

On Yvonne Rainer

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Overview

Yvonne Rainer is one of the most influential choreographers and filmmakers in America. She emerged as a dance choreographer in the 1960's New York avant-garde, and was a founding member of the Judson Dance Theater. Her dance works used game structures or formal arrangements, juxtapositions of contradictory elements, ordinary or task-like movements, non-virtuosic performers, repetition, fragmentation, and tactics to make the spectator an active and self-conscious reader of the performance. Many of Rainer's techniques became standard methods in postmodern dance, and were considered relevant to minimalist art.

Her interest in the formal possibilities of narrative and emotion led her to work increasingly with film. She made her first feature film (*Lives of Performers*) in 1972, and by 1975, left dance completely to devote her attention to filmmaking. Since then, Rainer has made 6 feature films which have been as influential to filmmaking as her dance works were for postmodern dance.

She returned to dance in 2000, when Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Project invited her to choreograph a new work (*After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*). Her new works, using the history of dance as one subject, and Rainer's own history as another, continue tactics she has used in both dance and film.

Early Life

Yvonne Rainer was born in 1934 to anarchist vegetarian parents (her father was an Italian immigrant and her mother a 1st generation Polish Jew from Brooklyn) and grew up in northern



Yvonne Rainer, her mother, father, and older brother. (from *Feelings are Facts: A Life*. MIT Press 2006, p.14)

California. As Rainer describes in her recent autobiography¹, the most significant event of her early childhood was the fact that her parents sent her and her older brother (Ivan) away to be cared for by various child-welfare facilities, a trauma Rainer would spend most of her adulthood trying to work out with psychotherapists.

As a young woman in San Francisco in the 50's, Rainer managed to drop out of University of California, Berkeley (after about 2 weeks), to meet various anarchist and experimental artists and poets (on seeing Allen Ginsburg's historic reading of *Howl*, Rainer afterwards reflected, "It was a little too bombastic for my aesthetic sensibilities of the moment"), and to see a lot of movies. These films, Cocteau, Dreyer, Buster Keaton, Jean Renoir, were highly influential for the young Rainer. She also spent a year working as an actress at the Theater Arts Colony, where she acquired a knowledge of plays and theater history, but also understood that she had stage presence but no talent for acting.

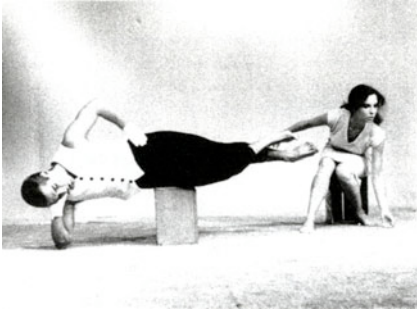
In 1956, Rainer moved to New York City with her boyfriend, painter Al Held. She unsuccessfully auditioned for theater and was usually rejected. In 1957, Rainer (in the company of a friend) took her first dance class. She was 24 years old, an unacceptably advanced age to be beginning a career in dance.

Influences in Dance

By 1959 Rainer had broken up with Held and decided that, if she was to pursue dance, she would have to dedicate herself full time. She asked her parents for a loan and began studying seriously, every day, at the studio of Martha Graham and elsewhere. Much of what Rainer later identified as the establishment of modern dance – heroic postures and grand narratives upheld by heroic and grand music, virtuosity standards for dancers with identical bodies, and dance in the service of notions of Beauty, Spirit, and Art – she picked up at Martha Graham's studio. As Rainer, with her short-legged non-dancer body, struggled to master the basics of ballet,

¹ *Feelings are Facts*, MIT Press, 2006.

³ *FAF* p.183. In describing this event, Rainer, whose later work incorporated Gender as a thematic and compositional concern, and who at age 60 publically became a lesbian, has written, "Neither condition has come to pass."



