

Trio A: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation

Yvonne Rainer

I worked on *Trio A* alone for six months in 1965. The dance initially consisted of a five-minute sequence of movement that would eventually be presented as *The Mind Is a Muscle, Part I* at Judson Church (on January 10, 1966). There it was performed by me, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton simultaneously but not in unison. An interim version of an extended, but not complete, *The Mind Is a Muscle* (Judson Church, May 22, 1966) was performed by William Davis, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton. In the final section of this version, called "Lecture," Peter Saul executed a balletic solo version—that is, with pirouettes and jumps. In the final version (Anderson Theater, April 11, 1968) *Trio A* was performed by me in tap shoes (without balletic furbelows) at the end of the evening while Paxton, Gordon, and Davis performed it as a trio at the beginning.

The individual sequences last from four and a half to five minutes, depending on each performer's physical inclination. Two primary characteristics of the dance are its uninflected continuity and its imperative involving the gaze. The eyes are always averted from direct confrontation with the audience via independent movement of the head, closure of the eyes, or simple casting down of the gaze.

Since its completion *Trio A* has undergone many incarnations. In 1967 I performed it solo as *Convalescent Dance* (Angry Arts Week, Hunter Playhouse); in 1968 Frances Brooks, the first of many untrained dancers who have learned it, performed it during a lecture-demonstration at the New City Library of Performing Arts; in 1969 it was per-

Yvonne Rainer made a transition to filmmaking following a fifteen-year career as a choreographer/dancer (1960–1975). After making seven experimental feature films—including *Lives of Performers* (1972), *Privilege* (1990), and *MURDER and murder* (1996), among others—she returned to dance in 2000 via a commission from the Baryshnikov Dance Foundation for the White Oak Dance Project. Her most recent media project, a video installation for a traveling solo gallery exhibition, contained dance and texts dealing with art and politics in fin-de-siècle Vienna. Her most recent dances are *AG Indexical, with a little help from H.M.*, a re-vision of Balanchine's *Agon*; *RoS Indexical*, a re-vision of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*; and *Spiraling Down*, a meditation on soccer, aging, and war. These dances have been performed in New York, Los Angeles, Vienna, Helsinki, Kassel, Berlin, and São Paulo. A memoir—*Feelings Are Facts: A Life*—was published by MIT Press in 2006. Rainer is currently a distinguished professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine.



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

formed by a half-dozen dancers to the Chambers Brothers' "In the Midnight Hour" on the stage of the Billy Rose Theatre in New York. At the Connecticut College American Dance Festival of 1969, fifty students who had been taught *Trio A* by members of the group with whom I was in residence there (Becky Arnold, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, and David Gordon), performed it in relay fashion for over an hour in a large studio for an audience that was free to roam to other events in the same building.

In 1970 I and some members of the fledgling Grand Union—Lincoln Scott, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Nancy Green, and Barbara Dilley—performed it in the nude at Judson Church with five-foot American flags tied around our necks during the opening of the *People's Flag Show*. The show was organized by Jon Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, and Jean Toche as a protest against the arrest of various people accused of "desecrating" the American flag, including gallery owner Stephen Radich, who had shown the "flag-defiling" work of sculptor Mark Morrel in 1967; Radich's case traveled all the way to the Supreme Court, where it was thrown out on a technicality.

Around 1970 artist Michael Fajans, who had learned *Trio A* from Barbara Dilley, taught it to fifty students at Antioch College, who performed it on a large stage to "In the Midnight Hour." In 1971 those members of the Grand Union who knew *Trio A* performed the nude/flag version at New York University's Loeb Student Center during the last throes of my

Continuous Project/Altered Daily (the dance that, begun in 1969, gradually “atomized” into improvisatory programs by the collective Grand Union). It was here that Pat Catterson, who had learned *Trio A* from Becky Arnold and Barbara Dilley, joined us, performing it in reverse. Shortly thereafter she again performed it in reverse (now fully clothed) during her own evening of work at Merce Cunningham’s studio; and later that year she and a group of her students performed it on the sidewalk outside my hospital window.

In 1972 Steve Paxton performed *Trio A* for one hour at L’Attico Gallery in Rome. In 1973 I incorporated it into the narrative of my multimedia work “This is the story of a woman who. . .” In 1978, five years after I had stopped performing, I performed it in Merce Cunningham’s studio for a 16mm film produced by dance historian Sally Banes.¹ In 1979 the PBS series “Dance in America” produced a version with Sarah Rudner of the Twyla Tharp Company, Bart Cook of the New York City Ballet, and untrained dancer Frank Conversano; in 1980 I taught it to a group of French ballet and modern dancers in a workshop in the south of France (Fêtes Musicales de la Sainte-Baume); in 1981 during a Judson Dance Theater revival at St. Mark’s Church produced by Wendy Perron, I performed it in a state of almost crippling adrenaline poisoning (otherwise known as extreme stage fright).

