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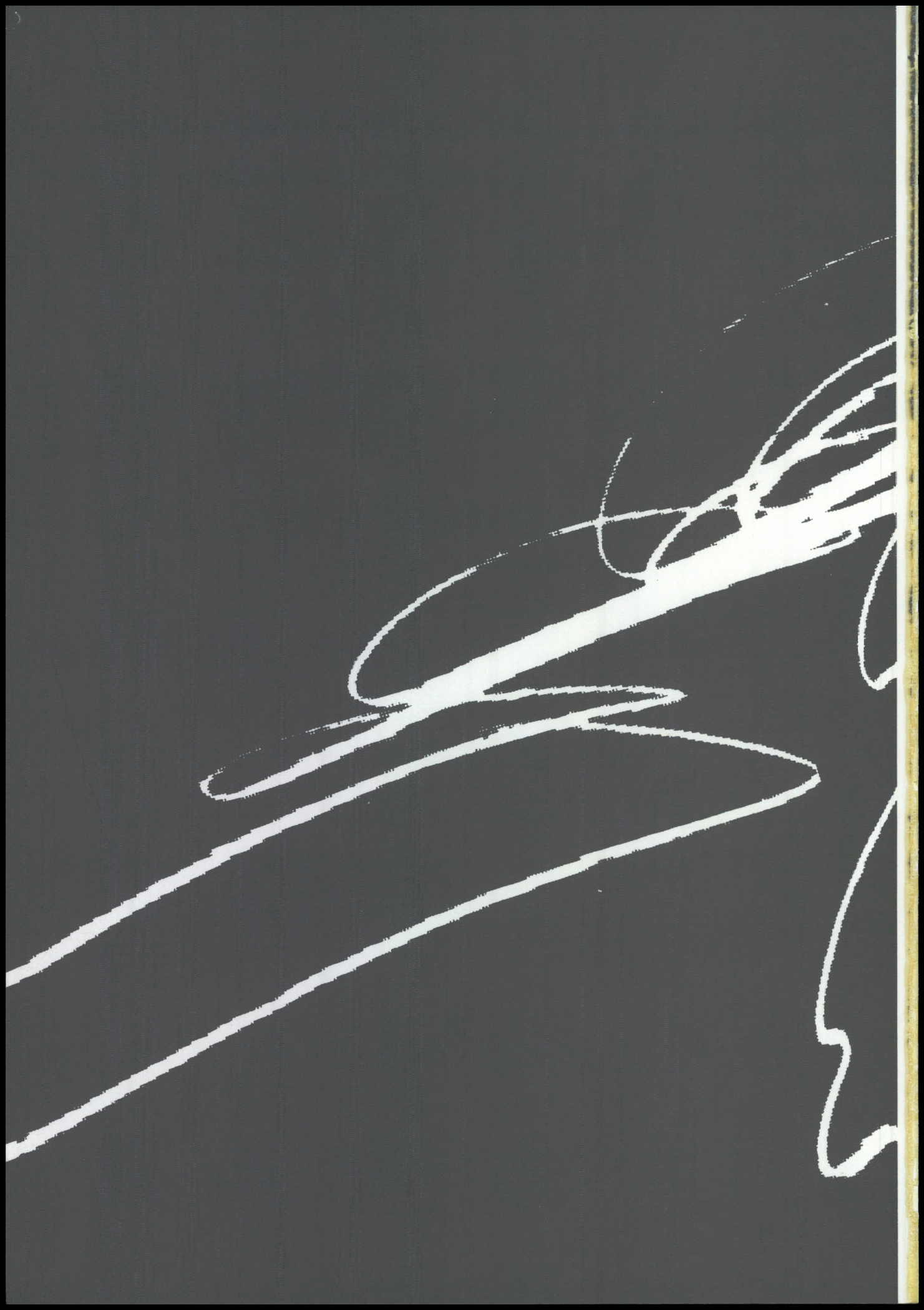
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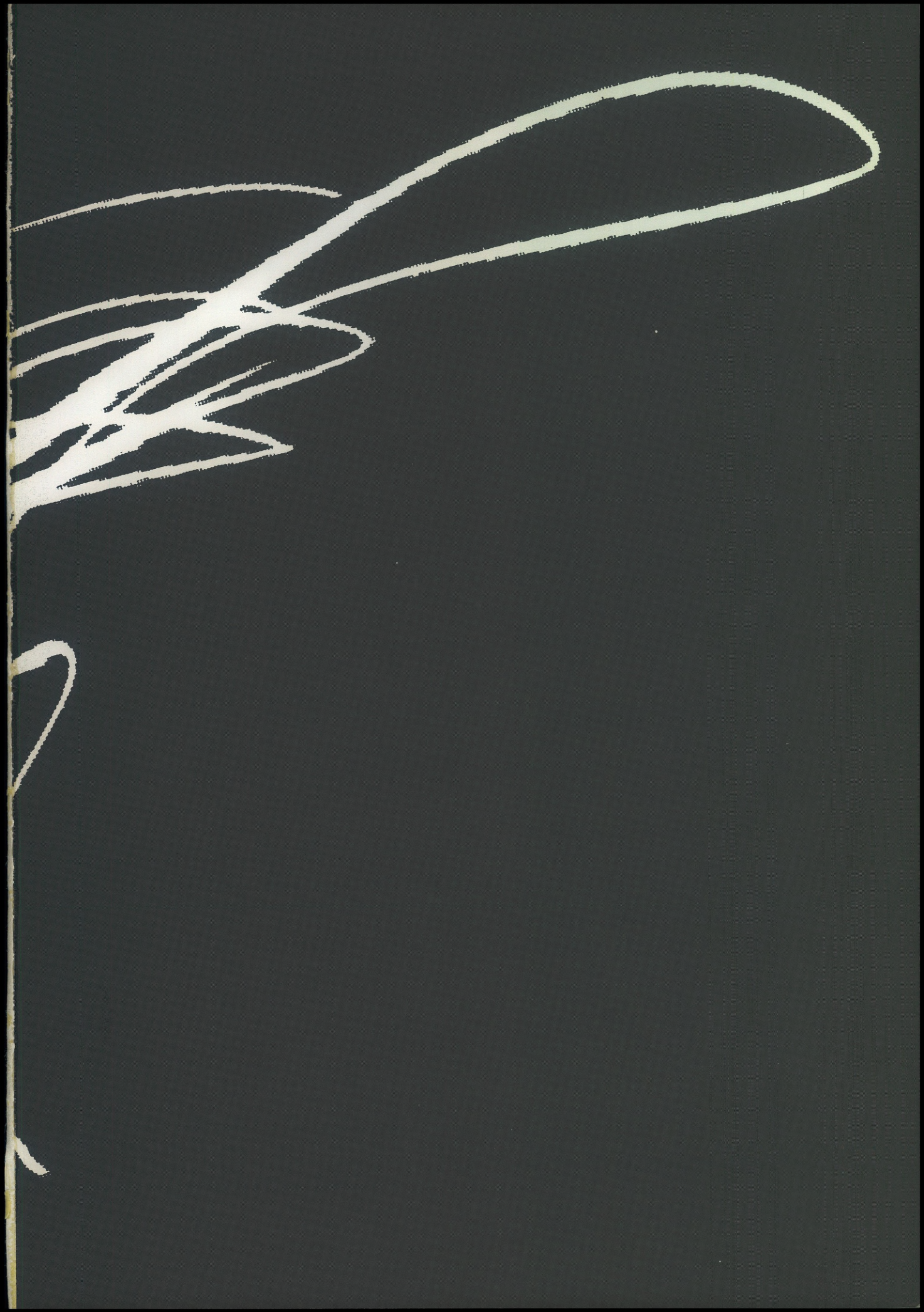
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**Privilege and Presence**

YVONNE RAINER INTERVIEW • DANA REITZ INTERVIEW

JOURNALS OF A ROAD WORRIER • THE PRESENCE OF THE PERFORMER







*Writings*  
*on Dance*

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**Privilege  
and Presence**

**WRITINGS ON DANCE**

**7. PRIVILEGE AND PRESENCE**

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DANA REITZ: GESTURE DRAWINGS FOR  
*QUINTET PROJECT*, 1981

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# P R E F A C E

**T**HIS COLLECTION of interviews and articles takes up the themes of privilege, presence and identity, drawing upon contemporary cultural theory to do so, but in a manner which is strategic and partial, that is, subject to specific (local) pressures and interests.

A number of possible dialogues and/or modes of exchange between theory and performance practice are proposed here. Responding to a question concerning her use of psychoanalytic theory, Yvonne Rainer firmly identifies herself as a “filmmaker not a theorist”. She describes the relationship between her practice as a filmmaker and her interest in theory as “a complicated and ambivalent dialogue.”

In a closely argued paper, performer Mine Kaylan undertakes a critique of current trends in performance theory and theatre semiotics. She reclaims the notion of presence not only as a useful critical category, but also as a potentially resistant, political force. In her use, the term ‘presence’ is not linked to the identity and expression of a fixed, unified subject, but refers to a performer’s skilled and intentional “movement of attention.”

Dancer/choreographer Dana Reitz echoes Kaylan’s criticism of the privileged status of the text in her discussion of the devaluation of improvisation. Dance criticism and theory tends to privilege the formal, composed elements of the dance – the *choreo-graphed* – over the embodied action of the live performer. Reitz’s work vigorously challenges the comforts and securities of established critical categories and conventions.

Finally, Angela Seward offers a tribute to one dancer’s unique quality of presence.

These are just a few of the provocative and challenging issues explored in this collection. We commend these writings to you and welcome your response.

**ELIZABETH DEMPSTER**

July 1991

*Rachel Fensham and Jude Walton*

# “Naming Myself”

AN INTERVIEW WITH

## Yvonne Rainer

**Y**VONNE RAINER’s work as performer, choreographer and film-maker has been scored in many voices; in her dances and films; her own writings, both theoretical and diaristic; in film reviews and criticisms; in feminist theory and in histories of the American avant-garde. In this proliferation of writings and interpretations Rainer emerges as an artist engaged in a self-conscious process of critical analysis into the constraints and possibilities for representation available through specific artistic practices.

Rainer reflects upon her development over the thirty year period as one which moved from an interest in the physical properties of the body and space available through dance, towards the formal and discursive properties available in film which indicated a consequent shift in theoretical understanding of her artistic activity.

From descriptions of individual feminine experience floating free of both social context and narrative hierarchy, to descriptions of individual feminine experience placed in radical juxtaposition against historical events, to explicitly feminist speculations about feminine experience, I have just formulated an evolution which in becoming more explicitly feminist seems to demand a more solid anchoring in narrative conventions. (I am not sure of the reasons, but I suspect the worst.)<sup>1</sup>

In New York in the early 1960s she was a pre-eminent and influential figure in the area of minimal, non-expressive dance and gesture. She was a member of the Judson Dance Theater, a group of choreographers who instigated research into many of the areas now known as post-modern dance. Later she toured with some of these dancers in a group known as The Grand Union.

Her approach to choreography evolved from a theatrical interest in the movement activities within game structures to an increasing emphasis on neutrality on the part of performers, requiring movements and the human body to have an objective presence during performances. Her dance works were complex constructions requiring the dancer to make transitions between contrasting and difficult movements continuously. Within the avant-garde tradition, she used chance operations or highly codified instructions, played with contemporary visual icons and texts, and employed every-day actions and movements. Her aesthetic was a direct challenge to the conventional aesthetics of dancing with its audience appeal based on obvious

beauty, disguised movement, emotionalism or narrative drama. "In setting up a world the work sets forth the earth" but this world consisted of "people using their bodies with skill, intelligence, coordination and economy."<sup>2</sup> Sally Banes, dance critic, claims that the achievement of *Trio A*, Rainer's emblematic dance work, was "its resolute denial of style and expression which made a historical shift in the subject of dance to pure motion – a world of thoughtful activity that sets forth the earthly, intelligent body."<sup>3</sup>

During this time she created many works including *Three Satie Spoons*; *The Bells* (1961) *Satie for Two, Three Seascapes, Dance for 3 People and 6 Arms*; *Ordinary Dance* (1962); *Terrain* (1963); *The Mind is a Muscle, Part I*(1966); *Convalescent Dance* (1967); *Trio A*(1970); *This is the story of a woman who...* (1973).

Since 1972, when she devoted her attention to film-making, her project has been the development of a vision which by inventing the forms and processes of representation might give voice to social subjects, namely women, and in her last film, blacks, who have been all but unrepresented in most media. Her films include *Lives of Performers* (1972), *Film About a Woman Who ...*(1974); *Kristina Talking Pictures*(1976); *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (1980); *The Man Who Envied Women*(1985);and *Privilege* (1990).

Although her first films were aligned to the theoretical terrain of dance, investigating the notion of the female body or the question of spontaneity, the medium of film and its politics enabled a greater range of theoretical positions to be explored. Feminists saw in Rainer's work filmic practices, other than those operating within the narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema, which might provide the space for a feminine language to emerge. The narrative process of her films was seen to function through ellipsis and accretion, without character identification or narrative closure. Images are presented which do not construct a particular or privileged viewpoint, the

fictional and non-fictional worlds interpenetrate, and the presence of different modalities of language, whether spoken or written, set up a radical heterogeneity in spectator-text relations.

Words are uttered but not possessed by my performers as they operate within the filmic frame but do not propel a filmic plot.<sup>4</sup>

Her films insist upon a “viewer-in-process”, actively engaged in the act of interpretation. Most recently, Rainer’s political commitment has led her, in the context of much discussion of ‘post colonialism’ and ‘third cinema’ to the concept of interrogating one’s own position of ‘privilege’ however that privilege may be situated.

On a personal level I could describe my own development as a gradual discovery of the subtleties of my own privilege which I took for granted when I began as a dancer ... This is an ongoing process and I feel I have just begun to scratch the surface: not to try to escape my class or my sex, but to constantly confront the facts of them.<sup>5</sup>

RACHEL FENSHAM

In August 1990 Yvonne Rainer visited Melbourne as a guest of the Performance Space, Sydney and the Modern Image Makers Association, Melbourne. While she was here she launched her most recent film, *Privilege* (1990) and presented screenings of some of her earlier films. Seminars enabled further discussion of critical questions related to narrative, feminism and performance-making.

We met with Rainer during her time in Melbourne and asked her about the connections between her background as a choreographer and her work as a film-maker.

**FENSHAM/WALTON:** In your book, *Work 1961–1973*, which documents your dance projects and leads into the period of time when you were making your first film, *Film about a Woman Who...*, you comment upon your fascination with language – “it is only through language I feel there is a key to clarity?”<sup>6</sup> Do you wish to comment upon that and its significance?

**RAINER:** That was spoken at a time, in 1975, when I was on my way out of dancing so that polarity, or seeming polarity, between speech, verbal language and body language was very much on my mind. I wouldn't make that distinction today. I mean, dance is expressive and it can obviously be dealt with in many different ways, with many different kinds of expressivity and some quite specific. I did not think of the kind of work I did as having those possibilities. It was all about the materiality of the body, its weight, its capacity to lift, to move objects, to become an object and I was working with groups of people in unison, in formal designs. So to make a reference in dance to things outside of itself, was not on the agenda for me at that time. Working with images and language, in film, seemed a much more likely format than dancing, as I did it and as I knew it.

**A contested position within feminist theory is that only through language can one begin to articulate a feminist practice. Are your practices as a feminist related to your desire to explore the possibilities within language then?**

People interact in all kind of ways and language is just one form of communication. I know the Lacanian view that we achieve individuation and the unconscious is formed at the moment when we have a sense of ourselves as autonomous bodies, at that moment we enter the world of language. I guess you are still thinking about this in relation to dance. I have just seen Libby Dempster's trio, *Whisper Coraggio*, and it is true that she uses language at a certain point in that dance to direct your reading and after that you read the movement in a way that you would not have without the language. It takes very little to change the reading and direct the spectator's interpretation in relation to the

event. I don't like to separate them, make them seem in conflict. When I was in dance, physical movement was seen by some people as being able to project essences of feeling, and I was in revolt against that kind of expressivity. Now, I don't feel that there have to be iron-clad distinctions.

**You are suggesting that the intervention of language affects your reading of a piece of moved communication. It may be that language and movement do disrupt each other ...**

Or affect each other, complement each other. This is difficult, I haven't thought a lot about the relation of language to body; this is your field. I've thought about it in relation to media because that kind of identification has been very explored by feminist theory. After I had got through my awareness of my own exhibitionist, narcissistic involvement in dance, I didn't look back. This was carried over into my thinking about voyeurism in relation to dominant cinema but I haven't applied this body of theory to the dancing body.

**What potential do you think, if any, dance has to assert an alternative physical space for women? – taking for example, the way in which you had Trisha Brown dance *Water Motor* in *The Man Who Envied Women*.**

That was my use of her dance; I used her as a part of the idealisation that my male character, his kind of obsessional ... I can't remember exactly what he was talking about, but he was there talking to his psychoanalyst, and she (Trisha dancing) could have been the wife or she could have been just the fantasy of a beautiful ... I thought of her as an idealised image of a woman, womanhood.

**In your films you work with language in various ways, however language sometimes speaks for, against, or across the speaker. How do you see some of those particular practices operating?**

Can you be more specific?

**For instance, what power does quoting extensively give your actors – speaking others' words?**

Do you mean as characters or as an effect on the spectator?

**I suppose, we have observed it as an effect?**

It operates in different ways. In *The Man Who Envied Women* the lecture suggests the authority and kind of dominant position, of the male character. In the corridor, there are these conflicting quotations that don't exactly mesh – they are not in response to each other, the Meaghan Morris and the Foucault, they sort of speak past each other as people often do. At the same time as the physical seductiveness of their behaviour is counterpointed against the language. In *Privilege* ... it is hard to think about language as something that operates – language speaks and speaks about particular things. Giving my working class disenfranchised characters theoretical language that is only heard and read in academic or scholarly contexts is a way of empowering them within the fiction of the film. And with that contrast between what you know they are unable to speak, and the analytical revelatory nature of what they speak, and what they have been given by me to speak, I think you read and hear and see them in terms of this very complicated spectrum of their social position.