Simone Forti and A.A. Leath performing in Ann Halprin's 1959 piece *Four Square* (from *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformative Dance*, Wesleyan University Press, 1995, p.78)



Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown in *Satie for Two*, a later re-working of Rainer's first solo *3 Satie Spoons*. From *Work 1961-73*, New York University Press 1974, p.285)

Graham instructors told her to be "less athletic" and "more regal." The relationship between these standards in dance with gender expectations were explicit. As she sweated to turn out her feet, Graham herself reportedly said to Rainer, "When you have accepted yourself as a woman, you will have turn-out."³

In 1960 Rainer started taking classes at Merce Cunningham's studio. Around the same time she met dancer and to-be choreographer Simone Forti. Impressed by Forti's description of the work being done by Ann Halprin in California, Rainer accompanied Forti and her (then) husband Robert Morris to attend Halprin's 1960 summer workshop.

Ann Halprin's workshops have been discussed as a source of many of the practices that would become accepted as "post-modern dance." By the late 1950's, Halprin (a generation older than Rainer) was already using (and on the brink of rejecting) improvisation as a method for creating new movement, assigning tasks instead choreographing movement, working with chance operations and notions of new music (collaborating with LaMonte Young and drawing on ideas of John Cage. She had rejected the idea of lofty dance narratives and protagonists in favor of discovering new ways of moving and, from that, of) new possibilities for the event of a dance performance.

Coming back to New York, Rainer (with Forti, Steve Paxton, and others) took a workshop in 1960-61 offered at Merce Cunningham studio, taught by Cunningham's accompanist Robert Dunn. Dunn introduced the dancers to the ideas of John Cage. He used one of Cage's scores (*Fontana Mix*), in which musical parameters are assigned to markings on the paper, and various layers of transparent paper are overlaid in order to, by chance, create a structure of musical elements. Dunn asked his students to use Cage's score and Eric Satie's *Trois Gymnopédies*. From this, students then made dance works. For Rainer, this resulted in one of her earliest choreographies, a solo called *Three Satie Spoons*.

Working with Cage's scores was impactful for all the dancer/choreographers in Dunn's workshop, not only in terms of promoting chance operations as a source of choreography, but also because it forced dancers to identify and use isolated parameters in



“Slant Board” was one of the pieces performed at Simone Forti’s *Dance Constructions*.



“Huddle” was another piece Forti premiered at *Dance Constructions*. (From *Being Watched*, MIT Press, 2008, p.109)



The performers in “See Saw” (also included in *Dance Constructions*) were Rainer and Robert Morris.

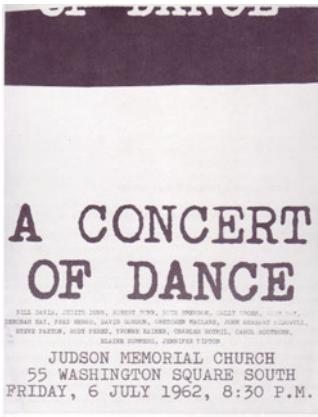
their works: tempo, duration, gesture, etc, allowing them to combine these parameters as independent units to produce a new kind of dance event, rather than as ingredients in service of an overarching dance narrative. This ability to work with the *material* of dance is what allowed Rainer and her peers to later enter into dialogue with other material-based endeavors, like painting, sculpture, and (in Rainer’s case at least) film.

Another major influence on Rainer at this time was her friend and studio-mate Simone Forti. Rainer has described seeing a rehearsal of Forti’s in which Forti simply sat still among scattered piles of wood and rags, occasionally changing her position or moving to another place. For Rainer, this was one of the earliest visions of the power of ordinary movement and “human scale” in a dance. In 1961, Forti created a major dance work (“*Dance Constructions*,” presented at the big downtown loft of Yoko Ono), in which various dance actions (most composed of tasks) were happening simultaneously, in different parts of the room. The audience could walk around these pieces, as if visiting a gallery and looking at sculpture. *Dance Constructions*, which highlighted the formal relationship between the audience and the work, was also an important precedent for much of later postmodern dance concerns, including Rainer’s own unfailing (and, in 2010, ongoing) need to formally position the audience as frame-givers and meaning-makers.

Dance Works

By 1962, the students in Bob Dunn’s workshop had so much material made that they decided to organize a concert. This “Concert of Dance” was their infamous first performance at the Judson Memorial Church, a highly liberal organization which was already supporting and presenting contemporary poetry and theater. The group of dancers formed the Judson Dance Theater, which continued as a defined group only until 1964, but whose legacy is the American post-modern dance movement.

