulnerable tender flesh, and what seemed to us then a garish symbol of violence and all that was wrong with this country and our government, was very moving. A few days later, at the last meeting of Barbara's class, Yvonne invited the ten of us in the class to

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perform the nude version with flag with the Grand Union in a show the next weekend at New York University's Loeb Student Center. We all said yes. I came by the Friday before to pick up a flag from her loft. Though determined to take part in this antiwar statement, I was so nervous about being naked in public that I decided I needed to give myself something to distract me from my nudity. For some reason my solution was to work the whole dance out retrograde. In my own choreography I had been playing with this backwards manipulation. Perhaps that was the source of my impulse, but it also may have come from the lure of the dance's ongoing-ness, from my desire, whenever I did *Trio A,* to do it again. If I could do it retrograde, I could do it end to end continuously, forward and backward.

It was an arduous task, this retrograding, but, just in time, after three nights of working on it, I did finish. Unfortunately, when I performed it with the Grand Union at Eisner Lubin Auditorium, I was moving quite slowly, a result of not knowing the dance as well backwards as I did forwards. Also, once I got up from the audience to join the Grand Union members, I realized, much to my dismay, I was the only one from Barbara's class to do so. I noticed at one point as I danced, with the audience seated in the round, that this immense room felt too still. It was then that I realized the others had already finished and were dressed again, and every face was staring at me, this fact breaking my concentration. I forgot my place, so I just did the first movement, which was my last, got dressed again, and rejoined the audience without completing it. Fortunately, a few months later in October of 1970, in a concert I shared with Douglas Dunn at the Cunningham Studio, I did the whole retrograde version, albeit clothed this time.

Teaching myself the backwards version of *Trio A* taught me more about the original, as movement manipulations do. The retrograde version is technically much more difficult than the original, forwards version, and since the original was indelibly imprinted on my mind, it was, and still is, easy to get confused and start to go forwards. It also is, in some of the very awkward places, very difficult to do the "pacing." Yvonne has told me, however,, that she thinks I do the pacing better with the retrograde version than the forwards! Although this was not my motivation, the retrograde performance has cemented me into *Trio A*'s history.

In the summer of 1971, while Yvonne was touring in Minnesota and eventually heading to California, she met two women who approached her about learning *Trio A:* Gail Turner, who would go on to work closely for many years with Meredith Monk, and her friend Mary Cerny. Since they were coming to New York that summer, Yvonne had them contact me to teach it to them, telling them I could do it backwards and forwards! This was the first time I taught the piece. I felt honored that she would allow me to do so. Just a couple of months later Yvonne again asked me to complete the teaching of *Trio A* she had begun at the School of Visual Arts while she recuperated from a long illness. The kids in the class wanted to do something for her. So one day I took them over to St. Vincent's Hospital, where her room on the fourth floor overlooked West 12th Street. I phoned her room and asked her to look out her window. There, on the sidewalk across the street, I had the students perform bits of the piece for her as they walked back and forth past her view. A year later I also taught it to Brook Andrews, an old friend who lived

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in Washington, D.C., but who had danced with me in New York. These early teaching experiences helped me to develop strategies for how to do it the most effectively, and like all teaching, it made me more assured when dancing the piece myself.

In 1975 I created a dance called *Serial II* that was a resume of my thirty-eight dances up to that point. Composed of an excerpt from each, this sequence made for a crazy patchwork quilt of a piece. I wrote Yvonne to get permission to include a snippet of my retrograde *Trio A*. She not only said yes but also gave me permission to do whatever I wanted with it. After that there was a long break before Yvonne and I connected again over *Trio A*.

In 1980 I began a full-time teaching position at Sarah Lawrence College, where, a few years later, I taught *Trio A* to six graduate students as part of my graduate seminar course. I also taught it to one very deserving undergrad, Mary Armentrout. Because it wasn't Mary's choreography, or perhaps because I was not the person on the faculty who was in charge of reconstructions, I was not allowed to show Mary's version in the student concert. So we did it in the lobby instead, during intermission. I taught John Jasperse and Jennifer Monson and a few other students some small passages of it so they could join in with Mary at those points. I loved making this outlaw dance still behave as an outlaw!

