CINEMA/MOVEMENT/SCREEN: MEDIA IN CHOREOGRAPHY AND

PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Ryan Michael Platt

January 2011

CINEMA/MOVEMENT/SCREEN: MEDIA IN CHOREOGRAPHY AND
PERFORMANCE

Ryan Michael Platt, Ph. D. (D.M.A.) (J.S.D)

Cornell University 2011

This dissertation examines the role of media and movement in contemporary
choreography and film. In contrast to the prevailing critical emphasis on the physical
apparatus of new media and technology in performance, it identifies a formal
connection between cinema and choreography in a common constitutive element,
movement. Like frames in film, the continuous passage of this movement provides a
structural alternative to dramatic unity and redirects its audience towards events and
possibilities from beyond the boundaries of of the theatrical and cinematic scene—
and the visual field of the seen. These peripheral events manifest themselves as a
"screen" that diffuses or obfuscates the site— and sight— of performance.

Rather than a surface for the projection of images, this screen is the product of
continuous motion. This continuous motion consists of two modes, autoimmunity and
the ambulatory. The dissertation first considers autoimmunity in Yvonne Rainer's
early choreography, which implements a structure based on incessant stopping. This
structural intermittence establishes an affinity with film and produces an actual screen,
which is embodied on stage by mattresses. In search of relief from this structure of
relentless interruption, Rainer's subsequent dance, *Trio A*, develops another
choreographic structure, ambulatory motion. In addition to suspending formal unity,
ambulatory motion's pedestrian pace diffuses distinct qualities. Applied to a

subsequent study of Chantal Akerman's feminist film *je tu il elle*, this diffusion becomes a formal category, opacity. By considering *je tu il elle* with regard to Akerman's recent documentaries on immigrants and autobiographical video installations, it is possible to link feminist performance to translation, which itself instantiates continuous motion. William Forsythe's choreography also uses translation, albeit in a way that returns to Rainer's engagement with autoimmunity as an aesthetic process. Unlike Rainer, Forsythe's translations emphasize autoimmunity's biopolitical aspects, which anticipate a life form that does not adhere to biological or technological definitions and whose collectivity relates to a notion of media that separates what it connects— namely, the screen.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ryan Platt is a critic and performance theorist. He holds a BA in Theatre & Dance and French Studies from Amherst College and pursued graduate work at Cornell University, where he studied 20th-century and contemporary theatre and dance in the context of French and German literature and theory. He has also studied at the Université de Paris VI and Humboldt-Universität in Berlin during a DAAD Research Fellowship. Ryan's writing has appeared in *PAJ* and *Theatre Journal*. His current research examines intersections between media, gender, and language in performance. His interest in language and translation has laid the ground for an upcoming project, which will study "sonic performance" in sound art, language-based plays, and experimental musical theatre.

To Stacy, my beacon of belief and dedication

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION
THE PERFORMANCE OF THE SCREEN

Innovation in contemporary theatre and dance has become synonymous with the presence of new technology. However, repulsion and anxiety also inform this fascination with technology, especially cinema. Theater throughout the twentieth century has reviled and revered cinema, whose mechanical means of reproduction threatens the specificity of live performance, but also offers a glimpse of a previously unimaginable horizon: life beyond the immediate boundaries of the stage. This conflicted approach to cinema relates to an underlying conceptual premise in theatre, which assumes technology to be inherently instrumental— in practical terms, an actual object to be used in an existing artistic framework. Theatre inherited this antagonistic attitude from the French avant-garde via Artaud, whose influence still dominates contemporary performance. In order to critically confront the unexamined legacies of avant-garde aesthetics, *Cinema/Movement/Screen: Media in Choreography and Performance* identifies an aesthetic paradigm that deposes this instrumental notion of technology, which I have named the performance of the screen. Rather than considering performances replete with digital devices, I investigate artists who integrate cinematic form into their compositional process: choreographers Yvonne Rainer and William Forsythe and filmmaker Chantal Akerman. By critically juxtaposing these artists' diverse work, it is possible to identify an emergent artistic paradigm that establishes a mutually informative relationship between theatre and film.

The fundamental element in this emergent aesthetic paradigm is the screen. However, in contrast to its conventional role in cinema, the screen that I discuss in these artists' choreography, films, and installations is more than an object that provides a surface for the projection of images. On the contrary, it imposes a

separation that interferes with the visual field and obstructs the image of the performer. In addition to appearing as a literal object, this screen also relates to a formal process that provides an alternative to dramatic structure. Whereas dramatic form relies on unity to delimit its possibilities, screen performance predicates its structure on movement— continual movement. Instead of staying within the frame, this movement corresponds to the incessantly even passage of the frame itself in film. As a structural predicate, cinematic motion establishes a formal affinity between film and performance, especially movement-based performance and dance. This formal affinity alters both theatre and film. Rather than emphasizing immediate events taking place on stage, this movement distracts the audience and turns their attention to the passing presence of singular elements excluded from the spatial and narrative particularity of dramatic structure.

The perpetual passage of cinematic movement emerges as a dual process in choreography: ambulatory motion and autoimmunity. In both Rainer and Forsythe's choreography, the ambulatory and autoimmunity instantiate a continuous sequence that arrests and replaces formal unity as a structural predicate. However, these two modes of movement proceed in different ways. The ambulatory designates a special sequential structure, whose movement incessantly delays the division of artistic elements into particular units. Without this division, there is no need for formal unity, which typically dictates the pace of dramatic action. Ambulatory movement thus initiates a state of suspension, in which ceaselessly passing elements seem to recede, as if fading away behind an opaque screen. As a result of this separation, the ambulatory generates a quizzically quiet artistic style, in which something always eludes identification and comprehension.

In contrast to the self-effacing reserve of ambulatory expression, the artistic experience of autoimmunity is acrimoniously aggravating, if not overtly menacing.

This aggression is a result of autoimmunity's formal process, which interrupts the organization of parts into a unified whole with relentlessly mechanical regularity. This incessant interruption acts as an irritant, especially since its mechanical quality indicates the presence of technology. This mechanical process catalyzes a defensive reaction in response to technological intrusion by a foreign body, such as a transplanted organ or prosthetic device. This instinctive immune response requires an autoimmune counter-reaction in order to integrate prosthetic technology, which is crucial to the survival of the body. In aesthetic terms, prosthetic technology provides a connection to others that likewise ensures the mental survival of the self. Prosthetics nevertheless inhibit the physical immediacy of individual experience, which is no longer directly linked through touch. As such, autoimmunity enables a form of collective life that is paradoxically predicated on separation.

Rather than incapacitating communication and community, this prosthetic separation serves as an aesthetic medium. In performance, this medium emerges in the form of an actual surface of separation or screen, including mattresses and opaque fabric partitions. As manifestations of ambulatory movement and autoimmunity, these screens connect the audience to aesthetically disorganized phenomena from beyond the immediate boundaries of the scene— namely, the unseen or obscene. In this regard, the screen is a form of media that relays remote events into theatrical space. These events consist of multiple categories: casual incidents from the quotidian sphere, which lie outside theatre's representational order; actual autobiographical details that lack relevance to formal aesthetic expression; historical events that have been nearly forgotten; and potential events that were denied the opportunity to exist by predetermined social categories, such as gender, sexuality, and nationality. As the material manifestation of representational margins, the screen provides passage for the

memory of unlived experiences and converts the margin into a site for common being— even be it a site that divides what it connects.

This paradoxically divided place of common being corresponds to my concept of the screen, which depends on the two separate modes of motion mentioned above: the ambulatory and autoimmunity. In keeping with this shared state of severed connection, *Cinema/Movement/Screen* reproduces a division in its organizational structure. Rather than proceeding through a linear order that would ultimately synthesize these two modes, its argument restricts the analysis of ambulatory movement to two interior sections and addresses autoimmunity in the first and final chapters. This bifurcated argument obliges its readers to remember that neither concept alone explains the screen and thus seeks to animate the principles that it describes.

My reading of the screen begins in chapter one, "Autoimmunity and Intermittent Movement in Yvonne Rainer's Early Choreography," which considers the neglected history of Rainer's dance during the first half of the sixties. Most accounts of Rainer's choreography emphasize her affiliation with the New York collective, Judson Dance Theatre, and subordinate her choreography to her 1966 solo *Trio A*. Although *Trio A* is a singular work of pivotal importance to both dance history and Rainer's artistic career, it is an error to reduce the complexities of her choreography to this dance. In order to explore these complexities, I first consider her experiments with John Cage's chance-based compositional methods in her earliest dances. As she attempted to integrate these experiments with chance into more cohesive choreographic structures, Rainer encountered irreconcilable formal contradictions that produced awkwardly aggravating obstacles in her dances. These obstacles became the vehicle for a formal process— namely, autoimmunity. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's late essay "Foi et Savoir," the chapter explores how autoimmunity impairs the

expressive range of dance, but whose automated movement emulates cinema and thus repairs a connection to possibilities excluded from theatre and relegated to the obscene. These excluded possibilities amass into an object that is a byproduct of autoimmunity, the screen.

Chapter two also addresses the presence of cinematic motion in Rainer's 1966 dance, *Trio A*. However, unlike conventional accounts of this celebrated dance, "The Ambulatory Aesthetics of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*" approaches it as an exceptional work within her oeuvre. In contrast to the infectious irritability that characterized her previous dances, *Trio A* has a strangely elusive tone that has quietly compelled audiences for decades. After establishing this tonal difference, this chapter examines its peculiar character in relation to its choreographic process. This analysis of Rainer's process leads to a new reading of a canonical concept in dance history known as "pedestrian movement." Rather than a stylistic effect, I show that pedestrian movement in *Trio A* is ingrained into its choreographic structure and is formally related to walking, especially as studied by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. According to de Certeau, walking is an aesthetic activity that transmits diverse events from daily life. In this regard, it is possible to liken walking to a form of media that depends on continuous motion— i.e., cinematic motion. Like cinema, walking in *Trio A* deploys a constantly even pattern of singular movements that constitute a formal process. As the title of this chapter indicates, I have named this process "ambulatory motion."