After making a number of smaller works in 1960-1962, Rainer’s first full-length dance work was “Terrain,” performed at Judson Church in 1963. *Terrain* was organized into five sections: “Diagonal,” “Duet,” “Solo Section,” “Play,” and “Bach.”



The poster of the first Judson show, designed by Steve Paxton. (From *Being Watched*, p.20)



Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown performing "Duet" from *Terrain*. (From *Works*, p.16)



William Davis and Steve Paxton watch other soloists during *Terrain* (From *Works*, p.21)

Most of these had game-like structures, where strict rules were applied to pre-choreographed movement determining what dancers did and when they did it. Much of the piece (as in other early works) juxtaposed contradictory elements: so in the section titled "Duet,"

Rainer danced a series of balletic movements while Trisha Brown simultaneously performed a series of erotic burlesque postures. Over this, the somber and elegant music (Massenet's *Meditation*, mixed with other music) added one more level of contradiction.

Also important is that, in *Terrain*, as in most of Rainer's dance works, the dance included spoken text. In "Solo Section", two of the five solos were danced by performers who simultaneously told a story. Here, and in most of Rainer's early works, texts used were appropriated from other sources⁴.

Another innovation in *Terrain* which would continue to be important in Rainer's later work was keeping non-performing dancers on stage. This revealed the dancers in their seemingly ordinary, "non-performing" bodies, and also created a surrogate on-stage audience, mirroring the gaze of the actual audience. In "Solo Section" dancers who were waiting for their solo stood behind a single police barricade (which would occasionally be moved around the stage), casually watching the other dancers.

⁴ Exceptions include "Ordinary Dance" (1962) a solo in which Rainer recited her own essay recalling the name of every street she had lived, and a 1967 version of "Mat" in which a taped voice-over read a letter describing a serious gastro-intestinal operation Rainer had recently gone through. Later, in the 70's and in Rainer's subsequent film works, texts would become more personal, though never confessional or singular. This generalization effect (or distance) was often achieved by changing the pronouns or verb tense.



Parts of Some Sextets: performers left-to-right are doing movement sequences “Bird Run,” “Duet,” and “Peel 1 at a Time.” (From *Works*, p.44)



Parts of Some Sextets: “Corridor Solo” and “Crawling Through” (From *Works*, p.48)

Rainer’s next major work was *Parts of Some Sextets* in 1965, a dance incorporating 12 mattresses, 10 performers, and 31 possible movement sequences. Here, as in *Terrain*, she continued to incorporate text and use performer-observers, and here, as in all of her non-solo dance works of the 1960’s, the dancers worked as a non-hierarchical ensemble, with no “stars” singled out.

In *Parts of Some Sextets*, there was considerably less game-like activity however, and the entire 43-minute dance was structured in relentless

30-second intervals, in which every 30 seconds, some number of activities would change. Rainer was trying to create an event that, though completely visible, prevented an audience from becoming involved with it. Here, she purposefully created a formal situation which would not develop dramatically.

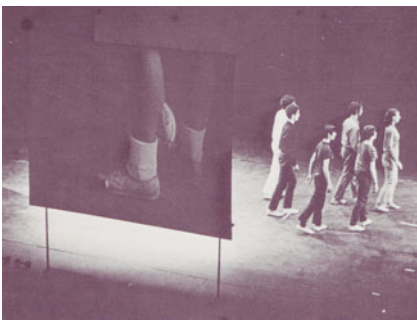
Though her earlier work contained silly or emotional material (inspired by, in her words, “the New York subways or the loony bin”) which she neutralized by juxtaposition with formal and non-expressive elements⁵, by 1965 Rainer was consciously trying to remove these completely from her work. This may be because Rainer felt that the New York audience, already in 1965 accepting a wide variety of movements as dance, were no longer surprised or engaged by such shenanigans. It is also possible that, as visual artists and the international art community were becoming more involved in contemporary dance (performing in Rainer’s *Parts of Some Sextets* were both Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris), the dancers (Rainer, as well as others like Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, etc.) were feeling more pressure to “grow up” and focus on the formal (material) aspects of their work over the personal (dramatic) ones.