The life of *Trio A* for the next eleven years eludes me. In 1992 I taught it to Clarinda MacLow, who performed it in the Serious Fun Festival at Lincoln Center; she in turn taught it to Jean Guizerix, formerly of the Paris Opera Ballet, who danced it during the 1996 Montpellier Dance Festival and later in Paris on a program organized by the dance group Quatuor Albrecht Knust. In August 1997, Clarinda, I, and several students to whom she had taught it danced *Trio A* at the Talking Dancing Conference in Stockholm (I introduced *my* interpretation as the “geriatric version”). On April 22 and 23, 1999, twelve dancers performed *Trio A*—six on each of two nights—nude with U.S. flags tied around their necks at Judson Church for a benefit to raise money to pay for a sprung wood floor in the Sanctuary. For this performance the dance had been taught by Clarinda MacLow and me. On October 4, 1999, *Trio A* was performed at Judson Church by Pat Catterson, myself, Douglas Dunn, Steve Paxton, and Colin Beatty as *Trio A Pressured*. Pat Catterson danced it in retrograde; Catterson, Dunn, and Paxton as a trio; Beatty and I as “Facing,” a duet in which I danced *Trio A* while his movements were predicated on keeping my face in view; Catterson and I performed it as a duet accompanied by “In the Midnight Hour.”

On August 3, 2000, *Trio A Pressured #3* was performed at the McCarter Theater at Princeton University by Rachel Aedo, Emily Coates, Michael Lomeka, Rosalynde LeBlanc, and Emmanuelle Phuon of the White Oak Dance Project as part of the program *PAST/Forward*. There followed a national tour of this program, culminating at the Brooklyn Academy of Music June 5 to 9, 2001. In the final performance of *Trio A* I joined the group in what was to be my penultimate public performance of it. In the fall of 2002 *Trio A Pressured #3* was included in a White Oak tour of European cities (without me).

In Charles Atlas’s video montage “Rainer Variations” (2002), I attempted to teach the beginning of *Trio A* to Richard Move’s “Martha Graham.” “Martha” had her own ideas about the process and proved to be a not very apt or cooperative pupil. In the summer of 2003 I taught *Trio A* to a dozen dancers at the Greenwich Dance Agency in the United Kingdom. I thought that this would be the last time I myself would teach it, from begin-



Figure 2. Pat Catterson performing *Trio A* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 2009.
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ning to end. (It nearly killed me.) In May 2004 Pat Catterson, Linda K. Johnson, and Shelley Senter performed another version of *Trio A Pressured* at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Catterson did it backwards, and Johnson and Senter performed “Facing,” followed by all three performing it as a trio to “In the Midnight Hour.” Both Johnson and Senter had learned the dance from Catterson. These three, plus Emily Coates (formerly of the New York City Ballet and White Oak Dance Project), are—as of 2009—the official transmitters of the dance.

In November 2004 Ian White and Jimmy Robert, two artists totally untrained in dance, performed *Trio A* (taught by Pat Catterson) at the Tate Gallery in London in a performance titled *6 things we couldn't do but can do now*. In the fall of 2008 I taught *Trio A* to three trained and three untrained people at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), including art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson and artist/writer Simon Leung. (This time, in better physical condition, I survived the process unscathed.) All six performed the dance on the annual faculty concert, *Dance Visions*, on February 5–8, 2009. The program included historic reconstructions of Donald McKayle’s 1951 *Games* and Jane Dudley’s 1943 *Harmonica Breakdown*. *Trio A* in *10 Easy Lessons*, danced without music, proved an interesting counterpoint in the context of the earlier work.

If the thought of having *Trio A* Laban notated had ever crossed my mind, it was only with the conviction that such a venture would be quite impossible. The subtleties and dynamics of this dance, performed without the structuring support of a musical score, seemed outside the domain of any graphic notation system. But when the opportunity arose in conjunction with teaching *Trio A* at the Greenwich Dance Agency in the summer of 2003, I did not object; in fact, I was curious. The notators were Joukje Kolff and Melanie Clarke. Their intense devotion to and completion of the task have given rise to some ruminations about conservation and immortality.

For the first decade of *Trio A*'s existence I was teaching it to anyone who wanted to learn it—skilled and unskilled, trained and untrained, professional and amateur—and gave tacit permission to anyone who wanted to teach it to do so. I envisioned myself as a postmodern dance evangelist bringing movement to the masses, watching with Will Rogers-like benignity the slow, inevitable evisceration of my elitist creation. Well, I finally met a *Trio A* I didn't like. It was fourth or fifth generation, and I couldn't believe my eyes. It was all but unrecognizable.

There is no cinematic record of the original performance of *Trio A*. A 16mm (since transferred to video) documentation of it was made in 1978, three years after I had stopped publicly performing and twelve years after the original performance of the dance. The difference between the two performances—one in my memory, muscles, and photos, the other on the screen—is immense. As David Gordon recently remarked to me, “You were an Amazon!” The 1978 film reveals someone who can't straighten her legs, can't plié “properly,” and can't achieve the “original” elongation and vigor in her jumps, arabesques (yes, *Trio A* contains three arabesques!), and shifts of weight.