**You see that as an empowering position for the characters?**

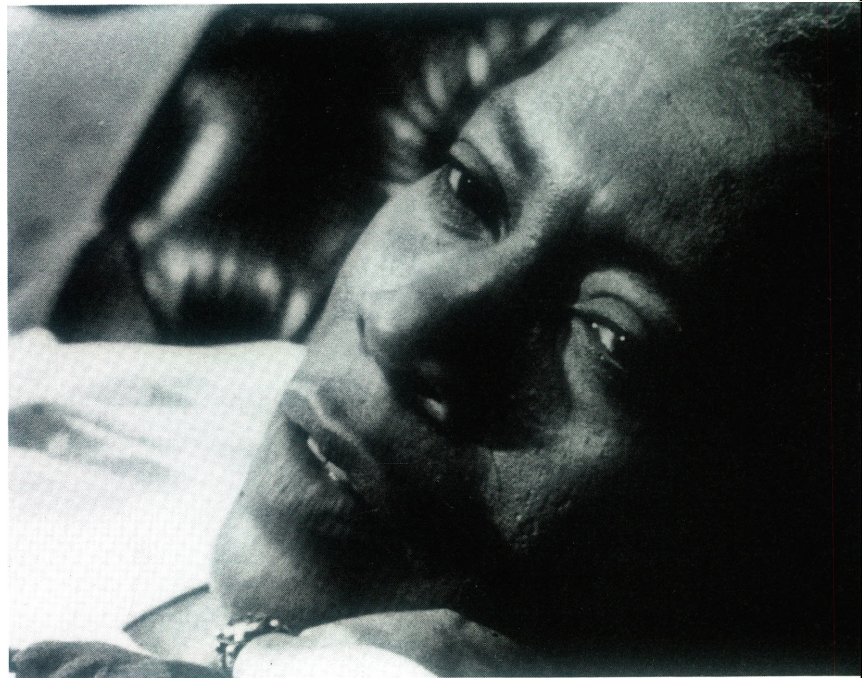
Potentially. You don't see that it empowers them because the plot does not go further, but there is that potential. What else is language but to have the potential to liberate and illuminate social relations?

**Do you know the writer Gayatri Spivak? She is an American academic with an Indian background who has been concerned in her work about privilege, which is, of course, the title of your film. Her concerns have included what it is to work as a feminist within a university and how then to speak of her class, her Indian-ness. I was struck by some parallels with your concerns within this quote: "my own task is to unlearn my privilege, to see my**

**privilege as a loss ... The process of unlearning one's own privilege as one's loss cannot be a benevolent ethnocentrism – it means really working through things very carefully."** <sup>7</sup>

I would say that it is the first and most difficult task so that we earn the right to speak and not just listen.

Listening is not so hard especially if we tell ourselves we are listening. It is learning how to speak, especially so that to those women we don't seem like yet another wave of missionaries coming to develop them into humanhood or femininity.



**Does this have a relationship to your current project?**

I think it is important that before you can speak that you can listen and hear. You must listen to those who do not have your privilege. To 'unlearn privilege', is an odd way to put it. I think you have to speak your whiteness, to speak your privilege and to show how it operates. In my film the Jenny character is unaware of where she is privileged and where she is not privileged. I think we must, those of us who are privileged in terms of class, we must both listen and relearn and examine.

On Tuesday night, I was asked the question –

why did you put the make-up on during your lecture? and I was explaining how I used the black make-up and the "flesh" one, and I had to catch myself not specifying what this flesh colour was. When whites used to think about theatrical make-up, flesh tone meant variations on white/rose/beige. To think of yourself as having a colour when the white colour has been the norm, seeming invisible, is a project of re-learning and it happens at all kinds of levels. I am amazed that I continue to find myself not naming myself.

**Can you explain that?**

I can only give examples. It is about universalising one's humanity, so that with the word, 'people' it is assumed that these are white people. It isn't that we want to speak of the 'family of man' but whites traditionally have spoken, and think of themselves, as occupying this place of privilege without actual thinking of it as a dominant position.

Another example – I was teaching and referring to an essay in a film magazine called *Camera Obscura* and it was an essay by a French man comparing the enthrallment of the cinema audience before the white screen. He makes an analogy to the infant suckling at the mother's breast. I suddenly caught myself – I was about to say the white breast – the white screen, the white breast. All infants suckle at breasts and the experience of people of colour in relation to the white screen may be very similar and it may well have to do with watching shadows on the breast but the breast is not universally white. So that author had made that mistake, and I read and digested it and then caught myself in this incipient awareness about race and class. As a feminist, you get used to thinking of yourself as victim and that, of course, has been the achilles heel of the feminist movement. White middle-class victimisation is not the same for black women, who are doubly and triply oppressed. So, as white middle-class feminists, we have to re-learn and re-think and catch ourselves on a daily basis.

**Would you see psychoanalysis as a means whereby you could begin to re-learn?**

Psychoanalysis has been one of the problems. It is full of exclusions and presumes a kind of universal

family oedipal situation which may not be applicable to other cultures. It does describe a very particular time and formation of male/female relations but its class bias is never spoken of, nor how it came out of a particular historical situation of Victorian sexual attitudes.

**But you clearly use Freudian and post-Freudian ways of thinking in your work?**

I have. There is a reason – I'm a film-maker and not a theorist. I pick up on these theories and they seem feasible and plausible in being applied to my own field. But it is a complicated and ambivalent dialogue. The removal of the woman, the physical presence of the woman, in *The Man Who Envied Women* was based directly on the challenge sent up by Laura Mulvey and subsequent feminist theorists about the objectification of women in front of the camera. This objectification, delineated from the Freudian/Lacanian model, of the image of the woman who produces castration anxiety and therefore has to be dealt with in certain ways in "classical" cinema. So you might say I was not going to induce that anxiety, I was not going to induce that way of looking by not visualising the female protagonist. But of course she comes back in at the end in that image of Jackie Raynal, who might be read as the return of the repressed! Yeah, that body of theory has been very useful to me, so I am not throwing out psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool; but the limits of it must be constantly kept in mind.

It is very interesting that the theory being developed and the writing coming out of black cinema studies have no use for psychoanalytic theory whatsoever. It is obviously not of use to women who are involved in representing themselves, period. Their images and their voices have been invisible and they have not had opportunities to make films about themselves, so there is an issue about the aesthetics and differences in attitudes between black film-makers and the white avant-garde of my tradition. Consider the work which has come out of the black British workshops, Sancofa and others. These workshops were set up in the early eighties after the riots in Britain and a lot of very interesting work has come out of these work-

shops. Much of it has a super professional, very glossy look to it, very saturated colours. They may combine documentary and fiction but they do not do things like re-filming and step-printing – stuff that characterises the American avant-garde which is interested in degrading the kinds of images that Hollywood has proliferated. Tracy Moffat, is an example of this opposite in Australia. Especially in this last film of hers, *Night Cries*, which is spectacular in its filmic, glossy sophistication. I asked Isaac Julian, who is a member of the Sancofa collective, especially in relation to his film *Passionate Remembrance*, why are you so interested in having this veneer which is so similar to Hollywood commercial cinema? He said “well it is a matter of imaging. It is to do with our having been absent for so long when we go to make images of ourselves we want the most beautiful possible images”. So you see, there are totally different points of departure in thinking about the aesthetics of the image.

**I'd just like to return to the question of the quotations – is it a privilege of yours, to put displaced texts into the mouths of blacks?**

One always chooses the texts of one's fictional characters. I mean if you write what you think is street speech, it is yours. But what you're saying is this is not mine, it is Franz Fanon's and Eldridge Cleaver's.

**It is also not theirs, in the presumed reality of the film, there is no feeling of it being theirs.**

The characters?

**Neither the characters nor the real person ...**

Who's the real person?

**The person playing the part.**

Oh, but they are actors. It is a traditional relationship. Which is something which is pushed under the rug: that actors do not speak their own thoughts.

The illusion is that actors are synonymous with the characters they play and speak their own thoughts. That is a deconstructive device.

**Are you privileging theory over what they, as a character, might say of their situation?**

What are you calling theory? The Eldridge Cleaver “I became a rapist” is an anecdote, that is experiential, a confession. The Fanon? I mean theory is simply a way of generalising, like the Fanon text is making a generalisation about the effects of colonialisation. I am beginning to get a sense, like



the last question that first evening which kind of stopped things cold. The question was, “why was there no spontaneous speech about race? – the women who spoke spontaneously just spoke about menopause and ageing? And the things about race did not ring true because it was not spontaneous speech”. This is obviously a bias towards the reality, or the truth value, of speech which comes unscripted and unwritten. I don't make those distinctions. I find speech from writing, from interviews, I don't prioritise. Whatever speaks, speaks equally. I mean truth is everywhere. But the documentary tradition has left us with this feeling that

that is the authentic voice. But when you have someone in front of a camera as soon as you are isolating that speech, someone speaks to the camera and that is mediated truth, that is not necessarily the voice of authenticity. It sounds that way, and what I like is the contrast between these different kinds of speech.

I think I have to address the fact that you and this woman who asked this question are uncomfortable hearing people speak in a manner that they would not speak. Not only that the words are not theirs and the level of education is not theirs, but that the access to the conceptual nature of these ideas is not theirs. But again that shows, at that very moment, a simultaneity. The character has been established as having a certain class and race, and there is a contrast between his position and this speech, speaking about his position. The contrast between these two positions is revealed at the same time as a social analysis of his social position. So it is a multiple function going on at the same time. If you look at that as simply being not authentic speech then it is a reductive way to think about truth ... Maybe I have not yet got at your discomfort.

**In recent seminars you've talked about filmic devices but you have also used choreographic devices in your films. Do you see them as that? ... coming from your background as a dancer?**

Yeah, definitely. But what do you call choreography in *Privilege*?

**One scene in particular stands out – the rape scene, when Jenny is coming down the corridor, inside and outside the room there is a repetition, she is walking down the corridor and it is repeated with slight variation. Inside, you see the scenes juxtaposed in a descending repetitive pattern.**

How is that choreography? I might call that theatre, they are like two stage sets.

**There is a particular use of timing, which is not something I see in other film-makers.**

Yeah, editing can echo certain choreographic devices. That repetition happens when Jenny and

Brenda meet in the hallway. I used five takes of the shot where Jenny moves away from Brenda, maintaining her distance, so that it happens about four or five times. Partly I had a lot of voice-over I hadn't anticipated and then you go to cut and you realise that to emphasise that moment and the physical discomfort, it can happen through body movement and it doesn't have to happen only through language. I am very happy when I can find moments in cutting to make those points. But that happens in fictional and mainstream cinema in various ways. Body language is not necessarily underlined with language. But then you never see that kind of jump-cutting in mainstream cinema.

I was thinking more specifically of choreography when Carlos backs Brenda up against the wall, which is a visceral, visual kind of struggle and synonymous with the contested psychoanalytic theory being spoken, which is about the origins of racism in the infant's relation to the mother and its bodily secretions. But there the interplay of language, the physicality of it and the sound give it a different dimension. The in and out of 'sync' sound and the continuous monologue and some of it being sync-ed up at key places and the contrast between sync and voice-over. Here you see how for my purposes film can accommodate... I can't imagine how that could happen in a live performance – that play with sound. And that is very illustrative of what drew me to film – the possibility of playing with the realism of sync-ed sound and disrupting the illusion.

**There is another example we could discuss from *Privilege*, the signing of the black woman and the potency of that physical material.**

The physicality is one aspect. It is part of a rather complicated entry into the film. The whole sequence begins with my sitting down and presenting myself and my face taking on the meaning of age when "My Funny Valentine" very incongruously comes on the sound track. Then the introduction of the lipstick brings in the motif of sexuality. Then the Caldicott speech which can be read both in terms of my character – I, at this moment, am some kind of activist in the Caldicott

vein – but it is also being read through the apocalyptic anti-male rap which is somewhat put into a parodistic mode with the lipstick ...

**Like a right nutter I thought...**

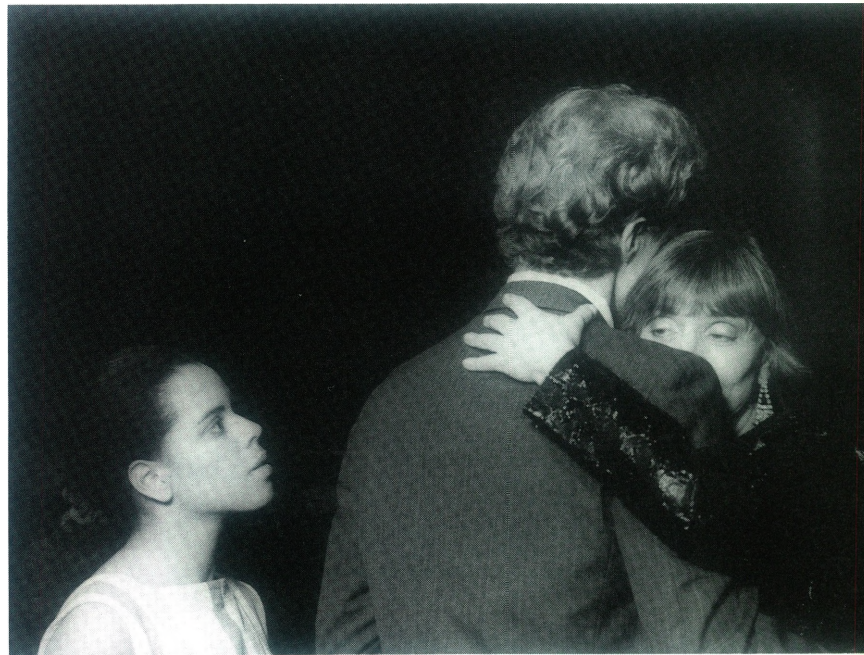
“Nutter?” (laughter) a mad menopausal woman? Then it all shifts in one twenty-fourth of a second, my image which has been central and very large becomes very small in an oval frame and you see this black woman presumably signing what I am saying. Which is a compounded reversal because usually the signer is marginalised. Here whiteness and blackness are reversed, with the white woman on the margin and the black woman as centre and the signer is centre and the speaker is marginalised. This idea of social position is foregrounded at that moment. Then a black African American woman’s voice comes on and the signer seems to be standing in for her. There is a transition in which the story seems to be shifting from a white woman’s experience to a black woman’s experience, and that experience is articulated as that of a woman who used to be another kind of activist, an advocate for American sign language which is a contested movement in the States, or it was, so she is now making a film about menopause. In the next scene we are into the documentary film proper, or one interview of this documentary and it is a white interviewee and the voice we have heard, the African American woman’s, is indeed the one interviewing this subject. So you see the signer is part of the narrative transition but also pointing to the different themes and discourses which are going to be elaborated in the film, the discourses around race, gender and sexuality.

So I guess the remnants of choreography and dance in my work manifest themselves in a certain kind of attention to physicality and have been subsumed by movement of the camera, framing and montage, all of which is more in a film tradi-

tion than a choreographic tradition.

**Do you have to solve problems spatially?**

Constantly, film is about the depth of the space of the frame, what is foreground, what is background. When I first started making films, and was making fictions about dancers, I used to say all I have done is take the floor and tilt it up, which was not entirely accurate. You are very conscious of a physical place in which activity occurs, the main difference is that you can crop it and stop it in ways other than turning the lights on and off or going into the wings.



**As a film-maker you can say exactly what goes onto the film and what remains in the editing process, but you relinquish some control about how that film is received? Live performance, for instance, is both an out-of-control and an in-control experience. You can control, and respond to, the spatial arrangement of your audience, the perspectives which they see and their interaction with the performance. Perhaps you relinquish something of that direct relationship in film-making?**

In film you are reliant on technicians and the lab and you do lose control very much. In fact there are optical flaws in *Privilege*, I know where they are,

most audiences wouldn't. On my budget you can't reshoot everything. I think dancers or choreographers have much more control than my level of film-making has. I had only four days of rehearsal with my actors which was all I could afford and the pressure is tremendous ... you feel like you are a dog wagged by its tail.

It is a very tyrannical situation when you compose your frame down to the last gesture. In *Journeys from Berlin* I rehearsed with Annette Michelson, the main actress, for over nine months and every gesture was choreographed down to the blink of an eye. The effect is a very synthetic performance. Talk about spontaneity, there was none and I had no desire for it. It is a series of monologues, fragments of writing from all over the place. On this film I didn't work that carefully, I didn't have time. This time my process was about giving the actors their head, letting them go. But then I could control it in other ways. I reshot some of Alice's lines on video. So you get two different optical looks, one more degraded than the other. I wanted to disrupt that surface and the monotony of a single monologue. Is that visual choreography?

**How choreographed or set was *Lives of Performers*? Are there choreographed pieces within it?**

There are two segments of documentary where the camera just rolled while we were rehearsing a dance but everything else is set. The sound track is somewhat improvised. I assigned parts of the script to various actors and I would tell them paraphrase this, read that, and I would get their spontaneous responses. So you get Shirley saying, 'oh I look like an old-fashioned movie star'. She had never seen herself on film and there was laughter. There was a mixture of spontaneous, so-called spontaneous, actually genuinely spontaneous, because the voices were... I never thought of this before but it is much easier to be spontaneous with a tape recorder than it is with a camera. When you are aware you are being looked at, the camera is a much more controlling, defining, delimiting apparatus than a tape recorder, where your physical body is not on display. So I would say that I got much more

authentic spontaneity on the sound-track of *Lives of Performers* than I did on the documentary, so-called, parts of *Privilege*.