However, even though *Trio A* exemplifies ambulatory motion, it lacks its material form— namely, the screen. In order to demonstrate how the ambulatory produces a screen, chapter three, "The Opacity of Chantal Akerman's Cinematic Spaces," applies this reading of *Trio A* to the films of Chantal Akerman. In particular, it considers Akerman's first feature-length film, *je tu il elle*, which shares a similar

peculiar character and uses props that serve as screens. The emergence of the screen also effects Akerman's visual strategies, which oppose the transparent presentation of content and render the film literally opaque. In addition to the actual diffusion of visual content, this chapter studies opacity as a stylistic and formal category. As a formal category, opacity designates a state in which the constant passage of ambulatory motion relays the diffuse presence of multiple disparate elements from the quotidian sphere.

This analysis derives from a close reading of Edouard Glissant's postcolonial theory, who proposes opacity as a concept in *The Poetics of Relation*. Glissant's influence also gestures towards the global dimensions of performance that inform Akerman's later work and the overall direction of *Cinema/Movement/Screen*. The latter half of chapter three follows Akerman as she ventures beyond the disciplinary limits of narrative film and the geographical boundaries of Western nations. By applying the concept of opacity developed in her early fictional films to her recent documentaries on Slavic and Mexican immigrants, it is possible to articulate an informed reading of her newest and most elaborate cinematic experiment: her 2005 video installation, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*. Since this installation uses a translucent fabric, tulle, to form an actual opaque partition, it is critical to my reading of the screen. Moreover, as a fabric associated with female identity, tulle reflects the feminist concerns that characterized Akerman's early films, including *je tu il elle*. By considering the female gender in the context of the screen, this chapter brings together two divergent lines of critical inquiry on Akerman into a theory of feminine performance: feminist film theory— as exemplified by Judith Mayne's reading of *je tu il elle*— and a formal approach taken by cinema scholar Ivone Margulies, who links Akerman's work to minimalism.

Given the primacy of feminine aesthetics in Akerman's work, it may be surprising that the subsequent chapter turns to a male choreographer who has adopted a menacingly masculine character. In order to explain this disparity, chapter four, "Forsythe's Box: On the After-life of Choreography," returns to the process manifested in Yvonne Rainer's early choreography— autoimmunity. In particular, it traces the development of autoimmunity through Forsythe's interest in "decreation," poet and critic Anne Carson's name for a process of affirmative self-destruction practiced by feminine mystics. This affinity to mysticism in Forsythe's dances makes it possible to consider aspects of Derrida's theory of autoimmunity that are not pronounced in Rainer's choreography— above all, the biopolitical and the concept of life.

In the context of autoimmunity and life, this chapter investigates an area of interest that Forsythe shares with Akerman's late work: the emergence of global culture, whose multiplicity at once requires and confounds unified explanation and translation. In Forsythe's dances, translation is at once subject matter, an artistic technique, and a formal process. Contrary to prevailing notions of translation, choreographic translation permits Forsythe to transmit elements that are normally excluded from theatrical representation. In order to account for this unusual process of translation, I draw on Walter Benjamin's influential essay, "The Task of the Translator," which likewise holds the incommunicable to be crucial to language and communication. As a process of performative transmission in Forsythe's choreography, this chapter ultimately examines how translation provides a protective screen that ensures the survival of life from beyond the theatrical scene while simultaneously exposing the audience to the unknown perils of communal contact with others in an irreparably impaired form—an autoimmune "after-life."

CHAPTER ONE

AUTOIMMUNITY AND INTERMITTENT MOVEMENT IN YVONNE RAINER'S

EARLY CHOREOGRAPHY

The career of choreographer Yvonne Rainer began abruptly. A self-confessed latecomer to her craft, she started dance "pretty late" at twenty-five (Rainer 1999, 50). In addition to her unusually advanced age, Rainer recalls lacking a "natural gift": "I was not supple, but I was strong. I could leap and jump" (Rainer 1999, 50). She was also insistently intellectual, "too intellectual," as she remembers (Rainer 1999, 49). Nevertheless, these apparent impediments— her ungainly athletic body and obstinately analytical mind— ultimately defined Rainer's choreography. Even after renouncing dance in 1972, such impediments persisted in her wryly incisive, unremittingly self-critical films. This comically self-critical character was already present in Rainer's first dance, which she composed in 1961, only two years after starting professional study. In this dance, *Three Satie Spoons*, Rainer's blundering body and obstreperous disposition became choreographic material. Its movements included "stretching the mouth... tracing lines down the body, squatting, grasping the foot to the thigh while turning...extending a trembling leg, and a shoulder stand" (Banes 1993, 14). Although apparently pointless and thus puzzling, these awkward eccentricities served an artistic goal: the repudiation of classical and modern dance.

Of course, Rainer did not undertake this choreographic rebellion alone. Her deliberate disregard for dance's established vocabulary was the signature of Judson Dance Theater, the New York choreographic collective in which she rose to

prominence during the sixties. In dance history, Judson's jubilant rejection of aesthetic values and compositional codes has become a canonical moment. According to this account, by incorporating "pedestrian movement" into dance, this group of young choreographers asserted that any movement was artistically valid. In the words of Sally Banes, the historian responsible for reviving and preserving these choreographers' legacy, after Judson "the boundaries of dance had burst open," marking the advent of "postmodern dance" (Banes 1979, 44). Although Banes' scholarship has been essential to restoring Judson's history, its conceptual foundations have become increasingly subject to revision.[1] Understood as a passing episode en route to the "postmodern," Rainer's early choreography has been subordinated to the status of a historical footnote— an important, but ultimately untenable experiment in the prosaic polemics of pedestrian movement. Moreover, despite her leading role in Judson, there are few prolonged critical engagements with her choreography prior to 1965. This neglect is partly due to their scant documentation. Of these performances, only one has been preserved on film, her 1966 solo, *Trio A*, which is typically regarded as the apex of her choreography, a veritable masterpiece.

Admittedly, *Trio A* is an exceptional work, which I maintain requires independent analysis from Rainer's preceding dances. Contrary to conventional readings of Rainer's early choreography, I intend in this chapter to identify a character and corresponding artistic process that is distinct from *Trio A* and the legacy of pedestrian movement— autoimmunity. However, the prevailing account of pedestrian movement has an important aspect. Judson's enthusiasm for pedestrian movement amounted to a rejection of dramatic style, through which they aspired to overcome the

---

[1] In particular, I have in mind Carrie Lambert-Beatty and Mark Franko, whose recent work on Rainer respectfully revisits Banes' conceptual premises, especially her insistence on the "ephemerality" of dance. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize Banes' exceptional capacity as a close reader of dance, which leads her to conclusions that surpass such questionable concepts. See Lambert-Beatty, p. 65.

theatrical constraints imposed on dance. By emulating the pedestrian quality of

quotidian experience, Judson sought to reach life beyond theatre's spatial and formal

limits. Although her pugnacious polemics may be the most evident aspect of her early

choreography, Rainer also emphasized the formal dimensions of composition— above

all, its process of narrative determination.

Even in her first dance, *Three Satie Spoons*, Rainer confronted the limits of

choreographic structure, especially as predicated by dramatic unity. In a statement on

the dance, she articulated her fascination with the diversity of possible experience: "I

am also deliberately involved in a search for the incongruous and using a wide range

of individual human and animal actions— speak, shriek, grunt, slump, bark, look,

jump... no single dance is about any one idea or story, but rather... a variety of things"

(in Banes 1993, 14). Rainer's emphasis on "the incongruous"— be it her awkward

body or nervous tics— resisted the reduction of multiple possibilities to "any one idea

or story." Stated otherwise, such intemperate incongruities resisted the construction of

any unified "idea or story." In her analysis of *Three Satie Spoons*, Banes too

recognizes Rainer's opposition to formal unity, noting that "the ways in which [its

movements] were put together resisted the interpretation of a unified plot" (Banes

1993, 14).

In dance, formal unity depends on the imposition of a governing "text" on

movement— that is, a musical score. According to this traditional relationship, music

determines the field of choreographically possible movements. Like a shadow, dance

mutely mimics existing notation and thus remains "silent." This silence conforms to a

fundamental rule of classical ballet. As Banes observes, this rule dictates that "dance

should tell its stories without resorting to speech" (Banes 2003, 24). Rainer's

opposition to this "silence"— and the formal imposition of unity— began in *Three

Satie Spoons*. In this dance, Rainer used intentionally clumsy choreography to break

the mimetic conventions established in ballet and antagonize its ideal of quietly effortless elegance. As an evident act of disobedience, Rainer also included spoken sounds: squeaks, sustained high notes, a yowl, and one strange phrase, "the grass is greener when the sun is yellower" (Banes 1993, 14). Combined with her awkwardly idiosyncratic movement vocabulary, this vocal repertoire would have seemed eccentrically absent-minded, as if verging on mental illness. Given Rainer's interest in the incongruous, mental illness provided a model to disrupt the stable semblance of a self-contained narrative— a transgressive tradition long employed in avant-garde theatre.

In addition to its idiosyncratic expressive value, this strategic imitation of mental illness had a formal purpose: psychic collapse corresponded to the fragmentation of narrative. In this regard, Rainer used madness in a manner consistent with late Romanticism. As follows this Romantic ideal, madness in *Three Satie Spoons* indicated the presence of vast possibilities, whose excess exceeds— and disrupts— rational comprehension. In Rainer's early choreography, this excess manifested itself in the garbled nonsense of illogical combinations. Contrary to classical and modern dance, *Three Satie Spoons* relayed a fragmented narrative, whose unintelligible expression became private, even solipsistic. Moreover, such potentially solipsistic expression corresponded to the dance's choreographic structure— its use of chance procedures, which permitted Rainer to resist the imposition of formal unity.