Over the next years I saw Yvonne perform *Trio A* at a Judson retrospective organized by Bennington College at St. Mark's Danspace, and later I saw Clarinda MacLow perform it at Lincoln Center in the Serious Fun Festival. In the meantime, I held to my promise never to forget it, and occasionally I would use it to warm up or just for fun.

It was a surprise phone call from Yvonne in 1998 that changed everything. She said she was writing a book about her early dance work and asked when had I first performed *Trio A* retrograde. It was a fun conversation. Just as a passing remark, I told her that I had never forgotten the dance and that I still did it occasionally. She was very surprised. A few days later she asked me to perform it in her stead with Clarinda Maclow at a pre-performance show benefiting the tenth anniversary of the Improvisation Festival. She had to make an unexpected trip to California and was not going to be able to do it herself. At that point I had not seen Yvonne in person in twelve years. The performance went very well, but I saw many small differences between Clarinda's version and mine. Yvonne had taught Clarinda the dance only a few years before. I wondered at the disparities, but I remembered the variations Yvonne had previously allowed. A few months later she asked me to teach *Trio A* to a group of dancers who were going to recreate the nude with flag version at a fundraiser for a new floor at Judson, but I was going to be away teaching in Wisconsin for a semester. So Clarinda taught the group instead. When I returned, I ran into Yvonne at a Douglas Dunn concert. It was a warm reunion. She hinted that she was considering returning to her dance work. Only a few days later she asked me if I would do my retrograde version in a new take on *Trio A* called *Trio A Pressured* at Judson, along with Steve Paxton, Colin Beatty, Douglas Dunn, and her. Of course I said yes.

I began to work on retrieving the retrograde. I was looking forward to showing off both versions to her, but it turned out, when I did, that I needed a lot of correcting. In a sense I had to learn it all over again, and that also meant redoing the retrograde! There was a film made of Yvonne performing *Trio A* in 1978, and, to a large extent, this film

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and her memory of the piece are its templates. I am blessed with an excellent memory, and I thought I was pretty true to what Becky had taught me, but I know, from my own choreography, that things can unknowingly and gradually morph. This may have happened to my remembered rendering of the dance. Since then I have kept notes on all of Yvonne's corrections to me and others, and I think I have it down now. Of course, the challenges of its ideas are still there, and every once in a while I think I get close to fully realizing its tasks. Yvonne herself has written that her best version of *Trio A* came after recuperating from serious intestinal surgery in the late 1960s.

For me, performing *Trio A* that night in October of 1999 at Judson matched the thrill of performing it for the first time in 1969. Yvonne rehearsed with each of us separately, and it was fascinating to watch Steve and Doug and an older Yvonne negotiate its doing. Its beauty was still there in all the same ways for me. My body has aged. Movements in *Trio A* that were not difficult at all at twenty-three are much more difficult now, and yet I understand it so much more. Still, that night it flowed. I felt like I was twenty-three.

From that event Yvonne's new dance life was launched. She asked me to assist her in her subsequent works for Baryshnikov's White Oak Project,[5] and I even went to Florida to work with the company. I taught two of the dancers my retrograde version for the *Past Forward* program. I had never taught this version to anyone. It was truly fun for me to watch them. I also performed it with Yvonne in an AIDS benefit at the Cunningham Studio. Yvonne has dubbed me one of the few custodians of this dance. I have taught it at many schools and to many individuals, both dancers and nondancers, from all over the world. And with the four of us[6] who now perform in Yvonne's new works, I have performed *Trio A* in other places in the United States and in Europe. Although Yvonne has become more protective of her dance, more doctrinaire about the details of it than she seemed to be in 1969, still each person's enactment of it, no matter how attentive one is to its details, will look different. Certainly, if one is doing the dance's tasks conscientiously there is no possibility of full unison with other performers. The mere task of finding the "pacing" that works will make for shifts in its time distribution between individuals, and, as with any dance, each person's distinctive body structure and sense of weight alter its look. In fact, the more attentive one is to doing it purely as intended, the more the individual seems to shine through.