**In terms of spontaneity I love the woman (in *Privilege*) who tells the lie.**

Yeah, none of that was scripted. She's playing with me.

**It seems at that moment you are undone, you, as the questioner, are riddled.**

Yeah, that was her intention. She is a photographer and her work always has to do with questioning reality so there was all that talk about a real interview and she was telling me that I was not going to get reality here. I said, 'I want to get your experience, no matter how real or not, for instance, how old are you?' 'Oh yes, that is very real, 49.' It is a lie and she is acknowledging it. I didn't see that as discomfiting, I just see it as another kind of reality. I don't see that the control, for instance a media representation, is always something controlling. What I am hearing is that as dancers there can be some kind of improvisation which gives a more genuine kind of interaction.

**I am not saying one is more genuine than another because I am interested in the interplay. Which is why I went back to the earlier film because it seemed to have a greater sense of spontaneity than *Privilege*, which seemed more controlled and mannered. I was interested in its construction and the moving between them.**

What you are saying is similar to what that person in the audience was saying about the race issue. That the experiential kinds of representation give more sense of reality than more rhetorical or didactic speech.

**They do and they don't; that can be another illusion. Improvisation is supposed to be creating genuine movement but, of course, it is always mediated even if it appears spontaneous. A particular set of circumstances leads to that improvised moment.**

I think dance shares with sports a feeling that it can

only happen this way once. It can never be repeated, therefore the reality of that moment is uncontestable. It may never be repeated, but what does that tell us about the thrill of perceiving it. An amazing return or a lob in tennis takes your breath away and there are those moments in *Contact Improvisation*. That kind of experience gets very dangerous when you start looking at TV documentaries and the illusion is that you are seeing it now, "It is real and this is the way the world is." The newsmen are there and yet you know how those moments can be manipulated and edited. So extrapolating the idea of authenticity and reality to social issues, you have to constantly qualify that way of looking at so-called real events because we get so much pleasure out of it.

We get pleasure out of people, suddenly, on camera laughing. That is why in *The Film About a Woman Who*, I set up that moment of genuine laughter, so it would happen spontaneously in front of the camera. I gave Shirley something to read that was totally, obscenely ridiculous, and it blew her mind away. I will never reveal what it was she was reading but I got the effect I wanted. Something so different from the rest of the film with its controlled, totally controlled, relation to the body and language.

**You talk about monitoring television and social issues, where you logically work out what is going on. Do you see that same sort of monitoring process being important over the more experiential and intuitive?**

I can give you an example again from *Privilege* with the so-called spontaneity of the documentary talking heads. It seems that I am not monitoring or interfering through optical effects. There is no subversion of this material akin to what I do to the narrative segments. It seems that I am lending the documentary a credibility by leaving it alone which

is different from the way I deal with fiction, for instance by asking questions—did this assault occur or not? changing of pronouns, showing the background of the set to reveal the means of production. Nothing like that except there are two kinds of documentary about menopause – the educational film and my talking heads. That immediately sets up the question 'who is talking truth here?' You have to decide. It isn't that one is lying, and the other is not. There is a different positioning and pointing to the positions of these women as patient/victim, subject/object and the doctor as



expert. The way they play off, who is the straight man and who is the second banana? The two kinds of documentary play off against each other and you might say, the monitoring process occurs through the juxtaposition. The doctors are certainly not spontaneous; they are speaking from a script. But this film is in the same documentary format and tradition – talking to the camera, there are the victims and there are the experts. Usually the experts are either lying or they are telling the truth, and the relationship is always constant between the people who have been affected and the people who have the power to make decisions over

other people's lives. In *Privilege* you have the same equation but it operates in a very different way to a documentary film. Although they are all speaking about the same thing, they are out of phase. They are speaking past each other, and in the gap between them we are able to draw our own conclusions about these two points of view. It isn't that they contradict each other, it is about social position. The doctors with power who assume women do not have power and the women who speak from a position of experience, which contravenes in some way these authorial voices. It isn't that they are victims and it isn't that they are experts, it is that there is some place in between that these experts cannot touch, and we are addressed in this gap. So in the question of spontaneity, it is very important to consider all these modes of address.

**Are you saying to the audience, position yourself in between? Given that film is what it is, the only spontaneous position might be that of the audience who does the thinking between those gaps?**

I am giving the audience critical distance.

**Do you remember the "Tea for Two" article which came out in *Contact Quarterly* with the conversation between you and Simone Forti? The juxtaposition was fantastic; these two good friends and the connections are there, but the content and the style and your different points of view were completely at odds. There was a gap...**

To think we both came out of Ann Halprin...

**There is something done in that article, by the two different threads, that in a way makes you monitor both.**

Do you want me to comment on that. I was aware of its humour even then, like when Simone says, "I guess I am just a patriarch." (laughter) We have been exposed to very different experiences and theoretical and political ideas. I am always amazed when I find women for whom feminism is a dirty word, to whom feminism means career opportunism. Often that is what it means to women in the arts. As for Simone, I think feminism has left her alone.

**She talks about the female principle ...**

Oh, essentialism!

**... an acceptance that in a non-verbal state she can investigate those universal notions, where does that end up taking you?**

That was the bias I was trying to describe before, as if the body is pre-language and that dancing can recapture the essence. Dancers were always talking about essences, (*still are*) that can be distilled. This polarity between language and body, mind and matter is a Western fallacy, but it does hold a powerful sway over our lives. The good body and the bad body. When Carlos is pushing Brenda, I use a quote from a psychoanalytic text by Joel Kovel. He was originally talking about blood and racism and I changed it to include sexism, hatred of the female body, blood and shit. What was I going to say... The bad body where the mind is good and rationality and logic all go with the mind. The dancers have the under side of that coin where the body is good and language is bad. Neither position is very liberating.

**You describe your last work as being more accessible and have noted its humour – that you heard more laughs than you had expected. We wondered why those things are more important to you at this stage of your work, or are they?**

I think there has always been humour in my work although I don't set out to make funny films, obviously. In the course of mixing up so many different elements you run into tremendous irony and possibilities for laughter. The business of accessibility is a very tricky area. People ask me, "are you ever going to make a real movie?" because real movies get larger numbers of people. But I do things in my movies that I couldn't do in 'real movies' and over a period of time the numbers of people who will have seen my films will be vast. They keep getting shown and small audiences occur in many different places. I don't think numbers is a gauge of value or even efficacy however.

Different people at different times, find some-

thing accessible. The audience for the avantgarde is constantly shifting and enlarging and contracting. When I started out dancing at Judson Church we filled the place for the first performance and two years later they were walking out on us and the work hadn't changed that much. It was just that audiences had tired of certain things they saw, I don't know what it was. Fashion? The kinds of audiences you get have to do with how you market your films, how you advertise them, how you distribute them.

Whether we like it or not certain kinds of work are marginalised and there is something called dominant cinema and there is something called the ballet which gets a big influx of patronage. There is the phenomenon of the way dance has developed in the U.S. with this emphasis on big production values. The combination of this pressure with that of real estate is the death throes, the strangulation of young artists, in every area. It affects their audiences too, they can't get their work out, they can't find spaces to do their work. But audiences are not the main thing to be concerned about, although in each project you think about how it is to be received but not in terms of some common denominator audience who might understand everything equally. You have to make work and adapt your work to specific issues at a given time with the materials and equipment that are available to you. I guess what I am saying is, you

don't totally have control over these things and can't anticipate exactly who is going to receive your work.

**Do you have a new project on the horizon?**

No.

**A trip to Australia?**

Yeah, I am taking back relics from the Hilton Hotel and I am getting a tape of an interview I did on 3LO yesterday ...

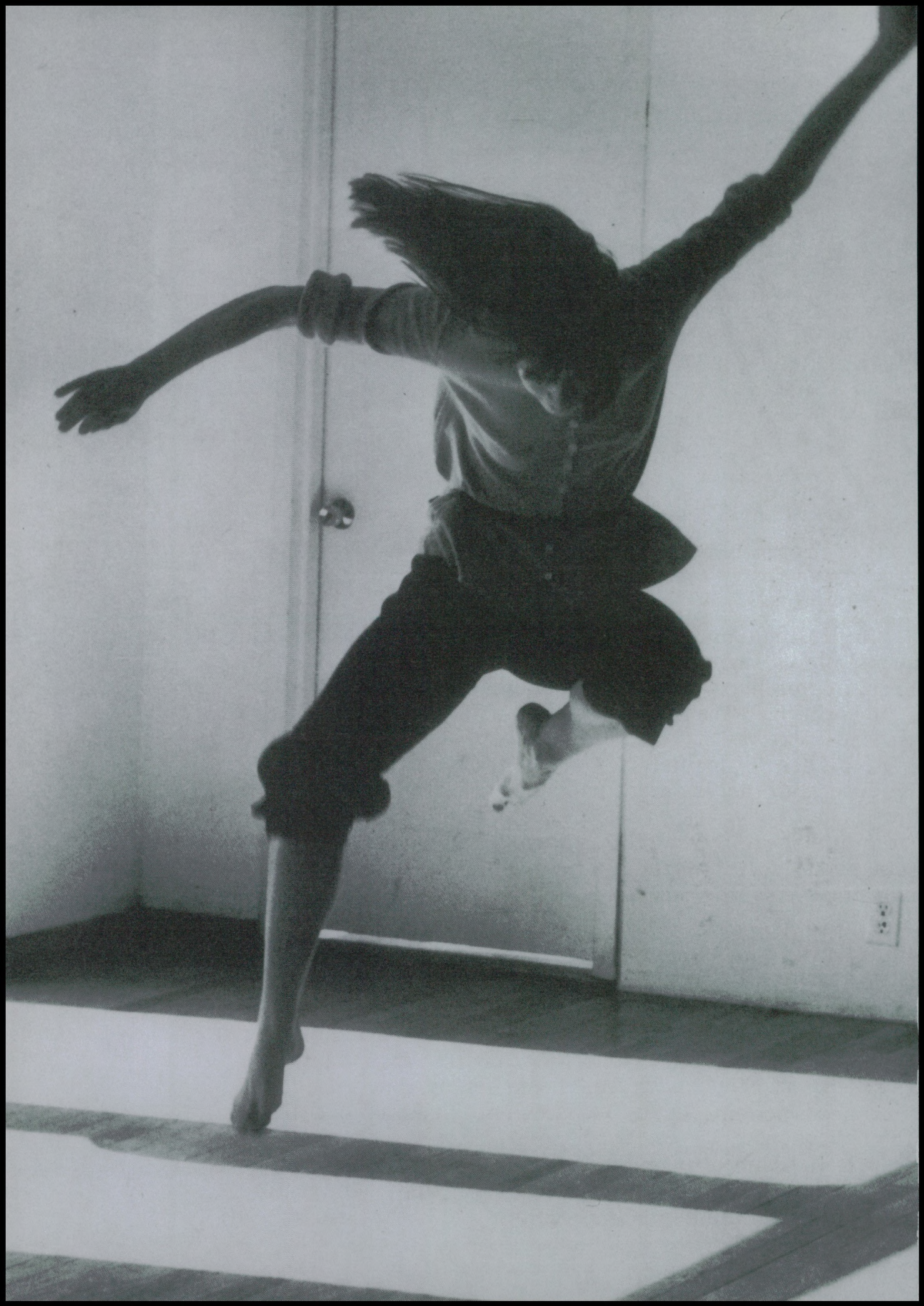
#### NOTES

1. Quoted in De Lauretis, Teresa, **The Technologies of Gender**, Indiana University Press, 1987: 107.
2. Banes, S., **Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance**, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 1980: 53.
3. *ibid.*: 54
4. Quoted by De Lauretis, *op.cit.*: 107.
5. Program leaflet - Rainer's Melbourne visit, MIMA, 1990.
6. Rainer, Y., **Work 1961 -1973**, The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, New York, 1974: introduction.
7. Interview with Gayatri Spivak, **ArtNetwork**, Sydney, 1984

#### ILLUSTRATIONS

All illustrations accompanying this interview are stills from Yvonne Rainer's film *Privilege*. 1990, b/w and colour, 16mm, 100 minutes. Personnel in the stills are as follows: page 13, Norella Nelson; page 15, Rico Elias and Blaire Baron; page 17, Gabriella Farra, Dan Berkey and Alice Spivak; page 19, Rico Elias and Tyrone Wilson.

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*Elizabeth Dempster*

# Situated Knowledge

AN INTERVIEW WITH

## Dana Reitz

**F**or almost twenty years now Dana Reitz has been engaged in a finely honed, inquiring mode of dancing in which numerous choices are made in the moment of performance. Beginning primarily as a soloist, Reitz has developed a unique choreographic and performance style; and it's a style which effectively demolishes any overly neat distinctions we might wish to make between the composed and the extemporised.

Reitz improvises each of her pieces around a core structure or score, working, as she has expressed it, "to bring into non-narrative visibility the fluctuating dynamics of motion, thought and intuition". In Reitz's work movement is analogous to the brushstroke of traditional Japanese calligraphy and it's the 'brushstroke' that holds her:

Where the impulse is, how it travels, how it goes out of the body. And the commitment to that stroke. That moment can't be repeated, but it's a trained moment, it's prepared for, and comes out of everything that's happened before. It can be like you're not even there. It goes right through you.<sup>1</sup>

There is a purity in this dance and it is achieved not through limitation or exclusion but through a rigorously *inclusive* process. For Dana Reitz improvisation is a personal investigation, involving at times intense inner focus. "It's not something you do on the *outside* of your life", she has said. The artist must learn to trust and take seriously what she finds in herself; she uncovers it, believes it, performs it. But the subject of Reitz's dances is not her self in any restricted, autobiographical sense. Her dancing speaks a self become liquid, infinitely adaptable, now located close within her body, now actively shaping the space around her, now expanded out to fill the whole of the performance area.

Reitz's dances are performed mostly in silence. Her presence invites an attentive listening, a tuning of the ear to the intricacies and rhythms of her movement. Her work radically modulates and alters our perception of space, time and the person. She invites us to contemplate the interpenetration and mutability of these perceptual 'categories', to watch as one becomes the other.

Reitz has taught workshops (Clear Cases of Improvisation) to beginners and professionals in various locations throughout the USA, in Europe and Australia. In the analysis and discussion which is an integral part of these workshops a distinctive vocabulary emerges: Reitz speaks of her attention to 'environmental volume' and of how she trades in 'spatial acoustics'; how the 'time' of a limb and its movement is related to its weight and volume – the space it inhabits. And through all this there is an unswerving commitment and challenge to the would-be improviser: "You have to ask every time, 'What am I doing here?' and you have to answer. You have to be present."<sup>2</sup>

The following interview was recorded in October 1990 at the conclusion of a two week workshop conducted by Dana Reitz at the School for Movement Research, New York City.

**DEMPSTER:** I'm struck by the fact that I've not heard you speak of your work in terms of an origin or starting point. It's as though the dancing is located in a kind of continuous present. Your process entails an acute attention to the simultaneous play of many elements and from what I gather, you do not build up a piece in layers (first the movement, then direction through space, then the emotional tone etc.) You move forward on all fronts, so to speak. The challenge you presented to the workshop participants was to do likewise: "You just begin..."

I understand that you see your dances as a continuum, each piece preparing questions for the next but I'm still curious about where a phase of work finishes. How do you know it's finished and where does a new phase start?

**REITZ:** We're starting out right in the middle. This is where I start. So, what's the question? How do I divide the time? How do I decide on beginnings and where I'm ending? How do I know when it's time for a new piece?

When the questions of the previous work are not fully answered but answered to a degree where some new questions come out, then the new work kind of grows out of the old one. In other words, there's a period of lag time where it all settles down and I think about it and I'm not quite sure what the next step is and I wait. There's usually something disturbing in the last project, some area of it that's a little shadowy or that doesn't have a lot of clarity, doesn't seem quite resolved.

**And it can't be resolved within the framework of that piece?**

Yes, it's like that area needs more focus. So I usually use that as a beginning, a stimulus maybe, that's the word, for the next project. As far as its position within the next project, it may be half-way through, but it's a place of entry, so that I know some of the things I'm questioning. Then I fill it out, backwards

and forwards, whatever direction it needs to be taken.

**You have mentioned that there may be a period of two to three years between one work and the next. Are the questions forming the work more complex now? The fact that it takes a longer period now to develop a new work, is that to do with questions internal to the work or more a matter of external circumstances?**

External circumstances have a lot to do with it. That and my energy level. If I think it's going to be a really big question then it will take me longer to set it up in a way where I can solve it. Some questions I can answer in the studio but if I really have this thing I want to go deeper into, in public, then of course all the environmental stuff comes into play: collecting the money, finding the space and there's the concept of the time it's all going to take. You know we were talking about how do I project the time that a particular project is going to take. I know by now that it's going to take a number of months, to rev my own engine up, to focus on it and then to narrow in and take it seriously. And then I have to throw the whole thing a year ahead in terms of performance, and then back up and try to find a way to accomplish all that. So that the timing of the whole project really depends on where I am, where I make the money, whether I have to tour in the meantime or whether I can stay in one place and work on it. That's so much to do with it now. There's always some fishline I've thrown out to go in a particular direction and then I have to wait and see what the time frame is.

**Each day in the workshop you introduced different points of focus, from developing small units or structures of movement, to consideration of spatial elements, time elements, etcetera. You asked us to attend to these elements in turn but you made the point very clearly that they are all already given within any action. It's not a matter of imposing something, some directive from the outside ("Now I should think about space and shape") but just directing your attention so that these things are attended to, refined perhaps, in a conscious way.**

1. Dana Reitz in interview with Burt Supree. *Village Voice*, Feb 15, 1983.

2. *ibid.*

**Now that process would seem to be absolutely essential if you're working solo: it's not really an option to step outside of the piece and watch yourself!**

No, I've never been able to do that!

