Trio A Canonical

Jens Richard Giersdorf

Despite Yvonne Rainer's subversive refusal to stage *Trio A* as a spectacle, to have it represent or narrate social structures, or to engage with the audience in a traditional manner, the landmarks of canonization have all been put upon it. The Banes-produced 1978 film of Rainer dancing *Trio A* was recently exhibited while the dance was performed live simultaneously by Pat Catterson, Jimmy Robert, and Ian White at the Museum of Modern Art, *the* institution that determines what constitutes important modernist and contemporary art in the United States and, indeed, the Western world. In conjunction with Rainer's famous *NO Manifesto, Trio A* appears in nearly every publication on so-called postmodern dance and art. Moreover, the key documentary on postmodern dance *Beyond the Mainstream*—containing *Trio A*—is screened in most dance history courses when postmodern dance is discussed. As a result, the choreography became not only a staple on syllabi in dance departments but also in disciplines such as gender studies, film and art history, or communications. Even Susan Au's *Ballet and Modern Dance,* a conservative historical text utilized in many dance history classes, defines *Trio A* as "one of the most influential works in the modern dance repertoire" (Au 2002, 155).

Having watched and taught about the dance many times, I always ask myself, How could a choreography that questioned everything about dance that preceded it still find its way into the Western dance canon? And more importantly, does this incorporation dilute *Trio A*'s subversive potential? In the following article, I want to think about *Trio A*'s problematic relationship to the dance canon and its unbroken political function.

Sally Banes ensured through her groundbreaking scholarship on—as she called it after Rainer's self-labeling—postmodern dance that *Trio A* and related works by members of the Judson Dance Theater were established as an important part of U.S. (if not world) dance history (Banes 1987). Although her theoretical analysis of these dances

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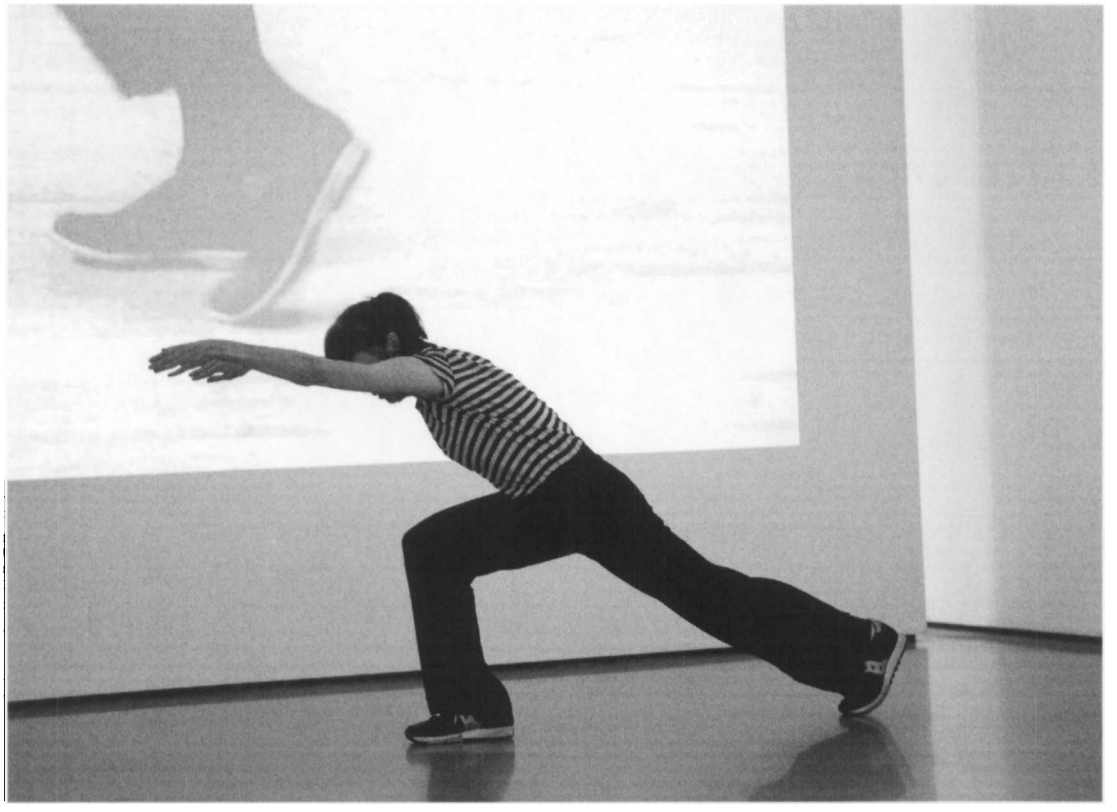