To accompany *Parts of Some Sextets*, Rainer wrote an essay explaining the intentions of the work. A part of it was a paragraph which has come to be known as her “NO Manifesto”:

⁵ Rainer has often quoted a critic who referred to this style of hers as “goofy glamour.” Examples include the burlesque movements in *Terrain* (1963), Rainer’s screaming fit in *3 Seascapes* (1962), and twiddling her fingers crazily in front of her face in *The Bells* (1962).

No to spectacle. no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency 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.

More than 40 years later, Rainer has said “I wish [the NO Manifesto] could be buried...”⁶ Rainer’s text, always written to explicate (perhaps for herself as well as for others) her works, exist as documents of the time and thought around the making of that particular work. So, the NO Manifesto shows Rainer’s 1965 dedication to keeping the audience at a distance, as well as her rejection of virtuosity, stardom, and goofy glamour (“eccentricity”). Unfortunately, the NO Manifesto (as well as her other highly quotable 1966 essay “A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A”, written to accompany her 1966 dance *The Mind is a Muscle*) has been taken to represent all of Rainer’s dance work and, even worse, has been put forward as describing the postmodern dance movement in general.



Rainer’s short film “Volleyball” was projected during the “Film” section of *The Mind is a Muscle*. (From *Works*, p.90)

Rainer’s next full-length dance *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966) was noteworthy not only because it was the first work of hers to use a film inside the dance, but also because this dance contained the choreography Rainer titled *Trio A*, which would become her most famous dance work. An uninterrupted 5-minute sequence of non-repeating uninflected movements in which the dancer’s gaze is always averted from the audience, *Trio A* (readily available in a 1978 video version performed by Rainer herself) has typified the so-called style of postmodern dance.

⁶ In an interview for the web magazine Corpus. (Accessed 9/29/2010) <http://www.corpusweb.net/meeting-yvonne-rainer-2.html>



Rainer performing *Trio A* in a convalescent condition, in 1967. (From *The Mind is a Muscle*, Afterall Books, 2007, cover image)

This un-emotional image of postmodern dance has remained to this day. Postmodern dance is often defined stylistically by its irreverent use of non-dance movements, its formal use of time, space, and sound, and by its resistance to character, emotion and narrative. Though many postmodern dance works do (like *Trio A*) fit this description, the point is not the style but the purpose served by such structuring.

In fact, though Rainer abandoned the theatrically goofy stuff from her work, she never abandoned her belief that everything, including emotion, language, narrative, and character, could be included in (and questioned by) the formal situation of the performed artwork. By the end of the 1960's and throughout the 1970's, much of Rainer's work centered on this effort. She has written that , "...my new-found preoccupation with the specifics of emotional life...far from violating the interdictions of the *Nouvelle Roman* and Minimalists, coincided with my previous techniques for handling props, movement phrases, and bodies, i.e., as objects that could be endlessly reorganized and manipulated in space and time."⁷

By 1968, Rainer was working on "composite" dances, which combined sections of old work along with new ongoing fragments. This series of performances and performed lectures and demonstrations led to *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* (1969), a sprawling dance work that included various kinds of sub-performance behaviors and a loose, improvisatory feel. Though in fact little was totally improvised, Rainer had developed sequences of action and had set rules to determine when and how these sequences would be performed. The final order and execution emerged in any given performance.

I suggest that in *Continuous Project – Altered Daily*, Rainer was less concerned with developing methods of structured improvisation and more involved in her use of modular materials. Her notion that these units could be endlessly combined and recombined (by herself and others) was not only an idea inspired by the *combines* of Robert Rauschenberg, it was in fact the way Rainer had worked with (and continues to work with, to this day) units of material: no

⁷ "Feelings are Facts" an unpublished 2005 lecture given by Rainer, p.10.

matter if that material is gestural, material, autobiographic, or interpretive. Rainer, throughout her career (regardless of whether she made dances, films, or her latest post-2000 historical dance works) has always re-contextualized old material by putting it into new media and new semantic environments. In this way, Rainer's work is always about the act of interpretation, both as practiced by the audience, and as acknowledgement of herself (the *auteur*) equally subject to the conditions of (re)interpretation.