**For me that experience and the class discussion that followed gave great insight into how to proceed with a solo process. You've said somewhere that "dancing isn't something you do on the outside of your life." With this process you have found a means of attending to all these elements – making conscious all those layers of content, if you like – without alienating yourself from the work at hand.**

Without separating it off. In other words, your attention on space doesn't automatically separate it into a study of space divorced from your own experience. There's not a rule from the outside about how you should deal with space. It's paying attention to something to increase your awareness of it, to clarify your thinking about it, or your presence with it. But it's not like fulfilling a particular, prescribed spatial study.

**That seems like a sophisticated place to arrive at and it does seem to be a place of arrival, not a starting place. You can impart this understanding as information, as a 'technique', in this workshop situation but it really has meaning only as it is embodied through long experience.**

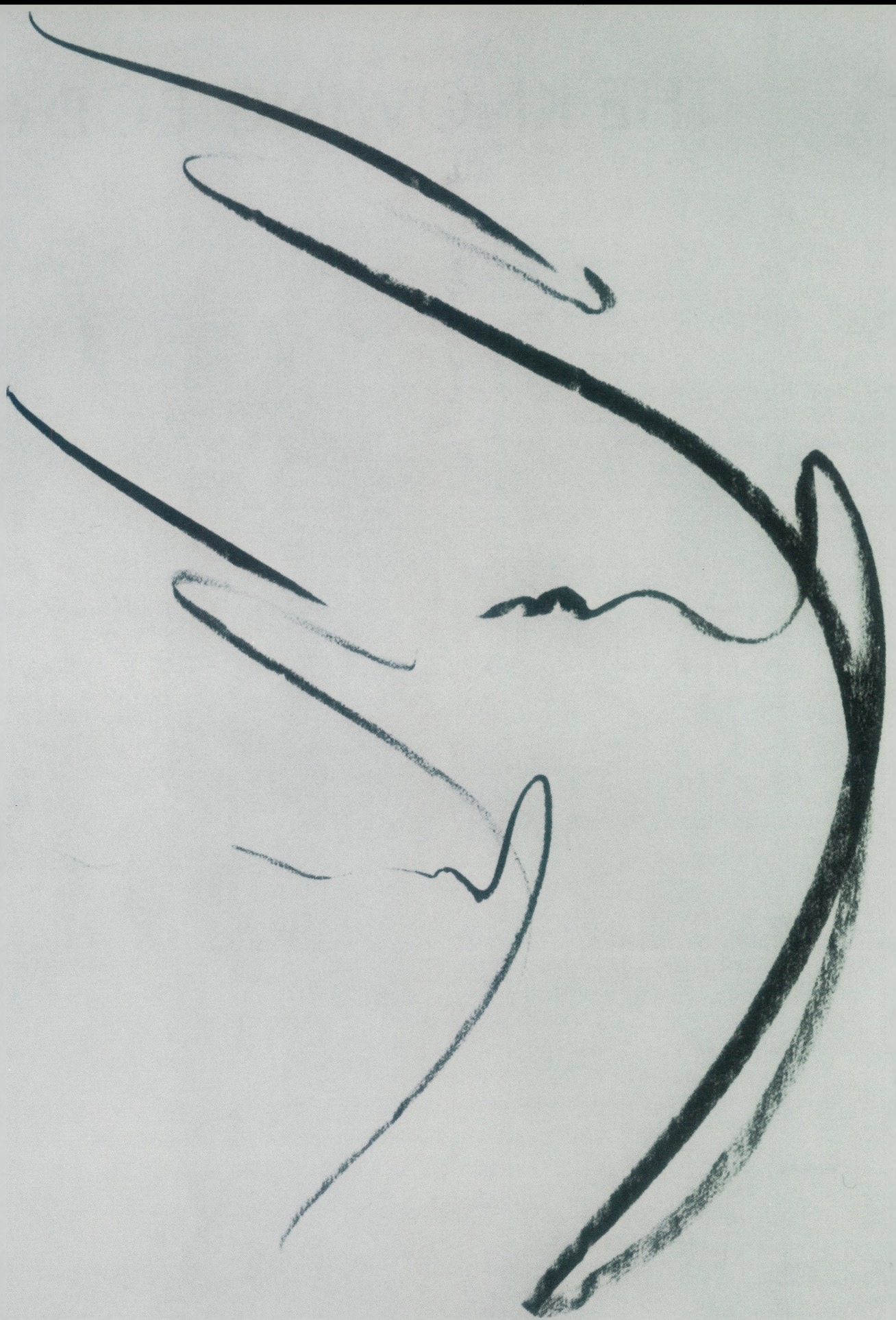
Well this is the first time that I've ever really talked about the complexity of these things in class – time and space together and personal experience. I realize that after so many years of doing it that I do pay very strict attention to it but I've rarely said that to somebody else, saying "oh, this is where a lot of the material is coming from, right here." It's essential and yet it's not something you just accumulate immediately. It's experience with dealing with different space and different amounts of time, waking up to the fact once in a while. In other words it's like a little periscope you send up. You're turned on to that part of the dancing and you can attend to it; you pay attention to it as a main idea, an idea that you can play with. You can stretch it or

confine it; you can say look it's taken me this much time to get through this amount of space, where this other space forces the timing. That's a very direct experiment that I'm doing. But it's for my benefit. What do *I* do with this amount of space and time? Not what *one* does, but what do *I* do? Maybe that's what we're looking at.

**It's unusual to hear this question of the play of space and time in performance discussed with the degree of delicacy and particularity which you bring to it. Obviously it's something many artists have an understanding of; it's evident in their work. But it's not talked about much in dance and consequently seems to be relegated to a realm of intuition or natural talent. My question would be that if there's a problem there, how do you have any access to it unless you have begun to recognize these elements, and their interaction, as active forces full of personal resonance. We are still much more familiar with a notion of space and time functioning as formal elements of the dance, determined and manipulated from the outside, that is from the perspective of a choreographer working with dancers. Does solo work present particular difficulties or should I say 'opportunities', in this regard?**

Light and stage dimensions are all partners for me and so this is how I deal with the space. I have to really pay attention to it as another force there. In a sense when you have another person on the stage you tend to forget some of the force of the particular environment because of the interaction between the people. Because you can have so many manipulations of work between people, that relationship can take over and kind of consume the space. But it would be fascinating to have two people doing this; still with the attention to the volume of the space and kind of lifted away from themselves, centered away from themselves once in a while. That to me is very interesting.

There are people who automatically know how to do this or sense this and others who absolutely pay no attention to the space whatsoever. Their work is all very involved with the relationship between bodies. There's no judgement here. It's



just a difference in where the attention is.

So I can do that on stage. I can pay total attention to myself and tiny gestures and then all of a sudden 're-realise' the whole space, the magnitude of it, and become very small. Just by my own awareness of the volume of the whole space my gestures are no longer the centre of attention. There's something else going on. There's a play between me sensing internally and then delicately surrounding the little bubble of myself and then me within the context of these other elements. There's a huge dynamic range possibility in there. But you have to really pay attention to that I think. The more I deal with that on stage, in terms of direction, focus and intention and all those things we have been talking about during the workshop, the more feedback I get from the space. In other words, I get more out of it. It's like a little journey through these spatial things and therefore I can almost watch the space with the audience. They are not just watching *me*, they are watching what the space is doing. They are watching me go through stuff and doing stuff but they are not just saying, "look at her dance." Hopefully they are saying: What is she attending to? What is going on here? Where's she going? Why is she going in that direction? What's at the other end?

All that suspense is wonderful stuff to play with. What you expect and how you set up the space going from one area to another; what you expect when you get there, changing it just before you get there so that there's a surprise; playing with the dimensions and pulling it back, pushing it and contracting it and expanding it. All that is incredible amounts of material.

**You have spoken of the 'drama' of those elements and of how you are in the play of that drama, a witness to its unfolding. It doesn't exist before the moment of the performance; it's new for the audience and for you at the same time and in part its created by that encounter.**

Right. But part of the structure is to set it up so that I know, basically, the journey. I know basically the points in space and the temperament of the movement and I know the time it's going to take ap-

proximately. I structure out pods of areas where I'm going to concentrate on certain things. So that I already know as a base some of the spatial plan but how I get there and how I surprise myself (as long as I do it within seven minutes or three minutes or whatever the time parameter is), that's all up for the drama of that moment and that includes the audience.

#### TALKING WITH THE AUDIENCE

**Could we talk a little further about how you see the role and position of audience? You acknowledge the audience as one of the elements which gives shape to your performance. Not only do audiences have a choice as to how they receive or 'read' the dance but they are implicated in it, insofar as their response has a direct bearing upon what transpires – they influence the temperament and tone of the dialogue. This is a very dynamic concept of performance. There's known territory but all of the elements are to some extent in flux so that...**

...you can't grab hold of it. It can also be a bit frightening because there are moments when the audience doesn't particularly want to ride with you on that. But you still have a structure, you still have what you have to do anyway, even if they are pulling back. And that ends up being part of the thing, you know. Your reaction to that, your response to that negativity or withdrawal produces a certain kind of timing and a certain kind of landscape.

**On tours would you be performing mainly to audiences that are unfamiliar with your work and the milieu out of which it has evolved?**

There are always newcomers. Those who have seen my work before tend to be able to see it a little bit more clearly. It seems to be a little overwhelming at first because there's so much going on but on the other hand there's some who come for the first time and they are very easy with it, they just give in to it, they see it and it doesn't bother them. I think it depends on the expectation you have when you come in as an audience member. I mean if you think you're going to see ballet, of course you're going to be disappointed and if you think you're

going to hear music, you're going to be disappointed and if you think I should be leaping, you're going to be disappointed ..all of that. Others will come in and say, "Well what's happening?" and they sit there and they watch and they are not so panicked about getting a message and they tend to have a much easier time.

**What you're establishing is a situation in which there is a potential for both parties to be changed by the encounter and I guess that some people will not be prepared for this.**

Well they'd also be baffled if they thought they were to be really part of it. They'd be scared that they had to do something. So that's not going to help really. They don't need added pressures (Oh, now I have to work hard!). Again it's what they pay attention to. It's very curious. Those that pay attention to the musicality of it can get very involved in that aspect, others who deal with space get involved in that; gesture might be someone else's thing. But what I'm hoping is that there's enough there for each person to have some connection to the piece without thinking that they've got to get 100 per cent of everything. I certainly can't get 100 per cent of everything. My attention weaves in and out of different areas. I'm trying to make a radical middle, some area, a mix where they all combine, intersect, weave through. This is very interesting to me. It's a very amazing fabric and it's not dead, it's not a dead middle. I call it a radical middle.

**A shifting middle? It's not a fixed middle is it?**

It's a waving middle. It's like where the stuff in the brain all gets connected through somehow. There's this membrane, this area where the mix happens. How it comes out you just never know but it's an incredible mix. As long as it moves through and doesn't get stuck then I think you're fine but if you feel that you've got to establish that middle ground and protect it for dear life then I think it can get very dry and frightening. You might feel like this mix is the proper mix; next day of course it's not there. It can't possibly be there in the same way. So I set up the co-ordinates to mix but I don't set up THE MIX. I don't know what colour I'm going to

come out with exactly. It will be kind of blue or kind of some other colour. It all changes.

**During the workshop someone asked you what you wanted from an audience.**

What do you do it for? What do you perform for? Was that the question?

**Yes it was. I felt the question was motivated by a perception that the situation you invite with an audience is very different from what is regarded as the norm today. These days audiences are described as consumers; audience members are consumers and there is a product, (an 'aesthetic experience') they consume. Yours is a very different idea of performance and I don't think you're alone in holding to it but nonetheless that difference is very significant in the times we're in. It marks your work in a particular way. This links up with your comments concerning the pressures faced by young artists just beginning their work now. There is a lot of financial pressure and pressure to present themselves as something. There's pressure to present their work as if it's a completely known thing: "I do This. You people are going to have this kind of experience". It does seem all very premature and forced. To me it's a kind of a travesty. It really reduces the exchange that can happen. The potential of that moment, when someone's performing and someone's watching, is so rich and it's a very radical moment which perhaps has no other place in our culture. If that place is somehow being abandoned, well it saddens me I guess. Because that's throwing away something very precious.**

Yes it is. But there are people who really like the other, who like the products. They like to know they are going to consume that particular thing for the evening and they can meet and talk about it in a particular way. They can get very disturbed by my work because I'm not handing them something that they can take home and categorize easily, necessarily. And it's baffling to them.

**I think it does require, well perhaps not require, but it happens, that people are changed by the experience. It doesn't have to be in a huge way, it**

**can be very subtle, but for a moment other time is suspended and in this moment things become very fluid. If you're unable or unwilling to enjoy that experience of 'not knowing', then yes, I can see that it might be very baffling. It's as though something is being asked of you and you don't know what it is.**

I think giving time on stage for the audience to settle is really helpful in this. If I structure in, in the beginning, some kind of time for people to breathe, to settle in and not panic about what's going to happen next, it helps them kind of sink in to that experience. I hope I do that better and better, where I set it up so that it's not a confrontation, it's not competitive. It's an opportunity to get into something else.

If I wanted to just do some entertainment or do particular dance steps then it wouldn't be a problem, but because I want people to kind of give in then I can't force it on them. You know I can't say "You better give in or you're going to be fools if you don't." I give them credit for thinking and it's such a relief for me because then I don't have to do their work. I don't have to come up with the one way to look at it. So what I hope for is an arena for these different mixes to happen and that the audience can come in and out at their leisure. They can pay attention to different parts or fall asleep at other parts. It doesn't matter to me as long as they are there, present. And I can't tell if they are really there if I'm pushing them. If I'm demanding that they get something immediately then I'm not going to hear them, I'm not going to know what they have to offer, I'm not going to be able to sense the energy of the room and I'm going to be blocking information. So I have to set it up where I can listen too. I can listen to what's going on with me and with them, not project what they are thinking, which is hard to do sometimes, You're thinking "Oh God, they're so bored!". It's delicate stuff, but totally fascinating to me.

**I enjoyed the stories you told in class about audience response. How you sense that they are a little hostile here, a little more curious over there so you turn away from the hostile side.**

Exactly, forget the hostile side! It's like a party, you know. There's one jerk you just don't want to talk to and you're not going to and you go off somewhere else and that's true with major audiences. You can tell. You can tell this guy in front is going to give you a hard time, and he'll probably come back again and give you some more of a hard time.

**This happens even in a large auditorium?**

Oh I can sense it. In bigger auditoriums it's not individuals it's more groups, areas, sections. *Section C is really trouble. There's this group that's been bussed in and they are all sitting together in one section and they thought they were going to see ballet.* You can tell that. And with smaller audiences you can really tell from individuals. *That person there who's whispering the entire time is going to get killed.* Things like that. It's very hard to accept a loud negative whether it's by sound or by shifting around or coughing or slumping, if they are doing it in a dramatic way to draw attention to themselves.

#### **GROUP PROJECTS AND COLLABORATIONS**

**What happens when you work with others? In addition to your solo work you have worked with groups of people, both in a directorial role and as a collaborator.**

Well I keep thinking that there must be a way of extending this with others on stage. Each time I've done an experiment with others it's been a matter of trying to find out how to be individuals in that space, tuned in to each other. In other words, each person having full attention and getting involved with the space and with other people without defiance. How do you work so that you can go through all the emotional states that come up and allow for all sorts of interactions to happen (in timing etcetera) but really listen intently. The practice of listening to one another is very difficult because everyone has a different way in to movement and a different need from it. You have to find out what that is in the beginning if you're going to work together. I've succeeded in some cases and failed miserably in others in trying to find a base, a

kind of contract about what it's all about. What's the intention? Why are we working together? What are we going to get out of it and is everyone going to get what they need? And that's really tough because you might come in thinking you need a particular thing and something else comes in that's whopping and it must be dealt with. You have to have some way of communicating with each other, not just in dance. You have to know how to verbalise some of that stuff. That's tough and it's real time. It's real presence and the problems of real relationships and expectations and all that. That dynamic is very tough – in real life as well as on stage.

**I'd imagine that once it's placed on stage it's intensified.**

Totally intensified and egos are in there and also images of how you are as a performer and what happens when there is somebody else out there that has a different angle and you feel shadowed or you feel like you are shadowing somebody else. There's a lot of give and take and real time difficulty. I keep thinking it's possible to map this out spatially, using that information to set up territories, to set up particular little modules of movement and areas where certain things can get worked on. Then you could flow through that into another area where perhaps another angle gets worked on, together or separately or by dividing yourselves up for a while and then coming back together. You could actually map the emotional territory and use it spatially and use it in terms of time too. For example you could figure out an amount of time in which to deal with X problem. But again you have to have a deal with all these people you're working with that that's what you're going to do, and that's the toughest. To name that and say, "Are you with me on this? Or do you want to do some other kind of thing which I don't want to do?" It can get totally off. So I've been in both kinds of experiences, some where I really had agreement and some where I struggled through. The closest I think was with Sarah Skaggs doing the project in Boston (*Severe Clear* Radcliffe-Harvard 1985) with the light sculpture. It was phenomenal because by that time

we had worked together on and off for about four years I guess. We knew each other's timing extremely well so we could kind of swim together or go in separate areas and not fight for space. There was a real comradery there that was remarkable. That was the highest point I've ever worked with anybody. And I know she gave in some of her own way for me, me being the organizer or director of it. I needed certain things from her in terms of spacing and timing and she had to come with me on a timing base. And that's how we could read each other. It's harder for me to deal with people who don't hear movement musically so much. If they are more spatially oriented but don't sense the time it takes to get there that's hard for me. And it's really hard for me to be with a group where there's no common strain of attention, in terms of what one really listens to and what's important out of it for them.

**I guess the question in that situation is why is this group of people together? Are they together to give each other a difficult time?**

Well sometimes we think this (laughter)! You know we give in and say well I guess that's what's happening here!