Though for me even with my aging body, dancing *Trio A* has the same significance as it always did, it is now an historical dance for others. My observation is that audiences who see it now do not connect with it the way Ellen and I and others at the Billy Rose Theatre did. Whether this is true because so many of its revolutionary aspects have been assimilated or because so much has changed in the world and how we perceive it, the result is that *Trio A* is an historical dance. Like any historical dance, with education today's audiences can come to appreciate it, but it does not move their souls. *Trio A* is now an icon. Audiences are likely to know about it before they see it. It is not completely unfamiliar. It was a different experience for us: we came to it without preconception. Today one might wonder at any continuing necessity for the cool of its "neutral doing," which was so important as a kind of correction to the overblown theatrics of dance preceding *Trio A*. Perhaps we need not shy away from using expressivity if we choose. Its relaxed

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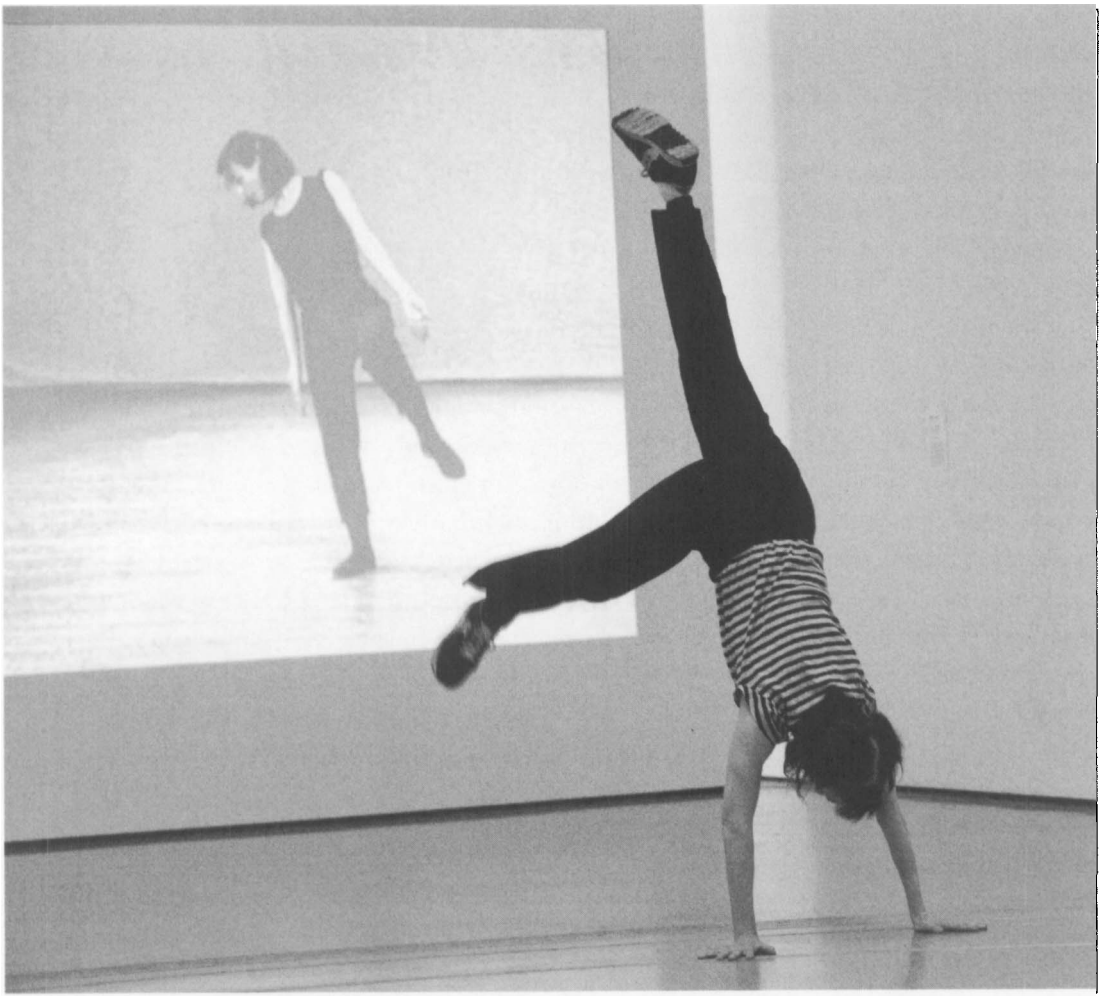


