Trio A in Europe

Ramsay Burt

Since the mid-1990s European dancers and audiences have played a significant role in the revival of interest in Yvonne Rainer's dance work. Two key examples of this are the restaging of Rainer's *Continuous Project–Altered Daily* (*CP-AD*) in 1996 by the French group Quatuor Albrecht Knust and the more recent creation and trial of the Labanotation score of *Trio A* in London. In her reminiscences printed above, Pat Catterson suggests that *Trio A*'s "relaxed natural quality, equality of parts, its tame simplicity, and durational patience may be out of synch with today's Zeitgeist." During Charles Atlas's documentary, *Rainer Variations,* Rainer herself suggests today's audiences would no longer be prepared to sit through the long slow works she made during the Judson period. If this is currently the case with audiences in the United States, it is not so on the other side of the Atlantic. European audiences for innovative dance and live art seem prepared to take the time to experience and appreciate slow, demanding, experimental work.

European choreographers and dance artists who have been interested in *Trio A* often have a keen and sophisticated, if idiosyncratic, interest in dance history. Artists I have spoken to suggest this interest helps them build on what has already been done and makes them aware of a broader range of creative possibilities. Some say they find it useful to discover dance artists in the past who were working in ways that are similar to their own practices. For example, Xavier Le Roy, who took part in the 1996 restaging of Rainer's *CP-AD,* performed the "chair pillow" section from it during his 1999 performative lecture *Product of Circumstances.* His discovery of ordinary, task-based, and pedestrian movement in Rainer's work affirmed his own research into similar kinds of movement. He subsequently created a duet with Rainer in Berlin in 1999, and he quotes on his Web site an email from her about his 1998 piece *Self Unfinished.* Rainer wrote: "The brightly lit performing area gives no clues to 'how to read' and the mechanical-man beginning is offset with a return to ordinary task-like activity: walk, sit, turn off tape machine. By

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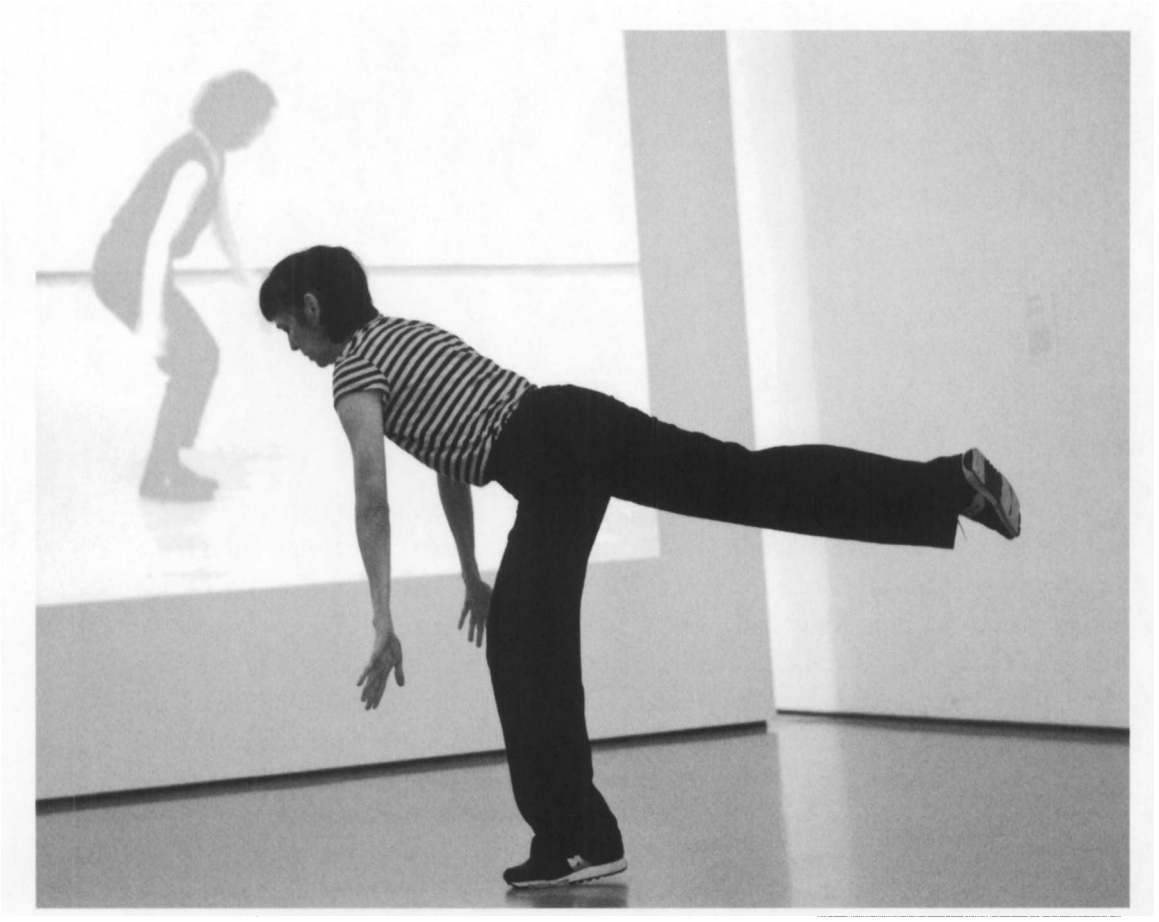