Of course, Rainer was not the first to use chance procedures as a compositional method. As is well-known, John Cage introduced techniques of structural indetermination into postwar American art and performance. For Cage, chance procedures transcended personal taste, which invariably conformed to traditional aesthetic form. Stated otherwise, his aleatory methods allowed the artist to renounce authorial control and thus enabled a wider range of artistic possibilities— as per

Cage's famous demonstration in *4'33''* that any sound is valid as music. This ideal of boundless inclusion influenced Rainer, Judson, and finally Banes, who conceived of such an expanded range of movement possibilities as "democratic."

However, the crucial aspect of chance procedures did not concern content, but rather narrative structure— and consequently, the determination of the possible. This aspect of Cage's aesthetics influenced the very beginnings of Rainer's career. She developed *Three Satie Spoons* in a workshop led by Robert Ellis Dunn, who in 1960 had begun to teach young dancers upon Cage's request (Banes 1993, 1). Following Dunn's advice, Rainer modeled *Three Satie Spoons* on methods that Cage used in his 1958 composition, *Fontana Mix*. Like Cage, Rainer haphazardly created a graphic image— a drawing made with crayons, whose colors each corresponded to a possible movement— over which she lay a "staff" (Banes 1993, 13). This staff was divided into units that measured the metric structure of the music Rainer had selected, Satie's *Gymnopédies*. The resulting intersections between Rainer's color-coded movement choices and the temporal framework of Satie's score determined the choreographic structure of *Three Satie Spoons*. By using chance methods, the dance did not establish causal relations between its parts. Albeit not random, its structure was indeterminate and no longer depended on dramatic unity to order its elements into a coherent whole.

Due to this absence of unity, the arbitrarily assembled elements in *Three Satie Spoons* created a diffusely ethereal atmosphere. Without a coherent whole, Rainer's eccentric gestural and vocal quirks resembled nonsense. Despite its strangeness, her incongruities remained innocuously understated, which was consistent with the quietly off-kilter lyricism of Satie's music. This mildly mournful lyricism suggested an odd consolation— contact with the presence of possibilities excluded from theatrical representation. This consoling presence of such lost possibilities was even more essential to Cage's aesthetics, which subordinated artistic expression to an

impressionistic atmosphere of peripheral events. Instead of personal expression, Cage

proposed that the artist's task was to attune the spectator to the diversity of

atmospheric incidents. Cage held that such incidental events were perpetually present,

at least "once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of [life's] way and lets it act

of its own accord" (in Rainer 1999, 87). The method used to achieve this ideal open

mind— a state of distraction that permitted attention to the plenitude of the

periphery— was chance.

In Rainer's early choreography, *Three Satie Spoons* was her most direct

encounter with Cage's aleatory aesthetics. A year later, she composed a new solo that

departed from his methods. Although there is no remaining description of the

compositional process that Rainer used, she specified that her previous dance, *Satie*

for Two, was "the last time I would use a formal chance score (again an adaptation of

Fontana Mix)" (Rainer 1974, 7). In fact, this solo, *Three Seascapes*, returned to the

artistic form that chance procedures sought to circumvent, dramatic narrative.

Admittedly, the narrative of this dance did not convey a comprehensible story, but

rather a crude parody, which appropriated dramatic form in order to disrupt its

structure. According to her notes, Rainer divided the dance into three sections:

> 1) Running around the periphery of the space in a black overcoat
> during the last movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.
> 2) Traveling with slow-motion undulations in an upstage-to-downstage
> diagonal during La Monte Young's *Poem for Tables, Chairs, Benches*.
> 3) Screaming fit downstage right in a pile of white gauze and black
> overcoat. (cited in Banes 1993, 90-91)

Unlike the absent-minded eccentricities in her first solo, *Three Seascapes* had a

distinct goal: to disrupt narrative continuity. Rainer's principal strategy was to

mockingly mimic dance's traditional elegance and subservient silence. To this end,

she consolidated and intensified her oddly awkward gestures, which became an almost crippling, constant clumsiness. For instance, in the first section, instead of dancing, Rainer "dog-trotted" and occasionally lay on the ground(cited in Banes 1993, 91). During this dumb display of artistic disobedience, Rainer wore a heavy black overcoat that encumbered her movements. Like her overtly awkward choreography, this unaccommodating costume conflicted with the music, "a luscious and amplified movement from the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto" (Banes 1993, 91). This garishly glaring contrast inhibited the enchanting effect of Rachmaninoff's "luscious" music, and in fact, Rainer used a "bad recording" to further undermine its lyricism and disrupt the passive spectator's expected pleasure.

As a result of this stylistic difference between music and dance, an uncomfortably odd tension dominated *Three Seascapes*. Such internal conflict exacerbated Rainer's affectations, with which she sought to stage contrasting elements, or "the incongruous"— that is, improbable possibilities normally excluded from dramatic narrative. In *Three Seascapes*, this conflict between genres anticipated a central technique of Rainer's choreography: radical juxtaposition. As Rainer later confirmed, she derived the phrase "radical juxtaposition" from Susan Sontag, who used it to describe Happenings. In keeping with the word "radical," such juxtapositions combined irreconcilable elements in order to fragment narrative continuity. According to this artistic method, such disruption could open its limited dimensions to a jubilant multitude of possible events, or "happenings."

As *Three Seascapes* progressively descended into a display of abject formlessness, this resistance to dramatic synthesis became its subject. In its second part, the dance's provocatively passive movement and musical accompaniment assumed increasingly uncomfortable dimensions— Rainer was apparently losing control of body and mind. As if herself becoming a "bad recording," critic Jill

Johnston's description of Rainer's "slow-motion undulations" specified that her gait resembled "a slow-motion spastic" (Banes 1993, 91). Likewise, the experimental music that accompanied her movement— La Monte Young's *Poem for Tables, Chairs, Benches*— was difficult to distinguish from irritatingly invasive noise. Johnston, for instance, mistook Young's music for the actual sound "of tables and chairs moaning, scraping across the floor in the lobby" (in Banes 1993, 91). This physical and sonic collapse culminated in the dance's final section, in which Rainer threw a wild tantrum. Despite its self-indulgently adolescent quality, Johnston described this tantrum with admiration, calling it "a beautiful fit of screaming in a flying mess of coat and gauze" (Banes 1993, 91). This enthusiasm responded to the comically affirmative nature of Rainer's screeching, which disrupted the self-contained conclusion particular to dramatic form.

Like this conclusion, Rainer was herself lost amidst "a flying mess of [black] coat and [white] gauze" (in Banes 1993, 91). In this regard, the messy mise-en-scene corresponds to her vocal excess. Moreover, this gauze-like fabric resembled tulle, the trademark material of the tutu, and thus invoked the conventions of classical dance. The resemblance of this material with tulle has prompted a recent critic, art historian Douglas Crimp, to dub the scene Rainer's "version of Fokine's *Dying Swan*," a 1905 ballet depicting the melancholy death of a ballerina as a swan (Crimp 2005, 52). Of course, Rainer's fitful interpretation of an ill-tempered, burrowing and bellowing swan satirized ballet's intertwined trinity of aesthetic ideals: imitation, expression, and beauty. It also disrupts the wistful contemplation of beauty's tragic transience, whose brief blossoming *Dying Swan* celebrates in a feminine image of mortal nature—a life that poignantly feels, but cannot voice its pain.

However, a more sinister silence belies Rainer's exuberantly adolescent excess in *Three Seascapes*. Like the swan, such silence portends death, albeit without the

romantic consolation provided by the fond remembrance of youthful innocence. As portrayed in this dance, death is associated with cloth or clothes, which enclose, muffle, and immobilize their bearer. More than mere innocent play in a disordered pile, Johnston noted that Rainer deliberately "puts her black coat over a long piece of white gauze" and "lies down under both," as if preparing for sleep, or more literally, being enshrouded (in Banes 1993, 91). This shroud-like fabric covered the body, as if concealing its dead weight in an immobilizing mantle of silence. Since the mournful burden of bearing this weight contradicted the scene's riotous protest, it is necessary to read Rainer's fit as fatuously futile— these cries demonstrated her incapacity to alter the formal silence imposed on dance.

The weight of this silence in *Three Seascapes* enforced an anesthetic indifference. Indeed, Rainer's cries could have been pangs of death or birth, which were no more distinguishable than the "flying mess" of black coat and white fabric. As such, these dichotomous states became caught in redundantly recurring cycles. From her timid appearance to ecstatic revelation, no meaningful event took place. Trapped in such manic circularity, Rainer's tantrum only revealed the necessity of concealment. This fitful, spastic quality and systematic degeneration into noise thus supported its subject, the exposition of its tautological formal conditions. Such tautological truth perpetually produces a new beginning and ending, or the endless repetition of the same. Instead of its destruction, the formal indifference characterizing the repetition of the same defines death in *Three Seascapes* as the indefinite deferral of life, whose advent and conclusion never occurs, and instead dumbly waits, as if stillborn in a placental pool of tulle, whose scarcely perceptible weight clouds the peripheries of the theatrical event.