Figure 1. Pat Catterson performing Trio A *at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, 2009.*
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has been repeatedly criticized, Banes did succeed in incorporating postmodern dance into the dance curriculum and the dance canon (Banes 1987). The canon has typically been applied to literary work, but all forms of artistic production are structured in relation to a canon of influential works that are legitimized foremost through educational institutions but also through galleries, theaters, and museums. Even though it has been repeatedly argued, canons are not based only on aesthetic merits, nor are they divorced from political structures (Bloom 1987, 1994). John Guillory assures us that "canonicity is not a property of the work itself but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works—the syllabus in its institutional locus, the school" (Guillory 1993, 55). Whereas Guillory sees such institutional dissemination as contingent on various forms of value of the canonical work, or what he calls "cultural capital,"[1] other scholars define the canon decisively as an important tool of domination and a vehicle for the establishing of national cultures and, therefore, national identities. For instance, Lisa Lowe clarifies that impact on the formation of and representation in the canon are not available to everyone equally (Lowe 1996). Identity components—such as gender, race, class, and sexuality—are important influences on the exclusion from recognized canons, which are not only established through traditional standards of the Anglo-European canon but also through subject matter and form. Citing David Lloyd's utopian argument on the

death of the canonical distinction between major and minor works with the emergence of minority writing, Lowe states: "the Anglo-European function of canonization is to unify aesthetic cultures as a domain in which material stratifications and differences are reconciled" (Lowe 1996, 43). Major artistic works established in the canon uphold such reconciliation through a universalizing gesture either in the content or the form, whereas noncanonical works can conform to this gesture or challenge the universalizing stance.

Not having been educated in the Western dance canon but rather in the socialist canon of my native East Germany, I grasped Rainer's significance fairly late into my studies when she visited the University of California, Riverside, in the early 1990s for a presentation on her films. Preparing for the visit, I tried to understand her—at that time—shift in focus from dance to film. As a Ph.D. student in dance history and theory, I was invested in dance's capacity to produce, communicate, restructure, or represent, and I understandably resisted Rainer's then need to communicate through spoken and written language or the medium of film. It was a few years later, when I performed one of her choreographies, that I better understood how Rainer had continued to investigate vectors of power in everyday life and artistic production despite the change in her medium.

The choreography that illuminated my view at that time was not *Trio A* but *Connecticut Composite,* a piece from 1969. As proposed by Maura Keefe, a fellow graduate student in the Ph.D. program, several of us embarked on a redoing of the printed score. The score consists of twenty square boxes organized in six rows of three and four squares on a single page. Each box holds one or several geometrical shapes, such as circle, line, or square. Some of the boxes show these shapes related to each other when, for instance, an arrangement of short lines in a row cuts through another solid line, or when a circle is neighbored by a square. The score also provides a brief instruction that reads: "People-Plan. Designs represent consecutive static configurations by a group of 20 people. The arrows indicate the direction in which they are to face. An unbroken line means shoulder-to-shoulder alignment. A series of parallel short lines indicates column formation. The performers regroup 20 times" (Rainer 1974, 126). Our redoing of the score turned out to be a mini-experiment in social movement. Picture a group of graduate students at the height of their intellectual engagement with dance, arguing with each other about how to read and execute the score. We were yelling, moaning, walking, getting annoyed, pushing, following, giving up, retrying, bargaining, staring, yawning, running—all of that not always in that order and randomly repeated. Surprisingly, the final performance was a relatively quiet dance that created shapes throughout space in nonunison, unevenly paced walking. The group molded itself twenty times into more or less coherent temporary collective shapes.

It was not the first time that I experienced dance's capacity to organize and reflect on social structures, but it was the first time that I had experienced it through such a simple choreography. Doing it forced the participants to evaluate their positions in space and in relation to other individuals. It gave us an understanding of the potential of choreography and its impact on histories and present structures. Reading Catterson's ongoing commitment to *Trio A* in this issue of *DRJ,* I can't help but notice similar challenges in her engagements with Rainer's choreographies. I was struck by the inherent contradiction between vocabulary and performance, the problem with execution, the egalitarian impulse,

the importance of memory, the conscious relationship to social structures—especially when Catterson explores the difference between watching and doing the dance, when she remembers her excitement after seeing it for the first time, and when she recounts the audience's participation in the choreography. Yet unlike *Connecticut Composite* and the numerous other choreographies by Rainer, *Trio A* has become iconic and stands in for an entire era of dance. Without questioning the innovative imagination of the dance, I want to suggest that this status is caused more by the transmission of the dance and response to that transmission than by its choreographic structure.