The issue of hierarchy continued to be a source of conflict for Rainer. Though rejecting hierarchy both in the structure of events (preferring movements and sequences to remain uninflected and interchangeable) and in the organization of performers (avoiding stars), Rainer was indisputably the *auteur* of her works. The group of dancers she was working with by the late 1960's included people with whom Rainer had long term relationships and collaborations, like Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Barbara Lloyd, Douglas Dunn and Becky Arnold, many of whom were choreographers in their own right.

With *Continuous Project – Altered Daily*, Rainer tried to make a modular work that would change from one performance to another, following the rules and logic that came from the works' structure. To do this, Rainer allowed her dancers more and more freedom to determine the timing and execution of events, and even allowed specific situations where performers could improvise during performance. This led to an exhilarating period of great creativity for all the dancers, and an enormous amount of invention during rehearsals and performances. It also called into question Rainer's position as leader, or as Rainer has written, as "boss-lady."

By 1970, Yvonne Rainer and the dancers in *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* decided to pursue the possibility of choreography created completely in performance, with no hierarchy structuring these decisions. This new group, which included Rainer but was not led by her, was called "Grand Union." Grand Union performances were always 100% improvised (though they could include gestures or movements from the past). The group (later joined by Trisha Brown and Nancy Green) performed regularly from 1970 to 1976, though Rainer only lasted until 1972, being unable, as she has



Continuous Project – Altered Daily, during a performance at the Whitney Museum, 1970. (From *Being Watched*, p.228)



A still from Michael Fajan's 1969 film *Connecticut Composite*, which shows a rehearsal of Rainer and her company, developing the work that would ultimately become *Continuous Project – Altered Daily*. Shown here are Rainer and dancer/choreographer Douglas Dunn reaching for a paper on top of a cardboard box.

written subsequently, to endure those performances without first smoking marijuana. Grand Union, however, became quite famous as a sort-of utopian community of radical improvisation in American dance.

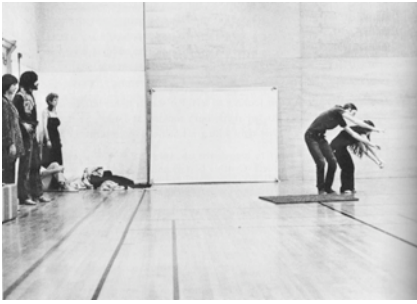
Though Rainer had been thinking about emotion (and the “emotional load” of objects and images) since at least 1966, by 1971 she was ready to turn to more radical and theatrical ways to explore this. In the milieu of the New York avant-garde dance scene of 1970, this was a courageous move. Rainer recollected in a 2005 lecture titled “Feelings are Facts”: “Ignored or denied in the work of my 60s peers, the nuts and bolts of emotional life comprised the unseen (or should I say “unseemly”?) underbelly of high U.S. Minimalism. While we aspired to the lofty and cerebral plane of a quotidian materiality, our unconscious lives unraveled with an intensity and melodrama that inversely matched their absence in the boxes, beams, jogging, and standing still of our austere sculptural and choreographic creations.”⁹

Grand Union Dreams

In 1971, Rainer received a grant to travel to India for 6 weeks. There, she saw lots of Indian theater and dance and, like many others of her generation, came back to America feeling disillusioned with her own culture (not to mention depressed about her own *sub-culture* of New York-based postmodern dance choreographers). The first piece she made was *Grand Union Dreams*, in her own words, “...an elaborate “pageant” that dealt with myth, anthropology, and Jungian psychology. The performers, divided into “gods, heroes, and mortals,” read or recited texts excerpted from the writings of Miguel Serrano, Colin Turnbull, and Jung, in no particular narrative order ...Given the literary sources and the magisterial pace, the total evening was at once pontifical and child-like. Nevertheless, it was *Grand Union Dreams* that initiated an on-going investigation of tactics — as yet very rudimentary — for creating characters and telling stories in unconventional ways.”¹⁰ *Grand Union Dreams* was the first dance work in which Rainer gave her performers characters. What’s more, these characters were at once fictional and foundational, mythological and autobiographical. The Gods were played by the actual (now dance stars) members of Grand Union, the Heroes by Rainer’s

⁹ “Feelings are Facts” an unpublished 2005 lecture given by Rainer, p.6.