Music, Mucus, and Autoimmunity

Despite its formal cogency, *Three Seascapes* was no masterpiece. In fact, like *Three Satie Spoons*, it was a brashly immature work, whose most substantial innovations were not yet part of a coherent artistic project. Nevertheless, both works established an aspect that was to prove crucial to Rainer's subsequent choreography: relentless resistance to the imposition of music— and formal unity— on movement. In a later work, Rainer lunceremoniously announced her contempt for music. However, Rainer's contempt for music was complicated, for she was paradoxically compelled to use music to resist its structural unity. Since this unity persists even in silence, Rainer had to remind her audience of music's binding role in order to disrupt its force. Accordingly, her choreography consistently combined contrasting musical styles. Because there are no recordings of these dances, it is easy to overlook their motley musicality. Douglas Crimp notes this neglect in an essay on Rainer's relationship to music, "Yvonne Rainer, Muciz Lover." This essay's unusual title refers to Rainer's "mucus rant," an anti-music diatribe from her 1968 work, *Performance Demonstration*. In this rant, Rainer expounded upon her antipathy for music, unabashedly declaring herself to be a "music-hater": "That's right, I would like to say that I am a music-hater" (in Crimp 2005, 50). Warped by her polemic energy, "music" mutated into "muzak" and "mussuck," pronunciations that provocatively flirted with "mucus." As she continued, Rainer justified her "hate" in terms of a deliberate artistic strategy:

> The only meaningful role for muzeek in relation to dance is to be
> totally absent or to mock itself. To use 'serious' muzach
> simultaneously with dance is to give a glamorous 'high art' aura to
> what is seen. To use 'Program' moosick or pop or rock is to generate

coloration which the dance itself would otherwise not evoke. (in Crimp 2005, 50-51)

In the context of a performance, like *Performance Demonstration*, these theoretical reflections inhabited an ambiguous boundary between artistic practice and critical analysis. Despite the charismatic candor of Rainer's remarks, their transparency was deceptive. As Crimp observes, Rainer was not simply a "music hater." Her dances employed various means of upsetting musical grandeur, such as electronically distorting Massenet's *Thais* or amplifying Baroque organ recordings to deafening levels. Such techniques were already present in *Three Seascapes*, which satirized music by staging the successive degeneration of Rachmaninoff into the experimental noise of composer La Monte Young, and ultimately Rainer's wild shrieks. Likewise, she produced a multitude of literal noises— screams, shouts, squeaks, and the abrasive sound of "wooden slats being thrown onto the floor"— in order to irritate her audience (Crimp 2005, 52). Such noises had an obnoxiously noisome quality, whose discomfort reflected the material excess of her choreography.

However, Rainer's musical mayhem observed certain rules. Most significantly, she did not mix genres. This restraint appeared in even her earliest artistic efforts. In *Three Seascapes*, each section maintained the integrity of a distinctly different musical style. The dance's titular reference to painting further emphasized the indivisible integrity of each section, whose content was organized into self-contained, separate units or frames. Moreover, its title and content produced a quizzical conflict: *Three Seascapes* did not include any references to the sea. This absence of "seascapes" introduced an enigmatic impression of absence into the performance. This impression made it possible to perceive the theatrical frame that enables and delimits sight— or for that matter, site.

The presence of these structural limits corresponded to the "alternative" role for music that Rainer proposed in her rant— furniture music. According to Rainer, furniture music obliges its audience to wait for an event that does not arrive. She expressly articulates this idea: "In Satie's idea of furniture music (although not in the music itself) I see an alternative that has not yet been followed thru in theatre: Meesik-to-sit-and-wait-by" (in Crimp 2005, 51). It is tempting to equate this reference to furniture music with elevator music, especially since both furniture and elevators immobilize their occupants. However, whereas an elevator encloses its passenger, furniture merely inhibits movement— whether that of Rainer's dancers, who were often charged with dragging cumbersome objects, or the spectator, forced to remain seated, as if waiting— waiting to the sound of furniture music. *Three Seascapes* actually included a composition whose title deliberately refers to furniture, La Monte Young's dully droning *Poem for Tables, Chairs, Benches*. Akin to such droning furniture music, muzak is also present in the confined spaces common to waiting rooms. However, as waiting room music, muzak also embodies an unappealing state of intellectual oblivion. Muzak is a derivative form, which is detached from its origin and conveys a blandly simplistic world, whose mindless inhabitants are spared formative encounters with limitations upon the possible.

Despite the risk of such obliviousness, furniture music and muzak have a common promise for choreography— indeed, Rainer calls it "an alternative" to prevailing theatrical conventions. As unobtrusive background noise, neither imposes a static score upon dance, and without dramatic structure, they relieve the need for formal unity. In calling for this alternative, Rainer distinguished between two different techniques, juxtaposition and superimposition. According to her distinction, furniture music is "a juxtaposition in time with visual elements rather than a superimposition" (in Crimp 2005, 51). Superimposition relates to the cinematic

process of overlaying sound and image in order to produce an impression of natural continuity. In her mucus rant, Rainer sardonically lauded "the colossal talents of composers such as Dimitri Tiomkin and Henry Mancini" and identified "movie-museek" as "a hybrid beast... a form that extends the image and merges with it rather than calling attention to its own lack of quality" (in Crimp 2005, 51). In contrast to furniture music, juxtaposition resists the spurious superimposition of unity between sound and image and thereby catalyzes an "alternative" order of the theatrical event.

In order to demonstrate how juxtaposition grounds this potential theatrical paradigm, it is necessary to consider the context from which Rainer appropriated this term. As she was well aware, Susan Sontag used "radical juxtaposition" to describe Happenings.[2] Like Sontag, Rainer located the artistic heritage of radical juxtaposition in French surrealism, especially its use of collage. With regard to Happenings' messy mayhem, Sontag's addition of the word "radical" suggested that the formal juxtaposition of arbitrary or opposing elements constituted an act of resistance, which contributed to "adversarial culture"— a phrase that Rainer recognized as "another Sontag formulation" (Rainer 1999, 104). By overwhelming a spectator's perceptual limits in an "adversarial" manner, collage technique disrupted the semblance of representational unity. As a result, this perpetual perceptual displacement replaced unity in collage-based works, which organized themselves around an exceptional, celebratory rupture. This rupture approximated an artistic goal: the absolute openness of form.

This ersatz economy of successive elastic oscillations resembles the mise-en-abyme that occurred at the conclusion of *Three Seascapes*, whose climax ruptured symbolic unity. In this scene, death arrives as an orgasmic excess of life, *une petite*

---

[2] Susan Sontag's essay, "Happenings: An Art of Radical Juxtaposition" was published in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*.

mort. The dance's use of radical juxtaposition thus enacted surrealism's autoerotic impulse to spectacular self-destruction, which attempts to end the closure of representation. Hence, Rainer associated dance with the ecstatic pleasure of erotic transgression: "Earlier you asked what was it like performing for the first time. It was as good as orgasm" (Rainer 1999, 63). The physicality of dance, especially when magnified by the consciousness of being watched, induced an irresistibly sensuous experience of immediacy— the acute awareness of the "pure" present.

Despite her resistance to the harmonious resolution of dramatic structure, Rainer's use of music also reflected a desire for the unmediated intimacy and personal peace unique to romantic love.   Love appeared as a theme throughout her choreography, fleeting moments of which could be uncharacteristically tender. For example, *Terrain* (1963) employed slowly unfolding poses based on erotic Indian sculpture; a remaining photo from *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965) shows Rainer with her eyes closed, feet lifted above the ground, and arms clasped around her real-life romantic partner, Robert Morris. However, it was more common in Rainer's dances to encounter unrefined aspects of sexuality: in *Terrain*, she delivered the deadpan vocal delivery of an ode to love, which undermined the spiritual quality of her Indian postures; in another section, Rainer performed an exaggerated series of "pin-up girl" poses set to electronically filtered music; likewise, the choreographic notation of her apparently intimate embrace with Robert Morris specified that they were moving apart: "Duet: Leaning away thru 1st embraces." (Rainer 1965, 169). In fact, Rainer conceded with adolescent self-bemusement that even though "the piece had expanded to ten people," she had kept the title because "I liked the corny pun on sex" (Rainer 1965, 173).

The unrefined fact of sex— and the technique of radical juxtaposition— also informed Rainer's films. In a 1980 interview with Noel Carroll, Rainer equated "radical juxtaposition" to a form of "ambiguity": "I suppose what I've just described is a form of radical juxtaposition, although when *I* use the term I usually mean a less specific kind of contrast, something more akin to ambiguity" (Rainer 1999, 196). Since unlike radical juxtaposition, such "ambiguity" does not attempt to realize all narrative possibilities— i.e., absolute openness— it must refer to another order of formal determination. Moreover, if this ambiguity did not provoke erotic or musical ecstasy, then it must have introduced an element absent from the conventional structure of representation. In order to identify this missing element, it is necessary to return to Crimp's example of Rainer's open contradiction, her anti-music monologue, which addressed a particularly literal omission, touch:

> The most flagrant omission today... is a film that will be shot in a large white living room with two large white sofas and two large white nudes—one male, one female—and one large white balloon about four feet in diameter. The film is neither pornographic nor racist. The nudes never touch. They are either separated by the balloon between them or are apart in space. (in Crimp 2005, 50)

Admittedly, an audience watching this film, *Trio Film*, may not notice the absence of physical contact. Rainer's mise-en-scene emphasizes the performers' nudity, which implies an erotic relation. The couple moves with exaggerated slowness, permitting ample time to contemplate their bodies in an environment devoid of distraction: an all-white set. Although this cheap decor is reminiscent of pornography, such apparent affinities in *Trio Film* are misleading— in fact, deliberately misleading. Contrary to the insistent presence of sex, the performers' calm detachment establishes a blankly indifferent tone. Subsumed in whiteness, this indifferent atmosphere visually equates the film's performers, furniture, and single prop into an

undifferentiated mass. As such a mass, they are at once together and apart. Despite their proximity, Rainer's description expressly states that they "never touch" and are "separated by the balloon... or are apart in space." The balloon functions as an intermediary, whose bulk connects and divides its performers. Rather than erotically challenging perceptual limits, this intermediary integrates separation into representation. Neither spatial nor psychological, this separation reveals a dividing limit that contains and conceals its content.

Granted, the emergence of this aesthetic separation in *Trio Film* is only momentary. The performers cannot maintain their solemn demeanor and dissolve into laughter, a direct acknowledgment of their audience: "Arnold tries and fails to keep a straight face, as Paxton, visible only from the waist down...jumps up and down on the cushion next to her" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 191). The bathetic relief of their laughter belies an unresolved tension, the uncomfortable presence of the other. At once hypervisible and enveloped by the room, the performers' nudity accentuates the inability to escape the frame. This formal tension— characteristic of radical juxtaposition— produces an acutely ironic consciousness of their contradictory predicament. Nevertheless, their self-conscious laughter must have reacted to nudity, which portends an uneasy vulnerability, as if exposed.