**To put it another way, perhaps you are working together to challenge one another in ways which are not necessarily going to be realized in the performance work which arises immediately out of that group situation.**

Well I think that's what happened last year. There was a large project where I had had certain hopes and expectations that did not go through. It was a real struggle but on the other hand it stimulated the brains enough, mine anyway, to say okay what was this? And how come I can't clarify certain things and how come I can't get what I need out of this? And how come I can't verbalise and deal with this? It's scary territory. Relationships are scary.

**There might be some things that either you don't wish to verbalise or that aren't ready to be. I guess that situation can force issues and can force you to a point of definition which is actually not helpful.**

Exactly. You swim in mud for a long time until something sifts out and sometimes it takes years for it to sift. It's real muck. Other times you seem to be able to go right to the core of it and get it right away. I can never tell. I set myself up with this stuff but sometimes I go in with one eye closed and hope that that part won't bother me (laughter).

**From what you've been saying I gather that the things that move you on are in some way irritants, questions which have some disturbance, some emotion attached to them. There's no movement without some disturbance?**

It's not all placid and that tension line is interesting to me as long as I can hold my ground and not feel overwhelmed by it.

**I'm curious to ask you about your next project with music. Whenever I say 'music' you squirm a little.**

I do squirm. It's very hard for me to deal with sound. I like it but I like to just sit and listen to it, I don't like to move with it. Because it takes so much attention.

**So how has this project come into being, given your feeling about working with sound?**

Hans Peter Kuhn worked on the Pepsico project last year and one of the reasons I chose him was because he dealt so environmentally with sound. He really could move the sound beautifully around the room in terms of distance and closeness and height and texture. He wasn't making up music so much as creating a sound 'bubble' and that was interesting to me. But then the more I got to know what those sounds were, they got set in my brain and it was hard to accept at certain levels. From the audience point of view it was very different but from my point of view on stage it was like "Oh there's that sound again, I don't want to hear it right now, I'm not ready to hear it right now". But you see life does this. You can't control the environment.

**Is that different from how you work with light? You set time structures and cues with light. Is it less pervasive?**

Light is much easier for me to deal with because it is pervasive but it gives in. The way I work with light, it is set but it doesn't sway my timing. Since timing is my base, when there's a sound coming in that has a particular timing to it, it feels more invasive. Because it's hard for me to hear my own thoughts when there's a loud sound or there's a repetitive sound or there's a pulse that's going on and my pulse is doing something different. And what the audience hears, what I hear, is the pulse of the sound and that seems to take over from the visual, from the movement pulse. So it's real hard to maintain the attention to my timing when there is this other stuff happening. But that also happens in real life, the truck goes by, the fire-engine goes by, something else happens. There's something that alters your sense of concentration. All of a sudden you waken up out of yourself and you notice that there's this other stuff going on. So in this project I decided that I was going to deal with this head on. It's just the three of us, me, Jennifer Tipton doing the lights and Hans Peter doing the sound and I'm going to deal with its presence and what it does; fight it in places and ignore it in other places and do a whole different trip in other places. What that attention is, between being self-involved and dealing with this outside force that is kind of at you. Is there a way of throwing it back, since there's not an obvious person there to throw it back to and it's surrounding you completely? I'll have to find a way of standing my ground with this sound swarming round.

**Somewhat conflictual language here!**

Yeah, well immediately I set myself up for a little test here! There's going to be a battle clearly. Because I don't like it as a thing necessarily. Sometimes I do, but other times when I want to concentrate I can't stand having it around. It's like noise. Though when I'm paying attention to it directly and I don't have to do anything myself, I don't have to concentrate on what I'm doing, I'm fine. So I'll have to step away and just listen to it once in a while and let it take over that space and then come back in and take over my space. So it's going to be this three way interaction, me, Hans

and Jennifer's light. What I'm hoping is that there will be phasing in and out of each other, that this mix is going to be the unknown. Is there a way of really setting it up so that the mix is not predictable but that we know where we are? That's the question!

**You've worked with Jennifer a lot?**

Yes we are real partners at this point. We understand each other's language in terms of space, so that's not such a conflict for me. Though in this situation it will probably be a lot trickier. We'll see.

**There is the question of how the sound and light play together too.**

They have to. More. They're not just added on. I'm trying to get these basic elements together in a different way from normal stage work where there is light that shines on a particular dance that plays to a particular music. What we are trying to do is mix it in around there so that they affect each other differently. It's not all from one source. I'm hoping that the audience attention will shift. All of a sudden they will pay more attention to the sound and not see the dance so clearly or not see the light so clearly. That's what I'm hoping, that they'll also be pulled in distance by the sound. The head will literally lift up to listen to that sound that's far away and therefore you will not see the gesture at that moment, you will not see the light shift. The timing thing between us is going to be pretty intricate because if the sound pulls away and the light shifts but you don't notice it, it will be very stunning. You would have your attention pulled and by the time you brought it back the scene will have changed visually. And those who weren't distracted by the sound will have seen that whole shift. So different parts of the audience will experience different shifts of attention. It will be kind of a circle format, circular and spherical and cylindrical and we'll be using a square stage. It will be a bubble, a little cosmos I guess.

**PROMOTION, POLITICS AND  
MOVING OFF CENTRE**

**I was struck by your comment concerning the promotion of your work – the fact that you do not**

**promote it as improvisation. Would you talk about that a little?**

I think about that quite a lot. It has to do with the norm and people's expectations. In jazz you can talk about improv and people understand it exactly and they accept it, but even so there are some circles that don't give it its full status because somehow it's not pre-set. And these guys are brilliant, physically and intellectually brilliant. It's just that they don't put it on paper the same way as someone else might. It's a lifetime's hard work. But often improv, dance improv, has the look of not being difficult, intellectually or physically, or clear or progressing. It kind of swims around itself and it doesn't seem to have a direction. That's the trouble I always had as an audience with a lot of it. There are a few people who are brilliant improvisers who I will look at a long time and accept the parameters of their work and accept what's going on. But for the most part I did not see anything that I felt was fully there and I didn't understand why dance forms—everything from pre-classic to balletic forms – were taking priority, were taking the spotlight, as it were over dancing that was more spontaneous. To me, improv is on the spot composition. Because you're constantly dealing with the textures and the space and the time and the mix of those things. You're monitoring it as you're going. Your body remembers what you've just done, your experience tells you where you want to get to. You've set up where you want to get to but you don't know exactly how you're going to get there. You're listening quite hard and there's all these layers of attention going on. You're dipping in and out to different degrees in each one of them and it's a quite difficult little thing to do. So the degree to which I structure and which I improvise is really my own business I think, and if I advertise that this is an improv, then I think people come in and don't give it the attention.

**They devalue it in some way?**

Well, that's just the reality of the audience today and in any situation where my work has been advertised as improv, I've felt very uncomfortable

because I've felt that the work is just not challenged enough and I wish to be challenged and argued with. If somebody is not involved in the work, doesn't understand it, whatever, I like to know that. Improvisation does seem devalued. The word doesn't indicate necessarily the work that's involved. You know, it might take me two years to develop a particular structure, so to then call it improv feels like I've just done it that day. There's no way I'm going to do that. I'm much too serious for that and I think improv can be taken much more seriously. So people don't know the extent to which I improvise at all and I figure that when my clarity slips in improv, that's my problem. You know I have to really deal with that, in the structure, I have to deal with those lapses and those problems and if it was a piece of choreography I'd still have to deal with boredom in a particular section, or something that doesn't ring true. So that defining and clarifying is part of the process and it's very interesting to me. People come up to me afterwards and say "How do you remember all that stuff? It's just amazing!" They're fascinated by memory. If they knew it was improv they'd look at it ...who knows? And other people will come up and will say "How much is improv and how much is structured?" People who've known me for years don't know that I improvise, which is pretty strange. Others do and are really involved in that. It depends on the place too. There are some places that are very hot into improv and I don't mind mentioning it at all in the promotion. But in larger stages or larger contexts it's poison.

**One person can't change the currency of language. That word has a particular meaning and resonance or lack of resonance and it's foolish to think that...**

...you are going to change the prejudice. I understand it differently therefore you should read it differently in the newspapers even though you've never seen me and you probably won't come and see me! I like to get audience from all over the place, not just a specialized audience.

Somebody will come and say "Gee, your work is so abstract." And I say, well, maybe, but ballet is abstract too, extremely abstract, so what's the dif-

ference? Ballet has a familiar vocabulary and people are used to the set-up. With my kind of abstraction they have to get used to the set-up and then they can read it more easily.

**And there is a huge range of emotion, or drama if you like, which is not imposed from outside but is inherent in the elements of the work. But I can imagine that is not necessarily apparent to someone who is new to your work. When someone first encounters it they might not necessarily have eyes to see those qualities. So perhaps what they're saying when they say the work is abstract is Where's the story?**

Other people read all sorts of stories. I try to have something where the mix is such that it can be taken in many different directions. I try not to tell them which one, which direction.

**After reading your article on leaving New York I'm keen to ask how you see the present socio-political and economic environment affecting your work?**

Does it play in the dancing? Sure it does. There's no one place to learn things and I think that New York has been a centre for so long and a difficult one, and it produced some very interesting things and combined some very interesting people. The mix was interesting. The place through which people went produced some very interesting things, very quickly. When you are not in an urban centre like this it takes longer to get certain information. I remember in the early days I was here and there'd always be this tug of war between New Yorkers and non New Yorkers – jealousies back and forth – and it seemed to be a silly fight. When you're here you get the opportunity to see lots of stuff, you very quickly go through layers whereas if you're in the middle of somewhere else where there's hardly anybody round you're not going to be able to get that immediate feedback and stimulation. That's the truth of it. That doesn't mean that the work that's produced somewhere isolated is bad work. It's different work because of the nature of existence there..So there would be these tugs of war about what's better, what's worse, this is more awake, this is more dead; and yet in the middle of

New York City you would have work that was as if the person was totally isolated and not paying attention to the other things that were going on around them.

But there *was* a lot of activity and challenge here. Then life got a lot tougher and the politics, the environment started to imprison a lot of people into mannerisms, ways of thinking and ways of working that had been quite legitimate and exciting and wonderful but all of a sudden they were getting dry, barren, staid, and protective, and advertised in a certain manner and following a set style. It was awfully hard to get out of that rut and change your mind, to start mixing up the ideas again and get on with it, you know, grow a little older and figure out what some new territory might be. Because you're holding on for dear life to the stuff you had set up. It has to move, to keep alive you have to move around a bit and I was just feeling that it was getting tight and dry here and painful in that I was not paying attention to my personal life in a difficult situation, on a daily basis. As long as I was focusing on work I would survive but there were parts of me that were in great pain doing that. You see I was starting to blind myself to parts of me and that wasn't making the dancing any better. And I think it's a kind of poison. Again it is set up to do certain things but to exclude other areas and I was just becoming aware of that and decided I had to change. That if I couldn't keep thinking and working in a place that felt better and healthier then perhaps I had other things to do. You know, if my work couldn't survive being in a healthier place then what does that mean?

What is it, is it the necessity to be around friends? Yes that's absolutely true. The necessity to be around people who can help you and stimulate you and there are great people here and they're still here, many, and I miss that terribly, that interaction and that stimulation. But they are not living in my house, they're not in the middle of a little New York apartment. There's nobody there on a daily basis being helpful, supportive and all that, so I had to be in an environment that was a bit more healthy because sickly dancing just doesn't give you too much to go on after a while. If your

own work starts to make you ill, perhaps it's time to change.

**It must be worth knowing that your work continues and flourishes elsewhere...that it can do.**

Yeah, well you have to go out and try it. You're not going to know just by thinking that you have to stay in the same place. It's not automatic, you have to really deal with it. It's hard in America, there's such a huge difference between the urban and the rural and the suburban. The distances are great, the politics are strange. It's a rather massive environmental change. So you have to build in some flexibility, some movability.

But so many people are leaving. It's not just an individual fight. There is a recognition that this lifestyle is damaging. It can be so exciting and damaging at the same time. You have to fix the balance, get in there and figure out what you need in this system.

**In Australia that question about place does seem primary but I think perhaps that it's a mistake, a kind of wrong thinking in a way – an expression of an anxiety about not being 'where it's at'. And I wonder whether this whole idea of a centre is shifting?**

You're in what I think is a difficult situation in Australia, because New York was the known centre for a long time. It's not going to be there forever. As if with billions of people on the earth there can be one area. I mean that's absurd! Yes, it's more convenient because then everyone knows where to go to see each other. The convenience and wonder of New York twenty years ago was that you knew that if you sat here everyone would come through! Now that I'm out of town I have to make an effort to get somewhere where that action takes place. That's difficult. And in Australia, my God you're way out there thousands of miles. It's hard to see what's happening in London or New York or Paris.

**What I see here in New York, even among young dancers, is a particular quality of physical intelligence. There's a sense that knowledge is being transmitted from generation to generation quite naturally and that the incredibly rich history of**

**dance that has occurred here is embodied and carried forward through time in this way. Finally we're talking about a sense of community; I mean a community of interest with a past and an ongoing practice. Maybe once it had a centre and now that is not so strong. But there is a network and if you're working outside of that, completely isolated or not even aware of it, then I think it can become problematic. A question arises about what it is you are doing if you have no points of connection, no points of reference that link you to that wider context. This is a different issue. And this is not just suffering some sort of neurosis about not being where it's at. It's a different order of concern.**

Absolutely different and I don't think it's just a neurosis when someone's worrying about Where am I? Where is it? It's very complex. How to find people who are similar is hard. One of the wonderful things here twenty years ago was the feeling that you were supported, that you could be really wacky and try all these experimental ideas – you know, crawl across the stage for an hour with a candle on your head. Whatever you wanted to do, there would be somebody there who thought you were great. Some group would show up and support you in doing what it was you needed to do. That is so essential and if you are in an area where you're not supported for thinking those things it's much tougher.

I've found these strange pockets around the world where people are really supportive and experimenting like crazy and right next door there'll be a pocket where people are backbiting and hating each other's guts and it makes me wonder, 'What is this?'

But you did have to search for pockets of support in New York. There were very nasty pockets here twenty years ago, no question, but you had to, in an animal-like fashion, sniff out the territories that were safe for you and because there were so many different people here you could find that, you could collect that. When you have fewer people then it's problematic because you don't have anywhere else to go. You kind of have to stick together but you're not liking it.

See, in New York it's more and more like that. I felt like it was getting more into: Who's going to do the next big project? (and it's going to be a mega-project). And who's going to get the money and who's not? It became more difficult at a very basic level and I felt that for me this was the beginning of needing to get out of here. There was much too much emphasis placed on promotion. Not that that's all evil but it became the focus rather than the desire to figure new stuff out. I had to get away from all that.

In Australia I felt sad in a way. You have such a small community, spread over such an enormous distance and it seemed to me that it would be incredible if you could just support each other's visions and take the eccentricities or whatever and see how it could develop. Rather than constantly kind of enclosing on yourselves and cutting off interaction. That was the feeling I got there and I felt sorry because I remember being here twenty years ago feeling so supported by different people, even those I didn't know. There were so many more people doing it and everybody was struggling and you kind of gave up on the competitive money thing after a while because there wasn't any. So you were all taking weird part-time jobs, doing this and that and you still went to see each other's work and it was supported that way.

But here we get into the question of cultural mannerism. There are all these different reasons for whatever is being set up in particular places. In Holland, and perhaps I'm being culturally biased here, but I was amazed because there was so much government money put into the arts that people didn't need audiences. It was so taken for granted that I felt rather spoiled. The attitude seemed to be, "Well we've seen that kind of thing before." They've seen everything! It's all been bought, it comes through Holland and there was this attitude – "Well your thing must be kind of like that thing, so I don't need to see it. Well it's interesting but I'm not going to get involved." Very amazing as compared to some other places I've been where audiences are incredibly involved. And I have a prejudice. I prefer those that are incredibly involved, even if they are back-biting. I just prefer a little fire.

**Dana Reitz: Biographical Notes**

Born October 1948, Dana Reitz was influenced by early music study (1956-66) and residency in Izumo, Japan (1965). She graduated from the University of Michigan dance and theatre program, Ann Arbor (1970) and moved to New York where she studied Merce Cunningham and Ballet techniques, Elaine Summers' concept of kinetic awareness and the Chinese movement discipline, Tai Chi Chuan. She was a member of Twyla Tharp and Dancers in 1970-71, toured Europe with Laura Dean and Company, Steve Reich and Musicians (1972) and performed a major role in the Robert Wilson/Philip Glass opera *Einstein on the Beach*, which played throughout Europe and at the MET Opera House in New York City (1976).

Dana Reitz began her choreographic career in 1973, primarily as a soloist. Her major solo works include: *Journey: Moves 1 Through 7* (1977); *Journey for Two Sides: a Solo Dance Duet* (1978); *Phrase Collection* (1978-79); *Changing Score* (1982); *Steps* (1979) and *Steps II* (1981); *Solo From the Field Papers* (1983), *Circumstantial Evidence* (1987). *Phrase Collection* developed into twelve versions, eight of which were

ensemble pieces. Other major group works include *Quintet Project* (1981) and *Field Papers* (1983).

Dana Reitz has toured extensively throughout the United States, Europe and Australia.

The interplay between light and movement has been of primary interest to Dana Reitz in the presentation of her work. *Severe Clear*, a collaborative project with light/space artist James Turrell and dancer Sarah Skaggs won a special Bessie Award for choreographic and design collaboration in 1985.

In preparation of her choreography, Reitz often draws and paints, with charcoal, brush and ink or colour, to visualize the phrasing inherent in the work. She has exhibited these pieces as part of group shows at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and at the Pratt Institute and Paula Cooper Galleries in New York City.

She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and the Jerome Foundation. She is currently working under the auspices of a not-for-profit organization, Field Papers Inc.