¹⁰ “Feelings are Facts” lecture, p.4.

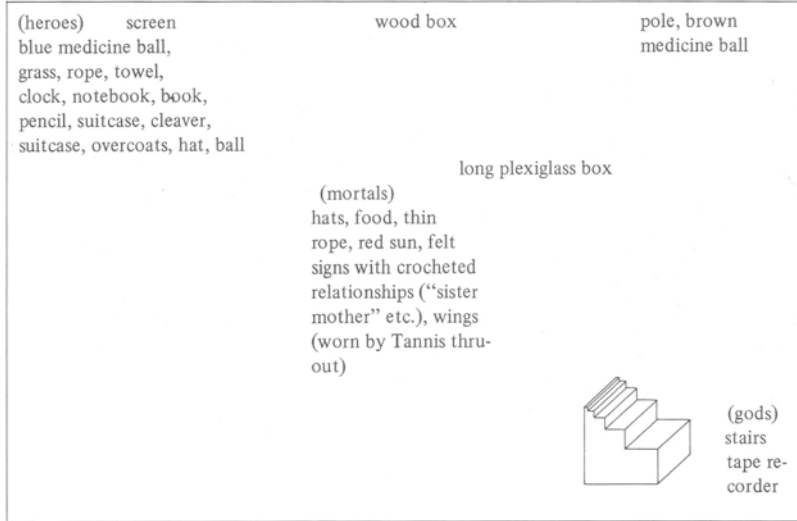


Grand Union Dreams
(From *Works*, p.201)

dancer-collaborators, and the Mortals by young dancers and students. This was the first dance work in which Rainer divided the performers and acknowledged star status. As such, the piece is very concerned with real and fictional relationships.

Script

Arrangement of objects and people in the space at beginning.



Audience

The speeches in the following text are either 'said' or 'read' from 3x5-inch cards.

Grand Union Dreams (From *Works*, p.201)