Figure 2. Pat Catterson performing Trio A *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009. © 2009 Yi-Chun Wu/ The Museum of Modern Art.*

natural quality, equality of parts, tame simplicity, and durational patience may be out of synch with today's Zeitgeist. I say this despite the seeming infatuation of some Europeans with the dance of the 1960s.[7]

For those who learn *Trio A,* however, it is still very alive and present tense, for they experience it on the ground level of their body. Knowing it this way is more informative and impactful than knowing it in theory or as an icon/relic of history. This I have found true no matter where my students are from. I have observed that each student has a similar transformative experience as I did in learning it. Its tasks are still difficult and engaging.

Others want to learn this piece because, first of all, so much has been written about it, and also because it is a way to touch that time. I think young people today yearn to know what that supposedly easier, creatively freer, time felt like. Though the legend of 1960s dance is perhaps larger than the reality was, learning and doing this dance can give

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some understanding of it in a way that nothing you read or see about it can. Its history is embodied in its doing. Everyone I teach goes through that mental crunch point where you think you cannot learn another new move, where they teasingly curse Yvonne's name in frustration. Everyone struggles with remembering all of its details and are surprised at how technically difficult and exacting it is. Just because nondancers are able to learn it does not mean it is easy by any means. I think this is the biggest myth associated with *Trio A.* But it is that pacing, getting that moment-to-moment present-ness, that is its biggest challenge and the task that keeps one wanting to do it again and again to try to fulfill it.

Years ago in the program for Yvonne's 1970 performance of *Continuous Project/Altered Daily*[8] at the Whitney Museum, she quoted a letter she wrote to Barbara Lloyd about a previous performance. It said "I got a glimpse of human behavior that my dreams for a better life are based on—real, complex, constantly in flux, rich, concrete, funny, focused, immediate, specific, intense, serious to the point of religiosity, light, diaphanous, silly, and many leveled at any particular moment." I was so taken by this statement that, when I got home, I tore out a long strip of newspaper and with a black felt marker wrote her words down on it; then hung the paper in my room. I kept it hung on my wall no matter where I lived for the next twenty-five years! I think when we dance *Trio A,* we get a glimpse of those dreams.

Notes

1. For one week in February 1969 the Billy Rose Theatre was the site of a mini modern dance festival with four programs featuring works by Twyla Tharp, Meredith Monk, Yvonne Rainer, and Don Redlich. Yvonne's evening on February 6 was called *Rose Fractions* and included one new work and excerpts from *Northeast Passing* and *The Mind Is a Muscle,* along with one work by Deborah Hay.

2. *Connecticut Composite* took place July 9, 1969, in several sites in the Crozier Williams Building at Connecticut College as part of the American Dance Festival.

3. This essay was first published in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology,* edited by Gregory Battock (New York: Dutton, 1968).

4. *WAR* was first performed at Douglas College at Rutgers University on November 6, 1970, and *Grand Union Dreams* at Emmanuel Midtown YM-YWHA in New York City on May 16, 1971. We who took Yvonne's class became an auxiliary group to the main performers of the Grand Union in these performances.

5. The first was an evening-length work Yvonne created in 2000 called *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan.* Later excerpts of it along with a version of *Trio A Pressured* were part of White Oak's touring *Past Forward* program.

6. Since 2005 Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, Sally Silvers, and myself, nicknamed the Raindears, have collaborated with Yvonne in the creation of her newest dance works: *AG Indexical, with a little help from H.M.; RoS Indexical;* and *Spiraling Down.*

7. What some European audiences might find innovative Americans might consider *déjà vu.* From what I have seen, European's take on American 1960s dance is an imitation of a conjectured "style." There is a self-consciousness in their renditions and in my view they lack the spirit of it.

8. These performances, two of which I saw, took place March 31 to April 2, 1970, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

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