When I hear rumors of people learning *Trio A* from the video, I know that they have achieved only a faint approximation of the dance with little understanding of its subtleties. Precision has always been an important component of *Trio A*. Its geometric floor patterns, governing direction of feet and facing of hips, is exacting and not to be trifled with. For example, the final diagonal with all its twisting perambulations, though not literally drawn, constitutes a directive as rigorous as any issued by Balanchine, Cunningham, or Lucinda Childs. If all of the trajectories of the dance were laid out on the floor, they would comprise for the most part straight lines in forty-five and ninety degree angles with a few connecting arcs. Adhering to these lines within an uninflected pace of idiosyncratic movement is what creates the unique look of *Trio A*. Because of the camera's fixed position and its tendency to foreshorten, the video and film of the dance lack the precision that live teaching can impart and reveal only the merest indications of these patterns and directions.

It might seem incongruous that such rectitude be brought to bear not only on the choreography of a dance composed under the free-wheeling firmament of the 1960s but on its exact preservation. Preserving *Trio A* is a paradoxical project, as, I would venture to say, are all enterprises that attempt to preserve performance, especially the products of the “adversarial culture” (Susan Sontag's term) of that period. Influenced in one way or another by John Cage's polemics against notions of “genius,” and the eternal masterpiece, we gave little thought to documentation other than photography, with the result that much of the time-based work from that decade has disappeared.

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.

An earlier record was made in Portland in 2002, where I “fine-tuned” the *Trio A*s of Shelley Senter and Linda K. Johnson while the whole two hours was videotaped from a corner of the studio. My particular spoken language—as important as the template of my body at this stage of my life—has thus been preserved. For instance, “like an airplane, not a bird,” or “Think of yourself as a barrel, not as a faun” (as I corrected David Gordon back in 1965)—these are metaphors or images delivered by speech that reinforce the physical transmission. But I doubt very much if this video adequately conveys the spatial details I have described above, since it shares with the 1978 film the distortion caused by foreshortening and fixed position of the camera.

So I was filled with relief and gratitude that *Trio A* had finally been Laban notated. As Joukje Kolff reassured me in response to my query: “Yes, the LN score is clear about orientations/facings of all body parts. The score is explicit about facing of the body in relation to the space: after every turn the resulting orientation is indicated. . .” Next, of course, came the test. As I laid down the gauntlet in an earlier version of this essay: “Step up to the bar, all and sundry, and reconstruct *Trio A* from this score. Be my guest (after contacting the Dance Notation Bureau).” I eagerly awaited the result.

The opportunity came in March 2006, when I was invited to the Laban Center in the United Kingdom, where I observed a dozen students demonstrate *Trio A* in a class taught from the Laban score by Melanie Clarke, one of the original notators. At the end I couldn’t help myself and dived in to make numerous corrections. Even with Clarke’s extensive study of the dance and attention to the finessed graphics of notation, it needed not just fine-tuning but gross adjustments.

After all this, I must admit to being equally fascinated with both the rough and the polished performances of my UCI-2009 troupe, consisting of three experienced dancers and three without any dance training whatsoever. All of them—Julia Bryan-Wilson, UCI undergrad painter David Gutierrez, Caryn Heilman (who had danced with Paul Taylor for ten years), artist Simon Leung, and M.F.A. dance students Rachel Pace and Amanda Prince-Lubawy—had worked their asses off during the ten-week course and subsequent rehearsals. Performed twice by each person, the dance was staged relay fashion, with the first group of three (two trained women and one untrained man) walking out to begin, to be followed when space permitted by the other three (one trained woman, one untrained man, and one untrained woman). Differences in pacing resulted in a staggered finish, each performer moving to the sidelines to assess when next to enter for a second run-through. The visible variations in difficulty and struggle, the poignant

determination and concentration of the three tyros—set off against the facility of the more “professional” performers—made it possible for me to engage with the dance in a way I hadn’t experienced before. In the past, if I had used untrained people, I had isolated them—that is, had them perform alone or in a group of others with a similar lack of training. But here everyone was operating simultaneously in the same space. The details, intact and recognizable from one dancer to another—sometimes in unison, sometimes in canon as a particular performer charged ahead or fell behind—propelled the eyes of the spectator into constant motion in the effort to keep track of individual differences. Art and life converged in a splendid moving tapestry. The difference between this group and the class I had observed at the Laban Centre lay in the consciousness of the former of both their limits and their struggle with those limits; they knew what they could not do, like balance on one leg convincingly or roll the head around while doing a difficult side step. The Laban people all had some dance training; they knew how to perform. What they didn’t know and couldn’t project was that sense of precariousness and achievement. My UCI “amateurs” had weathered the fire of my obsessive attention, and it showed—in their pride, determination, and self-awareness.

Oh well, when I am gone . . . Pat and Linda and Shelley and Emily will carry on. I have no doubt their students’ *Trio A*s will not make me roll over in my grave.

Note

1. The video is distributed by the Dance Film Archive, Ohio State University, and the Video Data Bank, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.