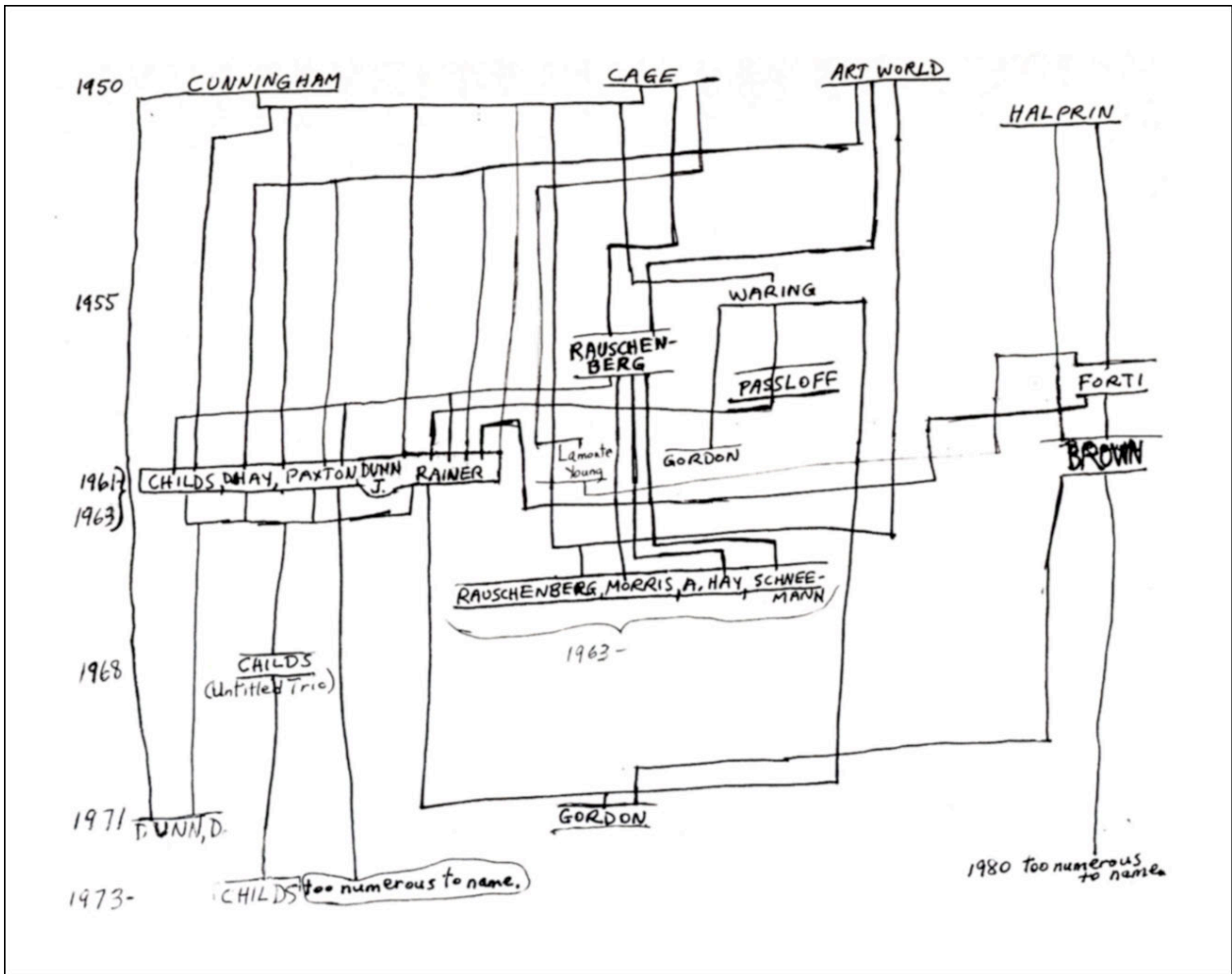
As Rainer said, *Grand Union Dreams* used rudimentary tactics, and it is an uncannily simple – at times embarrassing – piece of dance theater. It is, however, also an amazing opportunity to see how Rainer began to work on problems of narrative and character before her solutions became subsumed by the complex machinery of film.

The tactics Rainer would pursue after *Grand Union Dreams* were largely filmic. In 1972, Rainer made her first feature-length film *Lives of Performers* (which continues her modular tradition by including a long sequence using photos from *Grand Union Dreams*). The same year she made a dance work called *Inner Appearances*, a work dealing with narrative and character through the juxtaposition of a neutral performer and projected text. In 1973, she made *This is the Story of a Woman Who...*, first as a performance work and then as a film. After 1975, she had ceased making dance altogether and concentrated on films. She would not make dance again until she was 66 years old, in the year 2000.

Grand Union Dreams On

In our class at Yotsuya Art Studium, and with the help of outside performers, we will attempt to reconstruct Rainer's *Grand Union Dreams* from the text description of the piece (written by Rainer in the 1970's), photos of the single May 19, 1971 performance, and an interview with Rainer herself. This re-enactment is attempted in order to physically explore the early dance/theater tactics Rainer used to deal with hierarchy, narrative, and character.

The re-enactment is not intended to represent Rainer's work in general, or offered as typical of postmodern dance works of the 1970's. On the contrary, the great worth of *Grand Union Dreams* is its indelible challenge to assumptions about both Rainer's work and postmodern dance. This long introductory essay was written to help people unfamiliar with Rainer's work to contextualize this piece. In light of this, and in hopes of challenging old interpretations, we will position ourselves as seers and do-ers, and take a long hard look at *Grand Union Dreams*.



An intentionally messy diagram of influences that Rainer drew as part of a reply to dance critic Arlene Croce in 1980. In her article Croce described theater director Robert Wilson as “the most influential artist after Merce Cunningham on today’s choreographers.” Rainer’s diagram both complicates this simplistic view of history and also problematizes the issue of describing history in a static way. Rainer added the following postscript to her letter which accompanied the diagram: "Preferences from the standpoint of taste are no justification for the rewriting of history."