However, such exposure to the other contradicts the pronounced distance between the performers. Rainer's subsequent use of *Trio Film* demonstrated that contradiction was necessary to making this adjoining separation perceptible. Contrary to her statement that *Trio Film* was not pornographic, Rainer posed an overt contradiction in her next work, *Rose Fractions* (1969). In *Rose Fractions*, she projected *Trio Film* next to a pornographic movie. The most obvious intent of this deliberately suggestive juxtaposition was to provoke conventions of sexual propriety.

This interpretation assumes that juxtaposition necessarily contrasts unrelated elements, but the actors' uneasy laughter underscored these films' similarities—its cheap decor and furniture, and the restriction of its "trio" of a nude man, woman, and camera to interior space. In this regard, pornography was the negative manifestation of *Trio Film*, a censored reserve of Sadean possibilities ordinarily stricken to the oblivion of abjection.

Similar to many preceding artists, Rainer confronted her audience with the abject in order to implicate them in an underground economy of illicit desire. However, she departed from solely confrontational strategies, which overwhelm their spectator in a deluge of erotic abandon. Rainer staunchly refused such self-abandon and preserved the distinction between socially sanctioned art and obscenity. This attempt to recognize the obscene manifested itself in another aspect of *Rose Fractions*, a monologue by the controversial comedian, Lenny Bruce. Using an erroneously monotone inflection, Rainer recited Bruce's speech on "snot":

> I'm going to tell you the dirtiest word you ever heard on the stage. It's just *disgusting*! I'm not going to look at you when I say it, cause this way we won't know who said it. I may blame that cat over there. It's a four-letter word, starts with "s" and ends with "t"... and... just don't take me off the stage, just... don't embarrass my Mom. I'll go quietly. The word is—Oh, I'm going to *say* it and just be it *done* with. I'm tired of walking the streets. "Snot!" I can't look at you, but that's the word: snot. (in Crimp 2005, 50)

"I can't look at you, but that's the word": Bruce twice emphasized the necessity of turning away from his audience in order to shield himself from the shame of pronouncing an obscenity. Of course, as a favorite target of censorship in the sixties, his provocative humor exploited the fact that he could not legally say "shit" on stage, even though his reference was evident to his audience. In order to intensify the absurdity of this disparity, he deflated his dramatic portrayal of a painstaking confession with the word "snot." As "disgusting" semi-fluid products of bodily waste,

shit and snot both relate to the formlessness of abjection. In particular, shit recalls the anal orifice, a black hole, which in terms of representation, reduces all differences to the same—shit— and subsequently grounds ensuing expression.

However, Rainer's citation of Bruce's satiric speech act did not repeat his transgressive emphasis on shit. After all, she was seemingly not subject to the same laws of censorship, as evidenced by the looming projection of a pornographic film during her reading of Bruce's monologue. In contrast to shit, snot is certain to spoil the sexual appetite. It is a defensive agent against infection, which coagulates and clogs, slowing the manic repetition of the same. The physical pressure caused by such phlegm had been long building in Rainer's congested choreography. Even in her earliest work, this congestion manifested itself in a preponderance of clumsy postures, including the mute material weight in *Three Seascapes* and her increasing affinity for furniture. By weighing down her dancers' mobility, these obstacles obfuscated theatrical spectacle and frustrated her audience's desire for narrative completion, forcing them to wait and listen to what cannot be seen— literally, the obscene.[3]

In Rainer's choreography, the obscene had an unlikely intermediary, furniture— and "furniture music." By forcing its audience to "wait," furniture delayed dramatic action and relayed events from beyond the theatrical scene. Jill Johnston described a particularly salient example of furniture's connection to off-stage events in *Three Seascapes*. According to Johnston, the audible "moaning" and "scraping" of absent furniture accompanied Rainer as she traversed the stage "like a slow-motion spastic" (in Banes 1993, 91). These sounds were actually composer La Monte Young's *Poem for Tables, Chairs, Benches*. Since Johnston was an astute critic, it is

---

[3] I again discuss this concept of the obscene in the context of William Forsythe's recent choreography. See Chapter 5, "Forsythe's Box: On the Afterlife of Choreography."

significant that she mistook recorded music for live sound from "the lobby" (in Banes 1993, 91).

Johnston's error anticipated Rainer's emerging interest in the lobby— and space beyond the limits of theatrical representation. In her next work, *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*, Rainer staged an interlude during the intermission. Having used free refreshments to lure the audience into the lobby, she and a partner presented a "*divertissement*" (Banes 1993, 53). Given the choreography's intentionally awkward display, this *divertissement* would have been difficult to overlook. They entered, "legs interlocked so that they could barely walk, and only sideways. They stumbled across the floor... then exited through the lobby" (Banes 1993, 53). Rather than diverting, their clumsy passage was oddly inopportune— dance does not belong offstage.

This restricted range of motion also reflected the impediment that Rainer later imposed on her dancers, whom she asked to move heavy furniture. The task of moving furniture was the subject of a 1964 experiment, in which she laboriously dragged an entire room onto the stage: "We moved all the furniture in the lounge into... the playing area... including the filthy dusty carpet. Thoroughly irritated everybody by interfering with their activities, broke a leg off the couch, and spilled sand inadvertently all over my black dress. The situation was definitely not satisfying" (Rainer 1965, 168). Although the failure of this experiment in "moving" caused dissatisfaction, a similar frustration informed the experience of La Monte Young's furniture music. Such agitation likewise characterized Rainer's inability to articulate herself in the mucus rant, in which snot had to suffice as an expression for shit— and the obscene more generally.

Rainer's forcible slippage from music to mucus, (snot contains the word "not"), grounds the obscene in theatre's frame. However, since the obscene cannot be

seen or said on stage, its theatrical representation necessarily encounters a contradiction. This irritatingly inescapable contradiction inflamed Rainer's artistic distemper. As her choreography approached its ostensible limit, instigating a break with dance in favor of film, her articulation of the obscene— or "snot"— coincided with the eruption of her bilious disposition. Unable to suppress this agitation, she spewed forth a verbal barrage of argumentative objections and self-critical qualifications whose cacophony ultimately characterized her films' interpersonal conflicts. Prior to her films, this irritable eruption of bile resulted from her contradictory choreographic attempt to integrate the obscene into the theatrical scene.

As Rainer attempted to articulate this contradictory predicate, the growth of her amassed mucus increasingly distended vocal and physical expression. Instead of protecting her, this immune response was a hinderance that needed to be neutralized— by the very system that had itself become a threat. There is a logic that pertains to this contradictory strategy of defensive self-destruction: autoimmunity. In biology, the concept of autoimmunity designates a state in which the body attacks its own immune system so that it may incorporate necessary foreign bodies, such as transplanted organs or prosthetics. Unlikely as it may seem, Jacques Derrida adopts this principle in his later writings to describe an aesthetic process. In "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida defines autoimmunity as "un principe d'autodestruction sacrificiel ruinant le principe de protection de soi (du mantien de l'integrité intacte de soi), et cela en vue de quelque sur-vie invisible et spectrale. Cette attestation autocontestatrice tient la communauté auto-immune en vie, c'est-à-dire ouverte à autre chose et plus qu'elle-même" (Derrida 2000, 79).

Autoimmunity's self-destructive drive has no regard for its own survival— as Samuel Weber notes, autoimmunity is "suicidal" (Weber, 15). It is a relentlessly grueling process that exhausts the self with machine-like regularity. Derrida describes

this mechanical quality as "machanalité," or "automatisation": "Cette automaticité...

répète encore et encore le double mouvement d'abstraction et d'attraction qui *à la fois*

arrache et rattache au pays, à l'idiome, au littéral ou à tout ce qu'on rassemble

confusément aujourd'hui sous le terme de 'l'identitaire'" (Derrida 2000, 64).   By

violating the instinct to self-preservation, autoimmunity's automatized process of

dislocating identity enables community, or "com-mon auto-immunity" whose life

exceeds the self and mere biological survival.

In surpassing biological survival, this process of self-neutralization aspires to

spiritual life, life beyond the self. Accordingly, Derrida uses the word "sacrificial" in

reference to religious ritual, in which the death of an innocent preserves the sacred life

of community— or life itself. In this sacred sense, life is the possibility of possibility,

which grounds all possibilities. The prospect of attaining this sacred life equates the

idea of the afterlife with divine bliss, which holds the plenitude of all possibilities,

including past and unrealized events.

However, in "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida precludes spiritual

transcendence. Or more precisely, he states that transcendence, which depends on

sacrifice and is thus bound to "deuil infini," disrupts itself, producing "une spectralité

sans bord" (Derrida 2000, 78). In his definition of autoimmunity, this "spectrality"

preserves a different kind of life, a life which is "spectral

sur-vival." This hyphen is crucial because in French, it joins life to survival: *sur-vie*

literally translates as "on-life." It therefore implies that autoimmune life exists as a

state of survival, but neither according to the exigencies of biological self-preservation

nor spiritual afterlife. As the hyphen illustrates, which both connects and separates

this word, this life, this state of "living on," is apart from itself. It is other than itself

and never self-identical. In terms of autoimmunity, the impossible recognition of this

constitutive alterity corresponds to the body's integration of another's organ or a prosthesis— that is, a technical supplement, which imports non-life into life.

A technical intrusion likewise triggers Rainer's autoimmune response— the introduction of film into dance, which epitomizes the ephemeral mortality of human life. As in Derrida's analysis of faith and knowledge, this opposition between dance and technology is an aporia. Reconsidering this aporia has consequences for dance, whose earliest history lies in religious ritual, but also for technology. Despite its scientific foundations, technology frequently serves a theological purpose, the affirmation of infinite possibilities, but because its reproductive artifice dilutes the sacred, it must also be denounced. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider dance and technology in the manner that Derrida approaches faith and knowledge: "nous nous essayons constamment à [les] penser ensemble, mais autrement" (Derrida 2000, 83). Instead of extending the possibilities of Rainer's choreography, technology's prosthetic presence imposed restrictions on its vocabulary that impeded its expressive capacity. Ultimately, following the logic of autoimmunity, which identifies another kind of afterlife or survival (*sur-vie*), such restrictions also connect what they separate: *vie*, or life, the reservoir of potential severed from the theatrical scene.