Throughout her career, Rainer has never performed the role of genius artist who clouds her creations in mystery. Already in 1966, Rainer elaborated on the structure and choreographic process of *Trio A* by situating it in relation to minimalist art. She explained the continuous movement through the elimination of phrasing and emphasis, the task-like effort of the execution, the nonrepetition of vocabulary (Rainer 1974, 66–68). Even though Rainer does not discuss the averting of the dancers' gaze from the spectator throughout the choreography, she was aware of the difficulty for an audience observing the dance.[2] All this made Banes celebrate the dance as pure motion and a demonstration of corporeal intelligence (Banes 1987, 54). Such modernist reduction to the materiality of dance could explain *Trio A*'s position in the dance canon. It creates causal development and an unbroken canonical lineage from dance as ritual, via dance as performance of power (court dance), dance as spectacle (ballet), dance as expression (early modern dance), to the final emancipation of dance as movement (Balanchine and postmodern dance). For this kind of logical positioning in the canon, a dance like *Trio A* does not need to be accessible to the majority. Rather, in such a reading *Trio A* becomes a vehicle to consider the trajectory of dance history, and even more specifically U.S. dance history, with the culminating developments of dance firmly positioned in New York City (Balanchine, Cunningham, and Judson Church).

When in 2005 performance artist Marina Abramovic reenacted iconic performances from the 1960s and 1970s by fellow artists (Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Gina Pane, Joseph Beuys) and herself at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, she indicated as a driving force that performance art from that era is often surrounded with mystification and speculation. Mostly shown to a small audience, rarely repeated, and seldom sufficiently documented, these performances are open for anyone's interpretations (qtd. in Büscher and Cramer 2008, 22). The situation is similar for the work of the artist affiliated with the Judson Dance Theater. Unlike canonical ballet and modern dance performances that continue to be in the repertoire of companies, *Trio A* accumulated different meanings through the context of each new reenactment. As Catterson explains, the piece has been taught to many dancers and nondancers, often not even by Rainer herself (Rainer 1974, 77). These drastically different interpretations of the dance enable two different responses.

One response invests in the modernist gesture and origin of the piece. By celebrating the abstractness of the movement and its seeming liberation of dance from meaning, *Trio A* becomes a necessary and logical building block of the dance canon. And unlike many

other choreographies of that era, *Trio A* is very difficult to dance and is not pedestrian in its vocabulary, thus retaining dance as technique and justifying its entry in the canon. Its origin in the 1960s perpetuates this potential because this era is historicized in the U.S. national narrative as the time of racial and sexual liberation, bringing the possibility of national reconciliation across racial and gender lines. The apparent liberation of dance from external references in *Trio A,* and thus the ultimate self-recognition of dance, celebrates this narrative and provides the reconciliation that Lowe demanded for canonical work. Such response allocates *Trio A* to the dance canon, and this position is relentlessly legitimized through educational and curatorial institutions.

A second—and my preferred—response is the emphasis of the politics of context and practice of the many different re-visionings of *Trio A.*[3] As in the redoing of *Connecticut Composite* I previously mentioned, we consciously engaged with the historical materiality of the piece yet also rethought it through a complex negotiation of the material for the present. I don't know how engaging it was for an audience or observer to watch us making the shapes in space. But it was very stimulating to do so as a participant, and it was an important part of my education and experience as a dance scholar. Catterson seems to feel similarly about *Trio A.* The piece continues to enable her to engage with social circumstances and her own dancing. Both *Connecticut Composite* and *Trio A* were radical choreographies at the time of their first performance. They are still in their choreographic structure and stance toward performance, but even more so in their transmission. *Connecticut Composite* resists easy access to its seemingly simplistic choreographic material and context and thus forces a re-imagining of both in any re-incarnation. *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. In the process of transmission it always retains some of its past political utopian potentials while taking on new ones. The philosopher Ernst Bloch allowed a reconsideration of artistic production in service of social progress because—in his understanding—any production already contained the potential for the eventual accomplishment of a fulfilled future (Bloch 1993). He emphasized redevelopment and restructuring using pre-existing materials. Bloch did not see potential as something in and of itself that could be fulfilled. Potential required what he called hope in the present—a force that would radically restructure current social systems into a better, yet surprisingly different, tomorrow. The constant re-visioning of the existing choreography of *Trio A* enabled its dancers to protest, celebrate, fundraise, learn, and envision a different social landscape. Maybe one day Catterson can teach me a bit of *Trio A* so I can engage myself with its complex tradition and imagine my own vision of its potential.

Notes

1. Guillory focuses on literary work and distinguishes between linguistic capital (how one has access to the right kind of language) and symbolic capital (how one has access to knowledge that can be displayed for social advantage). He goes to great length to ensure the independence of these forms of capital from ideology or identity politics.

2. Rainer, who dealt with the objectification of the performer through the spectator's gaze throughout her entire career, predates in her work the academic analysis of this phenomenon in feminist film theory. See Mulvey (1989, 3–38).

3. I am borrowing the term "re-vision" from Rainer's elaboration on her rethinking of the canonical *Agon* and *Rite of Spring* for the performances of both pieces at the Documenta 12 in Kassel on August 17, 2007 (Rainer 2007).

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