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*Dana Reitz*

# Journals of a

Since I fear a continuation of the old regime  
it is difficult to write this without some sense of anxiety (high)  
sadness, anger, etc., regarding the future  
let alone feelings about the past  
i will try to stick to some main points of observation  
of myself  
of artists in different fields whom I know as friends  
of others within the sphere of art  
mostly of my generation  
surrounding 40 years old  
there are no statistical reports herein  
no polls  
no official interviewing of others  
no attempt to provide facts "untainted" by human emotion  
no calls for simple solution

this paper does not address the needs of everyone  
i cannot prove the numbers leaving  
compared to the numbers arriving

# Road Worrier

ON THE DISPERSION  
OF ARTISTS FROM NEW YORK

i have no authority to name names of friends who are in  
transition/transit

i have had no time and little interest in compiling this information  
because my main focus has been  
particularly in the past three years  
where do i live next  
how do i keep my work going  
do i have to think of leaving the field altogether  
after nearly 20 years of work

i have been very fortunate  
regarding fellowships and grants  
touring opportunities (mostly abroad)  
i have received incredible support from other artists  
and administrators in the field  
so why the confusion?  
so what has gone down?

**in 1970**

**it was clear that New York was the mecca of the dance world**

**i arrived in the city**

**after being schooled at a university**

**after being raised in country-turned-suburban area of upstate**

**New York**

**i went there because Merce Cunningham was there and John Cage**

**among many others**

**they had not had easy lives**

**i did not expect one**

**i lived extremely cheaply, could live on part-time jobs**

**income was around \$3000**

**i went to many performances**

**met many interesting and actually genuinely friendly citizens**

**loved the mix of people and ideas**

**had access to many different opinions and works**

**it was home**

**i joined the company of Twyla Tharp (at \$30/week)**

**then Laura Dean**

**then started my own work**

**produced that first concert and then many after**

**out of my own earnings**

**it became clear in the later '70s**

**that i needed much more full-time attention to the work**

**it became clear that money to individuals was rare**

**grant-writing started**

**then i took a year to work with Robert Wilson/Philip Glass**

**then, luckily, CETA, after unemployment**

**alternative spaces began helping with sponsorship**

**then touring in Europe**

**then a Guggenheim**

**then a major push toward using umbrella organizations to raise  
money**

**and then a push to organize an organization called a not-for-profit  
corporation**

**with a board of directors**

and then many papers to file  
many, many  
development plans  
fiscal reports  
and new rules not entirely obvious to the naked eye  
continuous explanations of  
why one's artistic and personal life  
did not always fit a corporatelike agenda  
did not always respond to the ever-expanding universe theory  
did not always increase  
perhaps we could start companies like Resource, Ltd.

well okay  
so we learned  
followed some new rules  
and fought to keep the core of the work  
but somehow the prices of everything kept going up  
and then  
the baffled look on our faces  
when the rich discovered loft living  
and we, along with many small businessmen, many small organiza-  
tions  
were forced out

we were surprised  
and we learned about the law  
and we learned what law costs  
and we investigated and sued  
and countersued  
and lived under highly stressful conditions  
including fire and ice  
and our conversations changed from art  
to real estate and law

and we started to realize  
as we fought  
and got older  
the cost of stress  
the cost on the body  
the cost on the psyche  
and the cost at the doctor's office  
the cost of medical insurance

and with others of the population of the U.S.  
we were forced to understand  
the great difference  
between those who could buy access to health  
and those who could not  
and many of our friends  
in this age range  
are dead or dying of the new plague  
and other stress-related diseases

and our conversations switched  
from real estate to death  
health, survival  
drinking water  
contaminated food  
environmental hazard  
the feasibility of last-minute babies

it was starting to be clear  
that we all should have had other lives  
that banks would not accept us as full citizens  
because somehow  
we did not choose to become highly paid executives  
stars or different brands of professionals  
could not "will" ourselves into trust funds...  
the lottery has become the only salvation  
it seems

what has been robbed from us  
is a belief  
a certain romanticism that kept us going in spite  
of obvious difficulties  
once upon a time we had been able to work very hard  
while living fairly cheaply  
one day we noticed  
it cost too much to stay in the same place

so what now?  
there is no clear substitute for the urban crossroads  
for a magnet of ideas and people  
we have been faced with a decision to flee stress-ridden centers  
in search of what?  
other large magnets of equal but slightly different-looking stress?  
mini-magnets?  
recuperation trenches?

or that dreamland  
the all-accepting community for artists of little money  
all races, all ages  
a new naivete we cannot afford  
we know that art making  
especially the kind that involves investigation and experimentation  
is not in general an accepted form of life throughout the United  
States

and now the conversations start with  
"Where are you going?"  
or "What have you found?"  
or "Have you thought about what you are  
going to do with the rest of your life?"  
once upon a time i had assumed that all of us  
would simply continue on, making new things

so we sneak into the country  
and we get a preview of the stress in rural areas  
see the land being bought up and developed – once again  
by those who have too much and give too little

we may be as welcome in small town that has just lost its factory  
or a farm community that has just lost its land  
as a wealthy dilettante was welcome into the loft land of Soho

even if we started in the countryside  
we went through  
the urban experience  
and we return as foreigners and must quickly adapt  
to the new realities  
members of minorities have a harder time  
melting in, what's new?  
and lo and behold  
artists from those other American communities we might live in  
haven't had such a great time either

so what can we offer a community that is so different?  
storytelling  
of many other people, events, lands  
or such gems as advice  
on the best police locks and gates  
the distinctions between addicts of the heroin or crack persuasions  
survival jaywalking  
an updated guide to the D train  
wildlife identification procedures to distinguish the large mouse  
from  
the small rat, sky rats from escaped cockatoos  
cockroach battle plans  
clothing suggestions for the least amount of attention  
certain knowledge of where to borrow or buy cut-rate the more  
chic stuff

for the fundraising events of the year  
translation of foreign language menus  
and most seriously, how to experience high doses of abuse without  
taking it personally  
but wait  
how about yet another tourist guide to the major cultural institu-  
tions of the city?  
tsk tsk

and now from this new community  
we need information on  
new clothing regulations  
colors for the hunting seasons along with the up-to-date schedules  
tips on real estate, i.e., how to distinguish land near chemical  
waste,  
nuclear power plants, military target zones and religious cults  
historical treatises on particular rights of way  
any clues about public transportation  
or, let's face it, reliable used car shops  
car repair suggestions  
secrets to fuel, water and insulation  
support groups for cabin fever  
planning strategies for late night food attacks  
calendars of community events within a 200-mile radius  
wildlife identification procedures re those animals not on a leash  
that are good to have around  
and  
to keep in touch with a previous life  
the nearest Xerox machine  
the nearest touch-tone phone  
and the nearest airport

the phone bill will be higher  
and, as well, the costs of transportation  
and housing—I don't know  
the banks still ask what one does for a living

well  
anyway  
the look of concern re the presence of outsiders in the community  
we don't need to be seen as missionaries  
or feared as troops of an ideological Attila  
we need not be classified as traitors to the urban cause  
or tolerate the word "failure" from the lips of yuppie congregations

we are simply responding to the fact that  
following historical precedent and natural tides  
with a little help from the politics that be  
times are changing  
the center is not holding  
the magnetic field around the city is  
apparently  
losing force

meanwhile  
New York  
what can i say  
so much energy has been handed to you  
so willingly  
so strongly  
so more than freely  
i do believe you blew it

and there is no other clear mecca  
the population is large  
America is vast  
and we are scattering  
there can be no one overall solution  
obviously  
to the problems of survival as an artist  
not all artists create equally, in equal amounts or with equal effect  
there is no single core  
apparently no principal code of ethics

**there is an enormous number of different angles  
scattered loyalties  
disparate experiences and expectations  
i like that**

**i like that art has a liquid nature  
like water  
necessary to life  
movable, changeable, yet identifiable  
reflective or turbulent, serene or agitated  
etc.  
art nature  
a natural phenomenon  
needing tending conservation conversation  
like the environment  
i hope it continues with energy  
no matter where it goes  
no matter how much it is diverted, blocked, polluted  
and thoroughly taken for granted**

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Mine Kaylan

# Performance Act

Annie Griffin is an extraordinarily charismatic performer and when she delivers her central solo narrative, the glint in her eye is so bright it seems to illuminate her whole face.<sup>1</sup>

**S**TEVE ROGERS' description of a powerful performer is very familiar as a common attempt by an otherwise experienced and articulate critic, to isolate a particularly engaging quality in the performance act: that of presence. The difficulty that Rogers experiences in articulating this quality in terms of a critical language of the kind available to him for 'reading' the other elements of the performance text is, of course, not surprising. There is no such critical vocabulary. Thus the main problematic in investigating presence as an element in the signification process of live performance is the difficulty of placing it within the categories of analysis already offered by contemporary critical theory. The performance act of actor or performer, however, has been addressed in theatre semiotics, psycho-analytic film theory and in the writings of Roland Barthes. My project will be to try to locate whether and how *presence* fits into the existing analytic frameworks. I will use the term *presence* here in the way it is often used in the theatre, or in performance art, which is to refer to a particular quality of attention that the actor or performer invites from her/his audi-

ence. This term is loaded with a personal and emotional charge: personal to the reader using it, and to the actor or performer it refers to. Moreover, it connotes a mystifying and metaphysical quality of being, an essence ascribed to the person of the individual *actor* or *performer*. Consequently, it makes an ambiguous and difficult object to fix for use as a yardstick in a critical enquiry. The other terms that are necessary to clarify are those of actor and performer. The former refers to one who acts in the theatre, the latter to one who performs in non-dramatic work- e.g. performance art. The work of each is different and distinct, but they share a common context in that both 'enact' in a performance text, as physical and psychic bodies which are live and present to their audience: live in the act of performance. The quality of presence is ascribed to artists of either discipline.

In terms of the practical methodology of the performance act, presence refers to the most important *skill* of the actor or performer; a skill which comes into play *during* the act of performance ie. it is not a technique, independent of an audience like juggling or fencing. Presence is attributed to a quality of engagement between spectator and the performance text, where the performance act is foregrounded as the primary site of signification. It can be seen as the fundamental project underlying the actor's training. (I do not refer to the per-

# THE PRESENCE OF THE PERFORMER

former, in this instance, since a formal methodology of this kind for the performer in performance art work does not exist, as yet, in the Western schools of training). Just as the dancer develops not only a physical attention in relation to the text; just as the painter learns not only a familiarity and an articulation of paints and tools, but also to direct his/her visual/perceptual attention in relation to the text: the actor learns vocal, physical, linguistic, etc. skills in order to articulate and direct the shifts of attention – vocal, physical, perceptual, mental, emotional, etc. - in accordance with the space/time dynamic of the performance text *and* in accordance with the attention of the audience. Presence is related to the articulation of the dynamic of *attention* between reader and text. Since signification in the live moment of performance is primarily directed by the actor or performer, presence is experienced as a quality of acting. Presence is the ability to focus the attention of the body and mind to each moment in the text, so that the attention is always in the *present* and it is always in *process*; presence is the skill of an actor or a performer to be mentally and physically 'present' in the moment of signification between the performance text and the audience: it is, therefore, *present-ness*.

In his comprehensive study, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, Keir Elam affords great attention to the work of the actor. Having rigorously

isolated every element of the actor's participation in what he calls 'theatrical communication', he concludes:

It is clear that the unifying of non-uniform messages of the kind discussed above- kinesic [physical], proxemic [spatial], linguistic, paralinguistic [vocal], etc.- is very much dependent on the actor in his [or her] role as multi-channelled transmitter-in-chief. Over and above the mastery of specific codes and subcodes attached to each system, the actor imposes *histrionic* subcodes regulating his [or her] performance as a whole and so his [or her] combining of messages into discourse. The actor, from this point of view, is the main agent of trans-codification on stage.<sup>2</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS; MY PARENTHESIS)

Elam is pointing to the fact that the actor is the most privileged, (if not crucial), site of signification, and that the clarity or 'the unifying' of his/her communication, therefore of theatrical communication, is dependent on the actor's ability or skill: the skill of bringing together the different semiotic levels of the text and his bodily communication in one time/space. This skill in the theatre practitioner's vocabulary is referred to as 'making present'. Elam also refers to another actor-specific element which he calls 'histrionic': the cultural, historical, stylistic determinants of the actor's per-

formance. If, as he also states, theatrical communication is 'semantically over-determined and relatively non-redundant'<sup>3</sup> [compared to social communication], then is the whole of the transmission of 'the multi-channelled transmitter-in-chief' (2) equal to the sum of its structural parts? If so, why is it not an identical experience to watch a group of life-like puppets perform the identical messages, codes and subcodes that he enumerates?

Barthes's essay 'Lesson In Writing' appears to be making just such a comparison. He makes observations about the Japanese Bunraku puppet performance in order to comment on Western theatre traditions, and in particular on the work of the Western actor. He criticizes the psychological interiority coded in the role of the latter which he says, signals *the concept hiding behind all animation of matter, that ... of 'the soul'*.<sup>4</sup> However, Barthes is not comparing the Western drama to a puppet show. He compares the formal and structural animate/inanimate correlation between the performative elements; the puppets, the puppeteer, the narrator/singer and musicians in Bunraku to the performance structure of Western drama.

What is expelled from the stage is hysteria, that is theatre itself, and what is put in its place is the action necessary for the production of the spectacle – work is substituted for interiority.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Barthes is actually pointing to a comparative aspect of the performance act which Elam's category of histrionics does not entirely encompass; one which relies on *the attention* of the actor or performer. The kind of attention on 'production of the spectacle' in Bunraku (above), which he admires, and rightly attributes to Brecht in Western theatre, has been experimented with in performance art works. An important, and perhaps characteristic, point he makes in this essay – one which belies the title of the work – is to highlight the structures of practice in the Bunraku and Brecht's theories: the collective participation in constructing the text which he uses as an analogy to those of the modern text. But just as his comment is about writing in general, so it is about the performance process and correlation between the

performance text and the performance act in general:

the reign of the quotation, the pinch of writing, the fragment of code, none of the promoters of the action being able to take responsibility in his own person for what he is never alone in writing. As in the modern text, the stressing of codes, references, discontinuous observations, anthological gestures, multiplies the written line, and this not by virtue of some metaphysical appeal but the play of a combinatory set which opens the entire space of the theatre: what is started by one is continued by another, unendingly.<sup>6</sup>

Barthes foregrounds the implicit participation of the performer in the correlation he makes between 'the entire space of the theatre', of the modern text and of writing itself. Thus, the performance act is positioned within the critical frameworks which he calls 'semiotic consciousnesses', the realm of signification and *signifiante*. Brecht's theories on acting were articulated around the process of meaning production (what he called 'aesthetic production') between audience and actor, and focused on the operations of identification as an ideological force. Thus, by highlighting the correspondence between Brecht's ideas on the practice of the actor, the performance act and the practice of reading/writing the modern text, he is actually foregrounding questions of identification: what part does identification play in reading/writing the modern text? in performance (which is of itself a modern text)? in Brechtian and or modern approaches to performance? These questions put critical attention on the site of meaning *between* audience and text, a site which, as Pistotnik points out, theatre semiotics does not address, since,

it presupposes that a sign is defined primarily, if not exclusively, by the performance context, and therefore does not seem to take into account the audience factor ... it treats them [performances] as isolated objects which possess meaning in themselves.<sup>7</sup>

The questions on the process of identification

between reader and text that are implied in Barthes's article, call for a psycho-analytic approach to a critical understanding of the performance text. However, Bertolt Brecht introduced the problematic of identification in reading the live performance text long before the development of contemporary (post-Lacan) psycho-analytic critique.

Although Brecht wrote and experimented with many elements of the performance text, his theories on alienation/distanciation technique are the key concept in his practice. His approach to acting is as a reader rather than as a practitioner, (exemplified by the fact that his methodology is useful to the theoretician, and/or director/writer, but not the actor). Brecht focused on reader/text relation in the live theatre as the site of meaning production, indicating that the relation of signification between text and reader was one of identification. Furthermore, he located the performance act as the primary site for the problematics of identification. Brecht's practice and theory has to be seen within the context in which he was working. He was reacting to and as such working against the theatre forms that he inherited. These forms, that are now called naturalistic, represented the bourgeois theatre: they were about and for such an audience. The drama texts, as well as the theatrical conditions (spatial relation of stage/auditorium, lighting etc.) all perpetuated a passive relation of the spectator to the text. Brecht's ingenuity lies in the fact that he foregrounded the process of identification as an *ideological* area of enquiry: that he indicated a correlation between the process of identification and the active/passive position of the reader; that he located the performance act as a site of identification. Brecht advocates an acting technique which resists psychological and emotional identification as privileged in the naturalistic drama, not one which denies or refuses identification altogether. If he believed that theatre without identification was possible, then why did he go to the trouble of presenting the audience with characters of different social classes, non-heroic characters etc. Why not a stage full of gentry, or puppets? His theories, in actuality, were

more about shifting the reference point and the level (the intensity) of identification from a psychologically foregrounded one (as in the naturalistic work) to other, social, economic, cultural ones. This is exemplified by the fact that although his characters contradict themselves they are not inconsistent (in that they behave like social, psychological and emotional human beings); they are never motivated by their psychological conditions, but they arouse an emotional as well as an intellectual/critical response. The most important contribution that Brecht made to a critical understanding of acting was to articulate that the relation of identification between reader/subject and actor/subject depended on the shift of attention of the actor. His explanation of the alienation technique as a third person re-enactment (one which indicates the idea, but is worthless as an instruction for an actor), is about *the focus of attention* of the actor during the performance act. Brecht's theory charts a trajectory of connections between the politics or ideology of a piece of work and the *attention* of the performer or actor.