1962-1964: Choreographic Complexity and Sequential Potential

Before considering how Rainer integrated film into dance, it is necessary to first examine her interest in choreographic structure, especially its sequential potential. This interest emerged in work with larger groups, whose structural complexity quickly exceeded Rainer's immediate control. This complexity was present even in her first trio, 1962's *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*. As one might expect, the choreography

of *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms* accentuated the arms, "often... independently of, or set against the rest of the body's motion" (Banes 1993, 51). However, Rainer's principal subject of investigation was structural. By attributing equal importance to arms and individuals, its title complicates the body's boundaries. Rather than individual expression, this title emphasizes the combinatory potential of sequences— the number of imaginable permutations between three dancers and six limbs.

The expression of this potential relied on the use of chance procedures. Since it suspends the habitual impulse to traditionally unified form, chance permitted a vastly wider range of potential permutations. In *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*, Rainer's use of chance procedures was simple: each dancer performed its fifteen movements in an improvised pattern. As such, its order was indeterminate, literally always changing. However, to emphasize the combinatory potential of these movement sequences, it was important to demonstrate that the choreography was not haphazard. Rainer therefore established compositional intersections that would occur in every performance, regardless of its order. For instance, upon hearing the phrase "blam, blam, blam," the other two dancers were required to orally accompany the speaker. This abrupt intersection permitted the choreography to convey its mathematical multiplicity: "So with three people and fifteen choices you have forty-five or more possibilities—I guess fifteen to the third power" (in Banes 1993, 62). By invoking exponential variability, Rainer indicated that her choreography relayed more than its three actual movements— namely, the relation of possible sequence to possible sequence. In this way, the spectator could perceive the totality of its potential combinations, whose plenitude exceeded its unified presentation within theatre's immediate boundaries. Since the choreography directed its audience beyond theatre's boundaries, it invoked another medium, film.

Nevertheless, it is improbable that an audience would have fully recognized this horizon of cinematic potential. Indeed, Rainer's intentionally distracting choreography— her awkward adaptations of ballet and displays of unrefined corporeal bulk— would have commanded their attention. For example, a ballet port de bras became a movement nicknamed "Flapper," which combined "limp arms while the dancer traveled forward in a relaxed, alternating fourth position" (Banes 1993, 52). Such movements also included a position noted as "ghoul," and a similar "twist with eyeballs up—perched on one leg" (Banes 1993, 52). In *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms,* these techniques resisted the reduction of the body to a transparent medium. However, this material resistance conflicted with the choreography's structure, which articulated a mathematic ideal that could supersede mere inanimate matter. Likewise, the title's redundantly deflating observation—the comically self-evident equation of three people and six arms— also interferes with the romance of statistical abstraction.

As Rainer began to experiment with more structurally and physically complex compositions, this conflict became more pronounced. In fact, given these performances' rapidly expanding dimensions, such conflict became an inevitable aspect of her artistic idiom. The most significant example of this growth— and the difficulties it caused— coincided with her first evening length work, *Terrain*. Like *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*, *Terrain* initially consisted of overlapping solos. Rainer increased these solos' sequential complexity by doubling her cast to six and enlarging their repertoire of possible movements from fifteen to twenty four, "many of them... similar... to *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*, although here were more phrases and they were more complex" (Banes 1993, 108).

As a result of this complexity, *Terrain* became an epic endeavor, which surveyed Rainer's choreographic themes and techniques. She deployed this expanding arsenal of techniques in five sections: "Diagonal," "Duet," "Solo Sections," "Play,"

and "Bach." These sections operated according to differing systems of indeterminacy and coordinated multiple internal units. The first, "Diagonal," demonstrated the increasingly obscure relationship of its voluminous variables. This title referred to the stage's two longest unbroken lines, its "diagonals," which served as the six dancers' sole line of transit. As the dancers moved along these lines, numbers and letters were called out that designated ten "simple" group movements and "four more complex combinations" for individuals (Banes 1993, 113). These ambiguously announced signals added to the cluttered uncertainty that characterized *Terrain*.

Confined to only two lines of transit across the stage, the dancers' movements too became literally cluttered. Rainer noted that "sometimes... two groups would start simultaneously from different corners, nearly collide in the center, somehow work through each other, and find that they were comprised of new numbers who had switched groups midway" (in Banes 1993, 113). *Terrain*'s first image also depicted a crowded group struggling to navigate the stage: "the six performers, staying in a *clump*, traversed the space along a diagonal, exited to the 'out-of-bounds' space...then re-entered and walked all the way downstage and across the front, then out on a jagged line, pausing for a few seconds before each turn of direction" (Banes 1993, 113). Despite the evident difficulties of coordinating such congestion, this scene presented a journey in three parts: their initial passage "out of bounds," actual exit, and subsequent return.

The three parts of this journey constituted a complete narrative. Although it conflicted with her use of chance, Rainer used narrative in *Terrain* to coordinate its increasingly complex variables. In a later interview, Rainer confirmed the contradictory necessity of employing both a "coherent" narrative and chance procedures: "I began to think about a coexistence of a coherent story-line on one hand and these very cut up movement sequences on the other. So in 1963, that whole year,

I worked on my first long dance called *Terrain*" (Rainer 1999, 60). Accordingly, *Terrain* employed a symmetrical structure, with both an "overture" and a final section, which "served as a coda" (Banes 1993, 116). Like a conventional coda, this conclusion provided an overview of preceding themes and events, especially the sixty-seven movement phrases from the dance's central section and "most of the traveling movements from 'Diagonal'" (Banes 1993, 116).

Given this synthetic review, it is fitting that Rainer set the dance's finale to magisterial music by the Baroque master of contrapuntal return, Bach. In particular, Rainer chose Bach's cantata *Ich habe genug*, whose subject is the fulfillment of earthly desires and satisfied acceptance of mortality. This renunciation contradicted Rainer's previous resistance to death, especially as wrought by narrative closure. As such, one of *Terrain*'s solos, "Death," appeared to depict the living dead. It consisted of "sharp jackknifing actions, distorted facial positions...and a slow, stiff walk with the head turned, the mouth open to emit a low, constant, loud... wail" (Banes 1993, 109). Like the fitful climax of *Three Seascapes*, such strategically exaggerated opposition to narrative closure also manifested itself as erotic excess. In *Terrain*, this erotic excess was evident in the section preceding "Bach," "Play."   This section staged ten individual games that culminated in "Love," a duet of "slowly unfolding, constantly moving series of erotic poses based on Kama Kala sculptures juxtaposed to a deadpan dialogue about love" in a field of fifty red balls (Banes 1993, 116).

Despite such ironic resistance to narrative structure, *Terrain*'s conclusion, "Bach," may have seemed unaffectedly serious and even satisfying. In contrast to *Three Seascapes,* "Love," or the constricted collective movement in "Diagonal," the performers in "Bach" crossed the stage in an unhindered pattern of progression: "When the singer began, the dancers performed their scores... [and] moved the entire column [of dancers] inexorably to stage left" (Banes 1993, 116). As this slowly

ponderous column "inexorably" advanced, several dancers finished their sequences and remained in place, never to complete their crossing. Others continued, but never reached their goal, for the lights and music faded, "leaving a few dancers still moving" (Banes 1993, 116).

However, given Rainer's unruly opposition to the formal symmetry of classical dance, such calm is suspect. Rather than affirming the musical resonance of a complete event, such endless recess indicates a formal insufficiency: the incapacity to coordinate the dance's expanding structure. As its expanding sequences exceeded formal determination, they became diffused. This diffusion informed the disparate variety of choreographic material in *Terrain* and also the confusing profusion of objects strewn across the stage. These objects were numerically excessive—fifty red balls— and also had an enigmatically confusing character. This enigmatic character was pronounced in the final solo, "Sleep," which included various props contained in a "carpet bag": "a white vase, a small sandstone turtle, a glass paperweight, a toy gun, two hats, [and] several dried mango pits" (Banes 1993, 114). This ostensibly arbitrary array of objects served no particular purpose in performance. Their only common qualities were small size and an apparently domestic origin, as if hastily assembled personal affects. In the theatre, detached from their external context, they were rendered resolutely ambiguous, like inscrutable archeological fragments. According to Rainer's description of "Sleep," a similar detachment also defined the soloist's behavior: "By focusing all of the attention on the objects, by never taking notice of anything else going on around one... all of this gave the performer an impression of an obsessed, maniacal character" (in Banes 1993, 115). Rather than willful excess, this mania resulted from a defensive withdrawal into the contemplation of private objects. Such emotional withdrawal also corresponded to a reduced range

of physical motion. As Rainer notes, "the performer never stood erect," and was confined to squatting, crouching, sitting, and ultimately, "simulating sleep."

This retreat into ordinary inactivity— such as sleep— was part of Rainer's emerging exploration of disparately heterogeneous materials. Like the mundane objects that absorb the performer's attention, these diverse choreographic materials included pedestrian movement. In a review of Rainer's use of ordinary movement, film and dance scholar Noel Carroll has identified "flicking one's hair, opening mouths, scratching ears, touching toes, creeping, stretching, lying as if sleeping, and sitting up" (Carroll 2003, 71). In *Terrain*, Rainer's choreographic exploration of ordinary movement consisted of nervous tics, such as "flicking one's hair, opening mouths, [or] scratching ears." Furthermore, the dance also included apparently passive activities— sitting, waiting, and sleeping— whose habitual nature did not require significant attention and could be performed in a fog of distraction.

Rainer first explored this distracted mode of performance in her first group composition, *We Shall Run*. In this 1963 performance, "twelve people in street clothes, not all of them dancers, ran for seven minutes in various floor patterns to the 'Tuba Miriam' of Berlioz's *Requiem*" (Banes 1979, 42). Similar to "Sleep," the performers of *We Shall Run* appeared withdrawn, blankly staring as they maintained a "determined jog" at an even tempo (Banes 2003, 29). The juxtaposition of such monotonous movement against the grandiose pathos of Berlioz contributed to Rainer's efforts to resist the appeal of Romantic lyricism, which conceals narrative closure— after all, her choice of Berlioz's *Requiem* again references death.