Figure 1. Pat Catterson performing Trio A *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 2009.*
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the time you're into the contortions with the dress, we're given this extraordinary hybrid creature, which confronts us with a multiplicity of interpretations."[1] I quote this at length because it exemplifies the way recent European work has sought to expand, in a democratically inclusive way, its audiences' ideas about the range of activities that can be considered dance. This, I suggest, is what artists like Le Roy value in historical works like *Trio A*.

I myself once tried to learn the first few phrases of *Trio A* when Douglas Dunn taught a workshop on it for my students. I recognize what Rainer herself states above about how demanding and difficult the piece is to dance. For me this was, in part, because I found it particularly difficult to grasp the way one movement follows another—or rather, doesn't logically seem to follow it. But, nevertheless, it is a work that can be danced by anyone with the determination to do so, regardless of their level of technical competence as a dancer. I recently showed my students the filmed version of *Trio A* in the 1979 PBS documentary *Beyond the Mainstream,* which alternates between footage of Rainer herself dancing it (from Sally Banes's 1978 film) and performances by Bart Cook, Frank Conversano, and Sarah Rudner. Asked what they thought of the differences in interpretation

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between these four dancers, none of my students felt any one version was "better" than any other. Rainer, they felt, danced it like she knew it was hers. They suggested that Bart Cook, who was at the time a member of New York City Ballet, used the shapes of his balletically molded arms and legs to open up and extend into the space around his body in a way that undermined the piece's internal focus. Postmodern choreographer Sarah Rudner, in their opinion, made it look too easy, while Frank Conversano, an untrained, inexperienced dancer, did the opposite. One student wished that the filmmakers had included more footage of Conversano. Because the experience of performing was so new to him, he concentrated hard on everything he was doing, and the intensity of his focus revealed the movement material itself with refreshing clarity.

I saw a presentation of *Trio A* produced by Martin Hargreaves with students at Trinity Laban (formerly the Laban Centre); these students had been the first to test out Melanie Clarke's Labanotation score and received corrections from Rainer herself. This presentation was during a one day conference, entitled Dance History Matters, organized by Alexandra Carter at Middlesex University in June 2006. The students began dancing *Trio A,* and then one of them stopped and spoke to the audience. He briefly recounted his experience of learning the piece and explained that his understanding of how to perform it had been affected by the contextual, historical material they had studied with Hargreaves. He concluded by outlining the ways in which he hoped that what he had learned through the project would contribute to his development as a dance artist. When he finished he resumed dancing, and, one by one, each of the others paused and told their own stories about dancing *Trio A.* Where Xavier Le Roy had found that knowledge of Rainer's work supported him in his own radical research into new movement possibilities, these students saw *Trio A* as a work that can extend their ideas about the nature of dance and broaden their range as performers. If anyone can dance *Trio A,* then this includes Europeans. I say this because I can see it being canonized as part of the American dance heritage, as something with a special relevance for Americans. I think it is important that, through an appreciation of its clarity and particularity, we can all go on making creative and meaningful uses of it.

Note

1. See http://www.insituproductions.net/_eng/frameset.html.

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