I have argued that the quality of presence is practically locatable at the level of the actor's or performer's *attention*. The word 'attention' implies a direction (a vector) and object, that is, attention to something, and a volume or intensity (force). This introduces a variability factor: a vector quantity, and force quantity. Therefore, what is isolated here as attention is something that the performer or actor can control by changing the direction, the volume and object of his/her attention. This concept is, of course, not unfamiliar to artists who are practically involved in the business of the performance act. Brecht's theories on acting indicate a direct correlation between the *attention* of the actor/performer and the process of identification (between reader and performance text). Since the operation of identification is implicit in the signification process of the performance text, and therefore, the politics (the ideological tendency), the presence factor of the performance act must also bear a direct relation to the politics of the signification process. In terms of the practice of performing or acting, as I have suggested, this

trajectory of correlations is gauged or controlled by the various executions of *attention*. Is it possible however to trace such a trajectory, critically i.e. in terms of an analysis of reading the performance text?

The concept of presence has not been addressed by any of the critical or analytical approaches for performance that have been covered so far. It is a level that seems to work over and above the structures of theatre performance language that are usually articulated. It is, however, possible to locate presence at the level of the signifier, at a level of signification that Barthes describes as *signifiance*. Like the term *presence*, *signifiance* is a slippery notion, not least because it is about the very slippage of meaning/s in a text:

when the text is read (or written) as a moving play of signifiers, without any possible reference to one or some signifieds, it becomes necessary to distinguish signification, which belongs to the plane of product, of the enounced, of communication, and the work of the signifier, which belongs to the plane of the production, of the enunciation, of symbolization – this work being called *signifiance*.<sup>8</sup> (AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

As readers/audience, we experience presence as an extra dimension of signification, situated at the very surface of the performance text, at the very interstices of performer/audience contact. It is dependent on the actual presence of the actor/performer. For example, an animated puppet does not generate a similar experience. It also depends on the particular actor/performer in the sense that not all actors/performers appear to 'have presence'. Presence is an element in the language of live performance which participates in the production of meanings; it affects the reading process. It is a disruptive quality of the language, it does not work towards the resolution of meanings, but towards the subversion of meanings. The disruption is a pleasurable one; it is the very sense that generates descriptions like 'powerful', 'electric', 'magnetic' and 'magical' about the performance or about a particular actor or performer. The disruption is sensed as moments of explosion of

meanings, a multiplicity, and excess of meanings: a centrifugal rather than a centripetal action of textuality, of readings.

*Signifiance* is a *process* in the course of which the 'subject' of the text, escaping the logic of the *ego-cogito* and engaging in other logics (of the signifier, of contradiction), struggles with meaning and is deconstructed ("lost").<sup>9</sup> (AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

In the live context, what we ascribe to the performer or actor is actually our moment of *presence* as a collective body, of optimum engagement with the text as an audience. As such it is simultaneously an *absence* of our consciousness as discrete bodies, as individual members of the audience: as Barthes says, the *ego-cogito* is lost. This experience of the dynamic force or action of signification between text and reader is the erotics of performance, identical to Barthes's articulation of 'jouissance'. Presence in the live performance is the site of desire. It is not surprising, therefore, that presence is often ascribed to the reference point for the engagement of our desire in the performance text, namely the actor/performer; and that it is described, as Rogers does (above) in a language connoting desire.

Contrary to signification, *signifiance* cannot be reduced, therefore, to communication, representation, expression... Hence its identification with the pleasure of *jouissance*: the text becomes erotic through *signifiance*.<sup>10</sup> (AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

Barthes writes about *jouissance* particularly in terms of the open text. Thus, the signification at the level of presence of the performer is implicated in the characteristic openness of the performance text. Such a trajectory of correlations between the discourse of desire and that of presence places the latter within an existing field of theoretic discourse; indicating a critical method of analysis for presence as a signifying element in the text and pointing to methodologies for innovative or radical practice in performance which acknowledge presence as a critical factor.

In much of his writing, Barthes has pioneered a sophisticated level of attention on the surface of

the text, generating new vocabularies, and using them to address a diverse mixture of cultural forms. I will focus on two essays by Barthes, 'The Third Meaning' and 'The Grain of the Voice' in which he explores some of the subtler areas of textuality, which he says are *theoretically locatable but not describable*.<sup>11</sup> As such, these works throw some theoretical light on the problematics of presence. The key theoretic concept in both is that of *signifiance*. In the 'The Third Meaning', Barthes contemplates the images from S.M. Eisenstein films and isolates two levels of textual signification at work in the film text, (or any text): the obvious meaning and the obtuse meaning. He proposes that the former area can be analyzed within the given vocabulary of signification that is, within the parameters of the symbolic, the denotative and connotative structures of analysis. The obtuse meaning, however, operates in the realm of the signifier 'without a signified', and as such it is outside the language system: *outside (articulated) language while nevertheless within interlocution*;<sup>12</sup> an excess of meaning in the signification and communication process. He describes it as an accent which not only subverts the obvious meaning but also disrupts the meta-language of criticism. This site of the other, the third meaning, *carries a certain emotion ... an emotional value* which for Barthes is the site of the erotics of its *signifiance*.<sup>13</sup>

In 'The Grain of The Voice', Barthes undertakes a theoretical investigation of what he states as, *the impossible account of an individual thrill, something that I constantly experience in listening to singing*.<sup>14</sup> He locates this quality as a signifier at the level of *signifiance* in the vocal performance: the signifier, he calls the grain of the voice. Barthes's account of the *grain* as a differential between qualities of vocal performance, as a differential which is independent of the technical competence or accuracy of the singing, is directly analogous to that of presence in the performance text. He uses Julia Kristeva's terms, *genotext* and *phenotext* to distinguish between the song of the voice with grain and that without: the *geno-song* and *pheno-song*, respectively. Kristeva explains some features of the genotext:

the genotext is not linguistic (in the sense understood by structural or generative linguistics). It is rather, a *process*, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, 'quanta', rather than 'marks') and non-signifying.<sup>15</sup> (AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

When applied to the live performance such distinctions can be articulated as the geno-act and the pheno-act: The former – to use Barthes's analogy – is where the *signifiance explodes, bringing not the soul, but jouissance*.<sup>16</sup> Barthes describes the pheno-song in terms that are directly relevant to most Western methods of acting and performing: that it denotes symbolically, and it is about expression, communication and representation of feeling. The geno-song instead works in none of these ways, but it designates an erotic relation with the reader. In this essay, he makes two very important points which are inter-related. First that his insistence in articulating a theoretical value for the grain of the voice, for the level of signification he calls *signifiance*, is an insistence to listen to the text with his body – the kind of attention, perhaps that Sontag referred to as 'an erotics of art'. Barthes's essay is an attempt to de-mystify this level by acknowledging its signifiatory operation, and by distinguishing it from the 'psychological' engagement:

I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man singing or playing and that relation is erotic – in no way 'subjective' (it is not the psychological subject in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce – to express – that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, by using Kristeva's paradigms for the genotext and phenotext, Barthes is placing his observations within an ideological framework. He is suggesting that 'the grain of the voice' as a signifier, as *signifiance*, is not an arbitrary level of signification – since it cannot be independent of language – but that its theoretical value relation to the signification of the phenotext, pheno-song, is at the same time an ideological relation. Kristeva

makes such a distinction when she compares the socio-political implication of the 'traditional' literary texts to the 'modern' ones, (what Barthes might call the closed text and open text, respectively). She describes the writing in the former category as working within the Symbolic, the language of The Law of The Father, the patriarchal ideology of society, and as such as presenting no challenge, no subversion at this level. Whereas the literary texts of the avant-garde, she argues, *manage to cover the infinity of the process [of signification], that is, reach the semiotic chora*<sup>18</sup>; a subversive action she designates to the genotext. Barthes's line of argument in 'The Grain of The Voice' therefore, by analogy, opens the way for a theoretic investigation into the ideological process implicated in the *significance* of the live performance text, a *significance* that can be attributed to presence of the performance act.

Recent film analysis has foregrounded the performance of the actor in the film text, articulating its signification in terms of psycho-analytic theories on the process of identification. Graham F. Thompson's article, 'Approaches to Performance', investigates the way in which psycho-semiotic articulations about performance in the text/reader relation apply to the performance act in film.<sup>19</sup> Apart from the obvious distinction between 'live' and non-live representational forms, there are some significant drawbacks in appropriating his analysis for the live performance text. Thompson deals primarily with the actor who plays a character. Since his analysis does not account for films in which the actor does not denote a character, it cannot account for their equivalent in live performance, for example, most performance art work. Although he indicates the relation of Barthes's theorization of the pheno-song and geno-song to performance act in film, he does not use them to differentiate between two levels of signification. He suggests instead that the performance act per se can be designated to the level of the geno-song (geno-text). The reason for this could be that the genotext, therefore *significance* in the film text, is entirely dependent on the structures of the film language, on image and editing – something

which Barthes, himself, suggests in 'The Third Meaning'. Thompson's essay is useful, however, in outlining the correlation between the performance act, the process of identification and the construction of identity in psycho-semiotic theory. Orthodox psycho-analytic definitions of identification do not suggest any relation to construction of identity; they have been articulated specifically in terms of the performance of the subject in language:

the construction of this [in language] identity of the subject of the enounced and the subject of enunciation, between the symbolic and imaginary.<sup>19</sup> *Thus there is a permanent performance of the subject in language itself – permanent and interminable – to complete the incomplete production of identity and cohesion, to provide fictions and images, to make sense.*<sup>20</sup>

Such theorization makes not only an overt connection between the process of identification and the construction of identity, but also infers that the process of identification is a necessary and unavoidable part of constructing meanings: "to make sense".<sup>21</sup>

In film analysis, the apparatus of identification has been investigated as a structural organization of 'a menu of looks' in the film text. In her paper, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey argues the ideological force of this process and its implication for the development of radical cinema. Within the particular conditions of reading in the dark auditorium of a cinema, the film text, she says, sets up for the viewer *two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structure of looking*.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, the process of identification is involved – as the necessary desire of the reader/subject to constitute itself in the text/subject; on the other, a process based on Freud's theory on scopophilia: *taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze*,<sup>23</sup> which relies on the separation between the viewer and its object i.e. a process of objectification. She argues that various narrative and technical (eye of the camera, editing etc..) structures of film organize 'a menu of looks' for the male gaze where the presence of the female sub-

ject, i.e. the female actor, functions as *erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium*.<sup>24</sup> Although much of Mulvey's argument is specific to film – as she herself acknowledges – it nevertheless contains some useful points that comment equally on live performance and, not surprisingly, on the feminist challenge to conventional theatre forms. In her book, *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case explains this psycho-semiotic theory in terms of theatre:

the cultural conditioning of the male gaze is essential for most of the performing arts ... [e.g.] When the ingenue makes her entrance ... The blocking of her entrance, her costume and the lighting are designed to reveal that she is the object of his [of the male protagonist and therefore of the audience] desire ... This example illustrates one major cultural assumption – that the male gaze is the subject of the dramatic action.<sup>25</sup>

Mulvey uses psycho-analytic discourses on the relations of identification and desire to analyze the position of the reader as active and/or passive participant in the text. The process of identification and many of the conditions conducive to scopophilia in live performance are identical to those in film. In the performance text, and particularly in dramatic or theatrical performance, the structure of looks are controlled, to a great extent, by the narrative and directorial (writer's and/or director's) decisions which include, as Case points out, decisions about actions, lighting, use of space/time, the visual setting etc.. In cases where there is no written score or director, as in some performance art work, the performer is obviously much more in control of the performance text as a whole. Since there is a correlation in live performance between the process of identification, the performance act, and the attention of the actor/performer, it follows that the 'structure of looks' in the live performance text – perhaps unlike film – are also controlled by the actor/performer via the performance act. Thus, a female actor, for example, could participate towards the particular codes which construct 'woman' as sign *for strong visual*

*and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness*.<sup>26</sup> In much feminist theatre practice there has been a conscious resistance and challenge to the processes that object-ify women. These strategies have tackled most aspects of the performance language and of the conditions of production of the performance text, including the *obvious* controlling forces on the performance act: namely the structures of visual pleasure underscored in the writing and directing of work by and for the male gaze. Certain developments in so-called radical and/or feminist performance art, (more than in feminist theatre/drama) for example, the work of Rose English, Carolee Schneemann, Rose Garrard – have implemented for live performance, the kind of formal and structural experiments which Mulvey proposes for film:

The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions...is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest' and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms.<sup>27</sup>

The active participation of the performer/actor in the dominant structures of signification that is, in the performance act of the performance text, distinguish it from the film text. The structural equivalent to the menu of looks – by inference the operations of ideology in the text – can be traced by analyzing the ideological structures of pleasure and of desire, as they relate to the position of the subject/reader and the *attention* of the performer/actor.

Mulvey's reference to pleasure and desire is articulated as one which, through an active/passive dialectic set up in the unconscious, positions the reader as passive, and interpellates him (therefore the female reader) into the text. It is therefore a site of ideological control, a strategy of coercion. Barthes uses the term *jouissance* and the *erotic* as a site of subversion of, and liberation from, ideological control: *jouissance* operates at the level of the

obtuse meaning, of *signifiance* and marks an active engagement of the reader, where the text elicits an active participation in constructing meanings. Thus, in some way, there is an opposition between Mulvey's articulation on pleasure and desire, and Barthes's on *jouissance* and erotics. Such an opposition has, of course, been constructed by Barthes himself – as elaborated in *The Pleasure of the Text* – to distinguish between the reader/text relation in different texts. As I have argued, the presence of the actor or performer can be ascribed to the level of *signifiance*. This trajectory of connections and oppositions, foregrounds the question: is there an alternative or oppositional reference in the performance act, to that of presence of the actor or performer? Is it simply an absence of the floating signifier? Is it the pheno-act (phoney-act!), but no geno-act? Mulvey's use of the structure of pleasure as activated by unconscious desire, is important because it designates to these terms, a positive action of coercion. The absence of *signifiance* in the performance act – thus in the performance text as a whole – is implicated in setting up structures of pleasure that interpellate the reader/subject. (Barthes and Kristeva put forward similar arguments about the *plaisir/jouissance* opposition of reading, phentext/genotext order of language and writing, respectively.) For the purposes of my argument, I will give a name to this pleasure, as it operates in the performance text; a word that is directly or indirectly (by inference) used to describe a quality of engagement with the performance act, a quality of seduction: *seductive*. (My use of this term contradicts Barthes's use of it as an element of the erotic relation). To summarize therefore: that which is identified as presence signifies at the level of *signifiance* that which is disruptive to the language, to the signification of the text, therefore opens the performance text; it *elicits jouissance*, creating a relation of erotics where the reader is actively participating in the production of the text. The absence of the signifier of presence – corresponding to the absence of the grain in the voice – is an absence of the genotext; it closes the text of the performance; it *solicits* desire, creating a relation of seduction; a relation that is *pornographic*

where the reader is passive and interpellated into the text. The term seductive is ascribed to the person of the actor or performer, just as in the case of presence. Both qualities are mistakenly ascribed to the individual rather than to the actual experience of reading, that is, to the signifying process of the performance act. There is, however a subtle distinction between the two, even in their common use. The quality of seduction usually foregrounds the individual person (that is where seductiveness is perceived as an attribute of the person), and not the actor; whereas the quality of presence indicates the skill of the actor, and foregrounds the actor at work. The subtle difference of attention each quality invites from the audience marks the very significant differential between the two, located in the actual practice of the performer/actor: a difference in terms of the direction, intensity and object of attention. Given the ideological implications of this distinction in the signifying process of the live performance text, the increasingly common confusion between the two qualities of the performance act – all too often by cultural commentators or theatre or performance critics – is not an innocent oversight, but one which carries an ideological value.

In contemporary critical theory, the correlation between ideology and textual action have been articulated, mostly, in terms of the structures and forms of narrative and of language. Although in contemporary theory much of this analysis has used a vocabulary of performance, and particularly of the performance act, there has been little attention paid to the ideological force of the language of the performance act: the actor or performer's live work on stage is itself a language with its own structures of signification. The absence of a critical vocabulary for this language betrays the limitations of existing critical discourse – limitations which implicate it *still*, in the critical frameworks of its heritage. In an age, or a cultural text, of so-called individual enterprise the term 'performance' has become common currency(!), a common part of the vocabulary for all kinds of practice. Simultaneously, in the age, or the ideology, of so-called communication, the live interaction is not

only rendered redundant, but also conflated with non-live communication. Much of contemporary critical discourse is inadvertently collaborating in this process, both by ignoring the process of live signification as an object of study, and by appropriating it as a metaphor for the very process of signification itself. Consequently, the 'live' aspect of communication, as foregrounded in performance, does not undergo the rigorous critical and analytical attention afforded to other areas. If all writing/reading is performance, it does not follow that all of live performance can be conflated to reading/writing. Such conflation may liberate the theoretic paradigms for non-live representational forms, but it still manages to reproduce the reductionist habits that underly the critical reading of live performance, historically. This is not to argue against the contemporary theory that, obviously, has proved indispensable to the subject of enquiry in this paper, but to argue for the development of such critical discourse so that it addresses the specific signifying processes of live performance. So that those who are well-versed in such theories also have learnt not only, as Sontag says, *to see more, to hear more, to feel more*, but also to articulate it in critical terms and so that it is not easy to confuse *plaisir* with *jouissance*, *presence* with the *seductive, erotics* and the *pornographic* in the live performance text. The perceptual and critical distinction between the two actions of signification are particularly pertinent within the context of what is referred to as postmodern culture. Jean Baudrillard uses the terms *seduction* and *pornography* to describe what he calls 'the ecstasy of communication' in postmodern culture:

We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene ... But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, ...in their forced signification, in their performativity ...<sup>28</sup>

He is describing an all-pervasive force of advertising, a coercive *force* of communication, which he locates in the mass production of an ideology which sells information and yet more communication: *pornographic* because it *sells* itself through coercive *seduction*. Baudrillard's essay infers a distinction between pornography and erotics. The same distinction between *jouissance* and seduction that can be isolated in the language of the performance act; a distinction, as I have argued, which marks the political, the ideological force of a performance text. Thus, confusion between the two is dangerous. If critical commentators do not, as Barthes says, 'listen with their bodies', then they cannot hear *significance* at work (or not) in the live text; they cannot address themselves critically to the most privileged level of signification, and are therefore unable to make fully political, ideological analyses of the live performance text. As dominant voices in the culture, they have to bear the responsibility for perpetuating, or even perhaps for generating the confusion.