In "Sleep," Rainer likewise wryly undermined the formal limits of dance by using yellow street barricades as ersatz ballet bars. Instead of moving, dancers loitered behind these barricades and regarded the "obsessed, maniacal character" in the center of the stage with distant indifference. Rainer intended the soloist's

pathological appearance and the observing dancers' blasé disinterest to conflict: "The cool detachment of the dancers who were 'not performing' around the barricade contrasted strongly with the idiosyncratic behavior in both the 'Death' and 'Sleep' solos" (in Banes 1993, 115). These observers' "cool detachment" reflected the passive presence of the audience, who were thus implicitly implicated in the disturbing display of indifference to suffering taking place on stage. Of course, even if the individual dancer appeared to be in distress, this scene did not depict actual cruelty; likewise, Rainer's indifferent dancers were not necessarily witnesses. On the contrary, as in any number of ordinary situations, their restlessly detached demeanor would be unremarkable, as if drearily enduring an indefinite wait. Given this ambiguity, "Sleep" did not charge its audience with failing to attend to the other.

The problem in *Terrain* was not insufficient attention, but rather the failure to notice the limits of the scene. As staged in "Sleep," the ambiguous distance between active and passive performers—which is itself an uncertain distinction given the passive nature of their activities— indicated the presence of almost imperceptibly remote events. This enigmatic impression of distance adhered to an alternative structural order. Instead of striving to establish an even distribution of events, Rainer's combination of chance procedures and coherent narrative in *Terrain* resulted in two compositional forms: dense constellations—such as the "clump" in its overture or the odd array of unrelated objects in "Sleep" that were clutched by a scarcely conscious figure—or the diffused patterns corresponding to the habitual rhythms of daily life.

Of these two modes, Judson predominantly pursued the diffused patterns of everyday life, especially ordinary movement. Rainer's exploration of ordinary movement likewise produced a peculiar character in performance. Albeit impersonal, such pedestrian performances were oddly animated, mischievously playful, and even

duplicitous. For example, as if lost in thought, the twelve dancers in *We Shall Run*
were emotionally and mentally distant, but also sharply alert. Consisting of only one
gesture, a steady jog, *We Shall Run* balanced itself between the boredom of its dully
droning continuum and hypnotically mesmerizing repetition. As suggested by its title,
which resembled a children's story, the performers were bright-eyed, curious
creatures, who at once appeared unpredictably prone to distraction, but also engaged
in private activities or games. These games were more than representations of play:
they provided a structural alternative to dramatic narrative. Instead of dramatic
necessity, the rule-based structure of games determined the choreography's possible
variations.

       Whether transgressively regressive or elusively reserved, such artistic play
disregarded authority. Rainer's play was at turns jubilantly self-indulgent and
quizzically quiet, qualities both present in the fourth section of *Terrain*, "Play." In
several scenes, bodies were awkwardly hoisted across the stage, which comically
indicated Rainer's opposition to narrative transport; another such act of play involved
a group "passing [a] ball from hand to hand within a moving huddle... with the goal of
grabbing the ball and breaking out of the group, only to be chased... back into the
huddle" (Banes 1993, 116). Other games, such as one consisting solely of "standing
and bouncing a ball," lacked rules and thus exuded a strange simplicity, as if
something were missing (Banes 1993, 115). Such simplicity also informed Rainer's
choreography in "Play," which included "running and stopping in a jump that landed
in a squat," and holding "relaxed" poses (Banes 1993, 116). It is significant that rather
than dramatic, sharply defined "freeze frames," these postures were "relaxed," or
everyday. This shift from a particular, decisive moment to an indifferently singular
instant reflects the emergence of the ordinary as an alternative mode of narrative.
Instead of emotional expression, maintaining such continuous motion claimed its

performers' attention. Unlike dramatic narrative, this ordinary or quotidian mode does not organize itself around necessity, but instead uses rules to determine its possible variations. Its games did not require justification relative to an external goal and supply their own purpose in the pleasure of their execution.

However, such ordinary aesthetics— and the semblance of quotidian continuity that it produced— depended on theatrical illusion. Despite its technical simplicity, *We Shall Run* demanded more than absent-minded effort. In addition to being acutely aware of her role, dancer Lucinda Childs recalled that she "was a total nervous wreck. The piece was very complex...It was hard to keep it in my head" (Banes 1993, 87). Furthermore, by juxtaposing pedestrian movement with "a very bombastic portion of Berlioz's *Requiem*," Rainer had intentionally staged a conflict (Banes 1993, 87). This conflict undermined the hypnotic calm of its pedestrian movement and caused "ironic interplay" (Banes 1993, 87). Irony also informed her use of games in *Terrain*. Although the ten games in "Play" could be performed in any order, they always culminated in a satirical series of erotic Indian postures amid fifty red balls. This messy ironic-erotic excess resembled *Three Seascapes*, and the inevitable conclusion of "Play" was likewise defined by its confinement to theatre's closed narrative frame. As in *Three Seascapes*, this closed narrative frame corresponded to death, which dictated the logic of Rainer's musical choice in *We Shall Run*, Berlioz's *Requiem*. Hence, even at the zenith of Rainer's enthusiasm for the ordinary, her choreography never surpassed theatrical form. On the contrary, the conflict between theatrical determination and quotidian continuity became essential to her artistic idiom.

In her following performance, *Room Service*, the strident irony of such provocative play became more triumphantly transgressive. In fact, Rainer predicated the structure of *Room Service* on a game, follow-the-leader. As in follow-the-leader,

three teams of three performers climbed, crawled, and clambered across "a grown-up jungle gym": a tall central platform covered with old mattresses beneath which a sheet of plywood rested on rubber tires (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 63). Weaving their way through this awkwardly imposing environment, each trio imitated its leaders' actions. Judson member Steve Paxton remembered "watching the first person able to do something naturally and then everybody else struggling to achieve it" (in Banes 1993, 176). In the absence of dramatic necessity, these funny, fumbling repetitions maintained the performance's structural integrity. Thus assured of structural continuity and relieved from the dramatic imperative of perfect timing, such deviations and displacements were a source of shared pleasure, which Paxton called "fun": "[*Room Service*] was quite lively— lots of running and sliding and playing" (in Banes 1993, 176).

Paxton's description of "running and sliding and playing" indicates the willfully wild tone of *Room Service*. If a game, the dance resembled unsupervised playground competition, which drove its participants to outdo each other. Rainer recalled that their play was "kind of dangerous": "the men's team would do these hair-raising things...at one performance Ross... tied up my team so we couldn't move" (in Banes 1993, 176). Accordingly, the artistic exploration of the ordinary became a boisterous display of any and everything, regardless of order. Emboldened by this anarchic embrace of all possibilities, *Room Service* became the forerunner of Rainer's massive "composite performances" during the late sixties and seventies, in her which her aptly named ensemble, The Grand Union, simultaneously employed dozens of performers in multiple spaces. In contrast to the ethos of distraction that characterized the ordinary, this tumult belonged to *Terrain*'s second avenue of inquiry, compressed clusters, or "groupings."

These compressed clusters were an essential step towards the integration of film's mechanical medium into dance. Like the clump of performers or odd array of objects in *Terrain*, these clusters embodied her constricted choreography, which interfered with physical and emotional expression. This interference ultimately introduced intermittence into her choreography, whose increasing immobility was enigmatically inexpressive. Despite their enigmatic quality, these increasingly condensed structures still contained the combinatory potential that Rainer encountered in her first group work, *Dance for 3 People With 6 Arms*. As such, the perplexing persistence of immobility assumed expressive value in Rainer's subsequent choreography. From amid the sprawl of these dances, this impassive mode of expression manifested itself in one mundane object, a mattress— an object that impeded movement and concealed the acting subject.

The Mattress is the Medium

The emergence of the mattress marked the beginning of Rainer's departure from the chaotic profusion that characterized *Terrain* and *Room Service*. These works overwhelmed Rainer, who recognized the untenable trajectory of their structural complexity and physical sprawl. As Banes recounts, "for Rainer, who had been exhausted after *Terrain...* and *Room Service* in particular— these performances signaled a turning point in her work (Banes 1993, 177). Nevertheless, despite her growing differences with Judson's members and their charismatic mania, the cumbersome, cluttered set in *Room Service* provided the conditions necessary for Rainer to discover this "turning point," which literally presented an escape route. In particular, Rainer became "excited" by a "particular piece of business" involving a

mattress, whose path led her outside the theatre: "2 of us carrying a mattress up an aisle, out the rear exit, around and in again thru a side exit" (Rainer 1965, 168).

Rainer's enthusiasm for this seemingly anodyne event may be attributed to the obtrusive set in *Room Service*. Like the set, she described the mattress as a "bulky object," whose cumbersome weight limited the choreography's physical possibilities and reduced the dancers to bearers of mute mass. Indeed, Rainer noted that it was not necessary to project theatrical qualities while transporting the mattress: "No stylization needed. It seemed to be so self-contained an act as to require no artistic tampering or justification" (Rainer 1965, 168). This "self-contained" character derived from this act's concisely finite structure, which consisted of "removing [the mattress] from the scene and re-introducing it." Despite its brevity, Rainer's description follows an immemorial narrative format, the journey. Over the course of this journey, the mattress left the "scene," theatre's visible space and returned, albeit apparently without the transformation that typically distinguishes narratives of voyage. The absence of transformation made this "particular piece of business" self-contained and inaccessible to an audience, who could not experience whatever may have been offstage. The audience could only perceive what they did not witness: their separation from events beyond their immediate perspective. Like a wall, this "bulky" mattress provided a dense partition that embodied this separation. The mattress thus introduced an unusual separation, which conveyed the unrevealed content that it divided.