#### TOWARDS A RADICAL PRACTICE

Brecht's theories on theatre have become paradigmatic to the discourse on radical theatre/performance practice. It is unfortunate, therefore, that there is a common (and reductionist) view, that results in an over-simplification of his theory of distanciation (or alienation) to one of anti-identification. Brecht's distanciation technique – a concept borrowed from the Formalist ideas about literary language – was a strategy that foregrounded the artifice of the performance, the theatricality of theatre. Such strategies have been developed since Brecht, particularly in performance art works. Although the styles of performing are as varied as the number of works, there are, however, some features that distinguish it from acting in drama/theatre. The performer in the performance art text does not usually represent a character in the narrative. If there is characterization, then it is often as pastiche or parody. Performing, in some senses, is the *refusal to act*, which simultaneously is rejection of mimesis, of the dramatic narrative, of

the illusion of reality perpetuated by the transparency of its theatre language, endorsed by the naturalistic and re-presentational forms of dramatic theatre. Yvonne Rainer's basic principles of performing embrace a broad spectrum of rejections, some of which she expresses in the following diatribe:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make believe no to the glamour and transcendancy 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<sup>29</sup>

The development of performance act methods/styles in performance art has been influenced as much by such theoretic motives, as by the fact that the *language* of live performance has not been the prioritized aesthetic language for most performing artists, since most have crossed over from another language which they often privilege in the live work they create. Consequently, as artists who have not been conditioned by the structures of the *language* of acting, they are able to explore and disrupt the conventional languages of acting. Simultaneously, certain amateur traits of performance which are due to the lack of a competent degree of fluency, have either been overlooked, or they have become incorporated into certain less engaging aspects of the performance act in performance art. Due to the lack of conscious critical attention afforded to the performer's work [act], there are not structural, theoretical or evaluative tools of analysis. In performance art, the performer 'on stage' is very often the artist – that is, also equivalent to writer/director/designer etc.. Even if this is not the case, the performance art text, by foregrounding its process of signification, foregrounds the performance act. The lack of attention to the skills and craft of the performer's language by critics and practitioners, indicates that the performance act is not considered as a discrete language which is also the dominant one in the live performance text.

The dearth of critical and practical development in specific relation to the performance act is founded on the misinterpretation of Brecht's ideas: that the processes of so-called radical or innovative performance is one that *rejects* the engagement of the reader through identification. Although contemporary theorization around the process of identification acknowledges it as a fundamental engagement of reader and text, and as a necessary relation in the construction of meaning, the inherited confusion in terms of *acting* and *performing* still persists. At a period of aesthetic production which is strongly implicated in critical practice, such theoretic misconceptions quickly translate into misappropriations in practice. The process of identification cannot be reduced to psychological or emotional identification. A methodological or a theoretical analysis of the performance act must acknowledge the process of identification; an acknowledgement which is particularly pertinent to innovative or radical performance art work. The textual strategies of performance art texts can be characterized as postmodernist texts which articulate a plurality of subject positions that in turn position the reader as subject-in-process, resisting the operation of identification with a fixed subject of the narrative or meta-narrative. The radical performance text *is identified with diversity and difference, a politics of contestation*,<sup>30</sup> therefore described in terms of what Dick Hebdige calls *critical postmodernist*. The radical strategy of such texts is to present contradictory positions of identification, to chart the fragmented identity of the subordinated subjects of culture: the cultural hybrids who are absented from the narratives that construct a fixed subject position of culturally dominant voices, that constitute a unified identity in a unified world which simultaneously interpellates and alienates the subject/reader through the inevitable process of identification. The radical performance text does not present a plurality of worlds, an equivalence of positions, because it is *tendentious* and selective. It foregrounds heterogeneity and difference within a tendentious field which makes present the subjects who have been absented, by creating for them the multiple and contradictory positions

of *identification* – the positions they inhabit in the multiple worlds of their lives. This is what Stuart Hall calls the diaspora experience, which,

is defined...by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and re-producing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>31</sup> (AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

The task of the critical postmodern text then, is to de-centre the dominant subject and to displace and fragment the reference points of identification in the text. If the process of identification can be correlated, as Stephen Heath argues, to the construction of identity, then the radical performance text has to acknowledge and provide references for identification. These references are located in the performance act of the performer and as such represent a trajectory, a process of shifting reference points, much in the way that Fredric Jameson describes as an aesthetic of *cognitive mapping*.<sup>32</sup> Without identification there is no signification, therefore there is no textual action. The live performance, more than any other text, literally relies on its readers to participate in its production – particularly in the case of performance which is an open text twice over. The subversive action of a text that *challenges* the single and fixed point of psychological identification lies in its power to *engage* the reader through the processes of identification in the first place. Only then can it shift the subject/reader across the multiple and contradictory positions of identification constituting for the reader, a *production* of identity. Stuart Hall describes the operation of such strategies in modern Caribbean cinema as:

... allowing us to recognize the different parts and histories of our-selves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities we call 'cultural identity'.<sup>33</sup>

Since the reference for the process of identification in the live performance is the performance act, and since it is primarily determined by the *attention* of the actor/performer, then radical per-

formance practice, described in the terms above, has to develop a practical and critical methodology that addresses the attention of the performer.

#### THE PROJECT: THE STRUCTURE OF ATTENTION

I doubt whether, were he singing today, his art would be recognized or even simply *perceived*... It is perhaps, precisely and less paradoxically than it seems, because his art was *already* marginal, mandarin, that it was able to bear traces of *signifiante*, to escape the tyranny of meaning.<sup>34</sup>

(AUTHOR'S EMPHASIS)

The actual site of signification that opens the live performance text, that subverts the resolve towards fixed identity and fixed meaning and most importantly that disrupts the ideological force that implicates all cultural practice, operates at the level of *signifiante* of the performance language. The primary project of a critical language for performance is to see more, hear more, feel more the play of signifiers at the surface of the performance text: at the level of presence. The critical reader must locate the contradictory relation of the obvious and the obtuse meanings in the live work, and acknowledge its implication in the politics of a piece of work. Such a development constitutes a simultaneous practice of thinking with the body and listening with the intellect – the quality of *attention* practised by the actor or performer who is identified as *having presence*: being in process of the present. The attention of critical practice must be on the *structure of attention* of the actor or performer, as well as on the structures of the other languages that make up the live performance text. In the live performance it is the *structure of attention* that determines the *traces of signifiante*; it is equivalent to the quality that Barthes believed would not today be perceived in Panzera's vocal performance. The most urgent project for the critical language for performance is to develop a vocabulary for reading the *structure of attention* since, as Barthes says:

This luxury does not yet belong to today's politics but nevertheless already to tomorrow's.<sup>35</sup> ●

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*Angela Seward*

# How The Woman Danced

Almost not there.

This was how the woman danced.

She is tall with long limbs, she is not thin like a ballerina.

No she has weight like a woman who is middle-aged and has borne children. She is pale among the stage light, blonde hair, in a straight fall across her face. A translucent figure from this distance. She is dressed in white.

The slow walk to watch forever. Like the pathways of planets.

She moves in an orbit. The high step lifting her foot through gravity, the thigh almost parallel to the face of the earth.

And the long way down.

Like a doe she gentles her way forward, like a tree slender and bared in winter, she is present.

There is a moon, a fellow traveller, a man, hardly noticed.

Not his fault that her movement rivets eyes to her, not his fault our breath follows her rhythm.

She is a beautiful thing, perfect, a beautiful thing, not dead, not alive. Perfect. Seducing the eyes. Elegant. Almost not there but for the idea of it. There but only in its distance. A beautiful thing seducing the eyes and blood to forget their own presence. If only we could be her, if only we could be pure idea.

She moves slowsteadygrace, a white trace across a landscape of ice. We measure her movement but we do not know it, it does not resonate. Since we must move close to distinguish white from white, distance keeps her secret. Distance keeps us entranced.

We pay no attention to where we are, we are nowhere other than there in her walking dance. A dance like a light at the end of a tunnel. In that place we are all of us the surface dwellers, the reeds that grow on the ice.

We live in a land where there are no storms, no torture, no mountains, no love, no undergrowth, no rotting fruit, no physical features of any kind. Only the reeds shifted by occasional winds and the dark shapes of bats (or birds) that pass over heading for a shore. And the flat, endless ice.

We are almost not there. White on white. Landscape of mind.

# Society of Dance History Scholars

## AMERICAN DANCE ABROAD

*INFLUENCE OF THE UNITED STATES EXPERIENCE*

14 - 16 FEBRUARY 1992

PROGRAM      ERIK ASHENGREEN

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1992 marks the 500-year celebration of Columbus' discovery of the New World. The Society of Dance History Scholars will take this opportunity to examine the impact of one part of that New World – the United States – on the cultural life of other countries. The Conference will focus on the influence of a multi-cultural United States experience on the world of dance. Broad topics to be addressed will include the exportation and importation of culture, dance as political vehicle (for example, State Department and United States Information Agency tours), the African-American influence abroad, impact of the world-class touring circuit, popular culture and tourism.

The Conference will be hosted by the Dance Department of the University of California–Riverside and held at the newly renovated Mission Inn, a National Historic Landmark building.

## HISTORY MAKING DANCE MAKING HISTORY DANCE

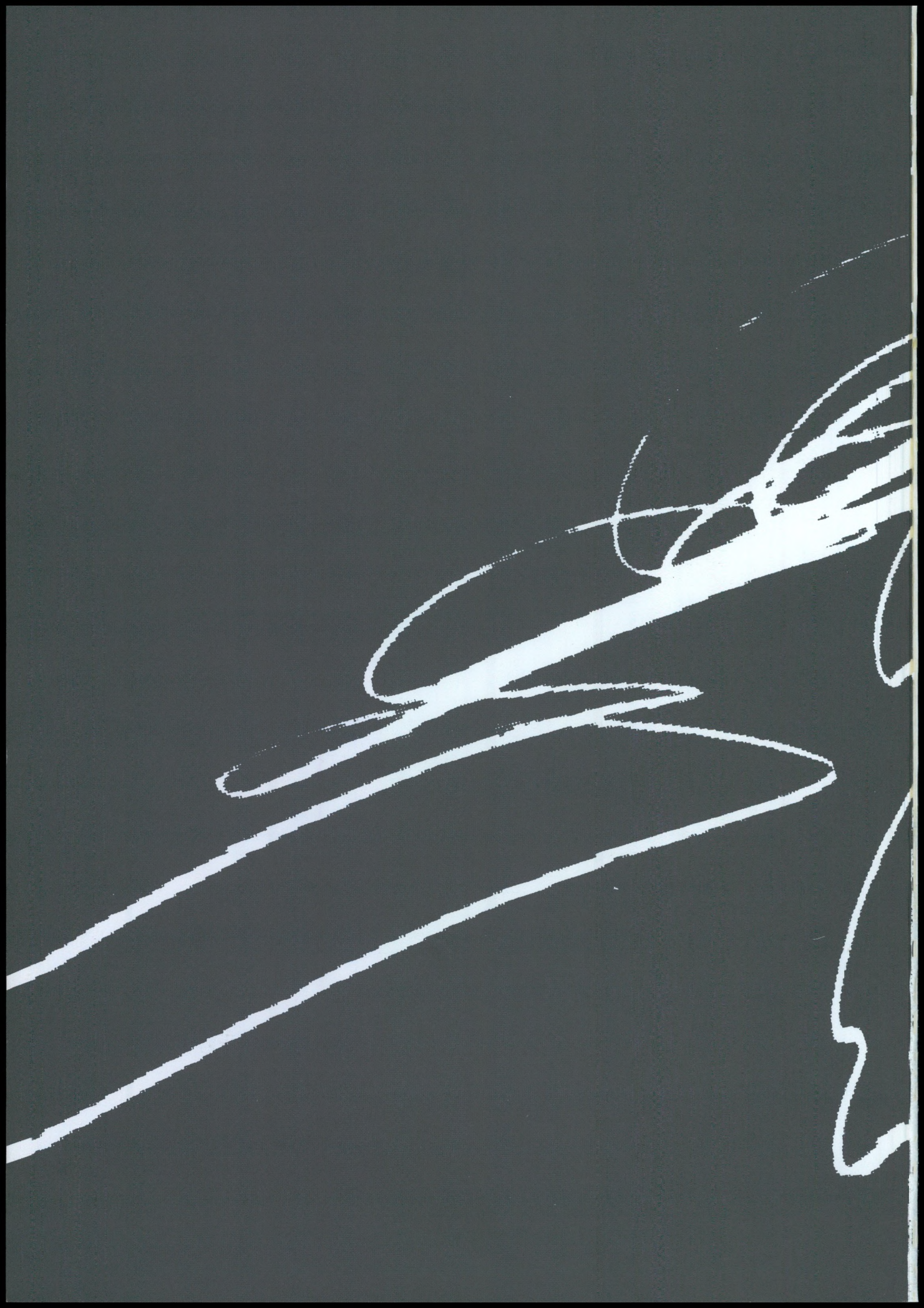
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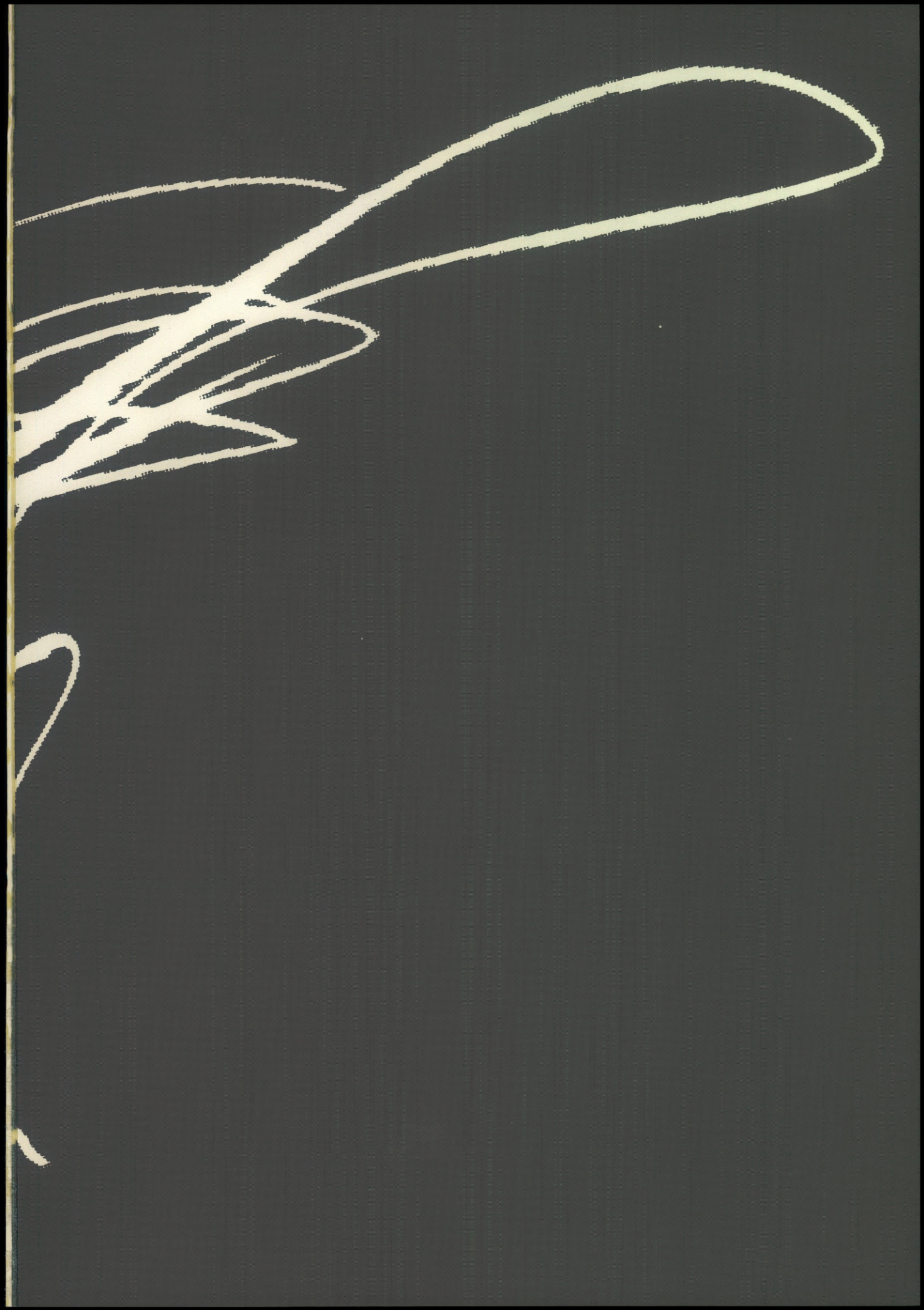
Immediately following the SDHS conference, the University of California Humanities Research Institute and the University of California Multicampus Dance History Research Group will sponsor a two-day conference. Also held at the Mission Inn, this conference, which is free and open to the public, will involve an interdisciplinary and international group of invited scholars working in dance, musicology, art history, history of the body, and the history of sexuality. This select group will join together for two days to discuss the unique contribution that dance history can make to the current debate: What is history? How is it written?

Moderated panels on chosen topics will be presented and topics will be discussed within the context of an open forum. Position papers written by conference participants will be available and sent to those who register before 15 January 1992.

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