As embodied by the mattress, this connecting division became the subject of Rainer's next work, *Parts of Some Sextets*, "a dance for 10 people and 12 mattresses" (Rainer 1965, 168). Similar to such structural segmentation, the title suggests haphazard fragmentation, whose abrasive quality cascades through its overtly emphatic alliteration. The title also bears the ribald irony that saturates Rainer's voice: "the larger piece had expanded [from six] to 10 people, but I liked the corny

pun on sex" (Rainer 1965, 169). Like *Terrain*, *Parts of Some Sextets* drew upon the

full range of Rainer's artistic vocabulary and distributed its motifs among thirty-one

possible movement variations. Due to scant scholarly reconstruction, it is necessary to

rely on Rainer's notes, which she published as an essay in 1965.[4] In this essay, Rainer

provided a list of the dance's "31 possibilities":

"The 31 possibilities as briefly described on the chart are: 1. Duet: Corridor Solo; 2.
Duet: Bob's entrance thru Y's squeals; 3. Duet: Leaning away thru 1st embraces; 4.
Duet: Diagonal run to end; 5. Bird run; 6. Running thru; 7. Racing walk; 8. Solo
beginning with shifting of weight; 9. Standing figure; 10. Bent-over walk; 11. Quartet;
12. Rope duet (with rope); 13. Rope movements 1 thru 4; 14. Rope movements 5 thru
8; 15. Rope movements 9 thru 13; 16. One vertical mattress moving back and forth on
a single layer; 17. "Swedish werewolf" (always off-stage); 18. Human flies on
mattress pile; 19. Formation #1 (fling); 20. Formation #2 (with "bug squash"); 21.
Move pile to other side; 22. Peel one at a time; 23. Crawl thru below top mattress; 24.
Standing figure on top of pile; 25. House lights; 26. One person running another into
pile; 27. Bob's diagonal; 28. Sitting figure; 29. Sleeping figure; 30. Vague
movements; 31. Formation #3 (pile-up)." (Rainer 1965, 173-5)

This list contains many themes from Rainer's previous work. For instance, her

interest in the body's clumsy weight and likeness to unwieldy objects evidently

informed "Solo beginning with shifting of weight," "Bent-over walk," "Move pile to

other side," and "Crawl thru top mattress." She released a fitful "squeal" in the second

duet, and her related investigation of ironically inhibited erotics, especially as

exhibited by bluntly awkward bodies, characterized "Duet: Leaning away thru 1st

embraces." The frequent use of ordinary movement amid seemingly playful activities

also informed the performance's tone. Save one sequence, *Parts of Some Sextets* used

trained and amateur dancers. Instead of technical discipline, an exuberantly childish

---

[4] I cite this essay, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts
of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial
Church, New York, in March, 1965," throughout the surrounding analysis. Its laborious length
anticipates the approaching advent of Rainer's "torrential verbosity," and moreover, parallels her use of
language in *Parts of Some Sextets.*

physicality characterized their general exercises, such as running, jumping, and lugging mattresses. Likewise, certain scenes' titles, including "Human flies on mattress pile," "bug squash," and "Swedish werewolf," also suggest wildly unrestrained hilarity.

Despite these traces of Rainer's former affinity for gleefully self-indulgent games, *Parts of Some Sextets* was resolutely impersonal— and formal. In a recent study of Rainer's choreography, art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty describes the dance as "distinctly athletic," but also "uniform": "Nobody... is at rest, but nobody is at an extreme of bodily tension... Arms, if extended, are not quite stretched, legs are only narrowly scissored open... Postures are erect, stable, pedestrian" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 181). Given this uniform quality, such ordinary movement ceased to resemble play and became work. As Rainer recalls, its rehearsal process was work, "dry, plodding work" (Rainer 1965, 177).

There were two reasons for the laborious tedium that permeated *Parts of Some Sextets*: Rainer's imposition of authorial control and its relentless time structure. Contrary to the anarchically excited spirit of chance procedures that previously characterized her work, Rainer had become convinced that authorial intervention was necessary. She first discovered that chance procedures were insufficient during the composition of *Terrain*. *Terrain* synthetically fused her many threads of artistic inquiry into a single work. In order to maintain order among the ensuing expanse of possible variations, she unwittingly produced a conventional structural synthesis of these competing themes, which culminated in Bach's concluding cantata. Since such structure grounds itself on the negation of unrealized possibilities— or figuratively speaking, the death of potential— Bach's mournful music indicated Rainer's compositional success, but equally her artistic failure to undo its terms.

As an alternative to the synthetic structural continuity achieved in *Terrain*, Rainer introduced a rudimentary organizational device in *Parts of Some Sextets*, fixed time frames. She divided the dance into eighty-four frames, which designated units of thirty seconds. Rainer transposed this matrix of possibilities to graph paper, on which she "made random marks" that determined thirty-second actions (Rainer 1965, 175). However, remarking that "my choices were intuitively and subliminally aesthetic," she admitted to imposing her authorial influence on this aleatory order. Above all, her intervention was intended to avoid the extended repetition employed in *Terrain* and *We Shall Run*. Unlike these performances, she prevented "prolonged involvement with any one image" through the use of consistent interruptions— ceaselessly insistent thirty-second shifts (Rainer 1965, 173).

Despite the diversity of its vocabulary, these fixed time frames were the predominant feature of *Parts of Some Sextets*. They proceeded with unpleasantly implacable regularity, whose mechanical order influenced the dancers' attitude of impersonal efficiency. In rehearsal, before adding a dryly stilted soundtrack— her recorded transcription of "the *Diary of William Bentley, DD* a late 18th-century Episcopal minister who lived in Salem, Mass."— Rainer shouted "change" to mark each shift (Rainer 1965, 173). Even though these commands did not occur in performance, Jill Johnston, who was usually Judson's champion, responded sourly to their trace: "there is something even slightly grotesque about playground activity subjected to signal commands at regular intervals" (in Lambert-Beatty 2008, 93). Indeed, instead of opening a field of free play, Rainer labored to resist such "playground activity," and more importantly, a prescribed field of rule-based possibilities.

In pursuit of this goal, she restricted sequential development in time— and also space. In her reflections on *Parts of Some Sextets*, Rainer states that "I wanted the

whole situation to take place in front of the audience" (Rainer 1965, 172). This visual restriction corresponded to the mattresses, which conveyed the limited range granted to theatrical expression. Unfortunately, without adequate documentation, it is difficult to specify the mattresses' exact role in the dance. After considering the few remaining photographs, Lambert-Beatty proposed that "the mattresses... are collectively legible as the record of a specifically serial action," so that, like geological records, their progressive pattern reveals traces of an unidentifiably distant time (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 80). More immediately, it is possible to identify the mattresses' functions within the performance. According to Rainer's list of activities, the mattresses were moved, arranged, passed, stood upon, crawled through, and used as a landing pad or crash site. Although they enabled play, such cumbersome mattresses also impeded physical movement and choreographic expression. Hence, these obstacles, which distinctly outnumbered the performers, eclipsed individual expression and literally enveloped their figures, as if dancers were disappearing. The disappearance of the human figure was implicit in Rainer's original conception of *Parts of Some Sextets*: "Began thinking about a sextet, 6 people plus a stack of single mattresses the height of a man" (Rainer 1965, 169). Like like the restrictive time frames, the mattresses caused visual interference that obstructed "prolonged involvement with any one image" (Rainer 1965, 173). Both forms of obstacles thus prevented the associative identification of analogous patterns, and their incessant disruption became the performance's primary impression: unpleasantly abrasive and physically jarring.

However, rather than a single, catastrophically overwhelming disruption, *Parts of Some Sextets* staged serial interruptions. As Lambert-Beatty observes, it was "built on continuous stopping" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 107). Lambert-Beatty identifies such "continuous stopping" with a particular media, film— especially rudimentary films, which "like the Lumière brothers" preceded the editing process established in

montage: "what was missing... was the *edit*... though full of cuts, [*Parts of Some Sextets*] was without montage" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 106). This mechanical intrusion into Rainer's choreographic structure incited a defensive reaction, as if being rejected by dance's traditional medium, the human body. In order to maintain this mechanical motion, it was thus necessary to mount an autoimmune counter-reaction.

Once begun, it is impossible to arrest autoimmunity. Autoimmunity is an automated process of incessant interruption that relentlessly renews itself. According to Derrida, this "automatisation" or "machinalité" generates an irresistibly repetitive impulse, whose movement resembles an involuntary "reflex": "cette automaticité quasi spontanée, irréflechie comme un reflexe" (Derrida 2000, 64). It is important to note the violent nature of this virulently reflexive process that consumes its subject, as if a disease. Similar to acid reflux, "automaticité" causes a stomach-churning revulsion in reaction to the prosthetic presence of the mechanical, which "reproduit avec la regularité d'une technique, l'instant du non-vivant ou, si l'on préfère, du mort dans le vivant" (Derrida 2000, 64). In order to escape this prosthetic intrusion, the autoimmune subject would do almost anything, perhaps even immoral or obscene acts. It thus requires extreme discipline to endure this grueling process of self-sacrifice, which enables access to life excluded from theatrical form— literally, the ob-scene.

The mechanically automated movement of autoimmunity is essential to obscene expression. Its process of incessant stopping interrupts the progressive development of dramatic structure, whose continuity depends on formal unity. However, rather than solely disrupting dramatic unity— as would an avant-garde artistic tradition, such as surrealism, from which Rainer sought to escape— machinalité predicates an alternative form of structural continuity. Like film, autoimmune movement provides a connection to ob-scene events from beyond the boundaries of the theatrical scene. Nevertheless, in the absence of dramatic structure,

these disorganized events remain self-contained and undisclosed, as if impeded by an impasse— namely, the screen.

This impasse is the material manifestation of autoimmunity, whose self-directed assault causes an increase in the production of antibodies. Applied to Rainer's choreography, these antibodies clog the clarity of physical and vocal expression, which becomes distended, as if malformed. In contrast to the typical definition of a screen in film, this impassive surface impedes visual expression. The screen thus emerged in *Parts of Some Sextets* as a cumbersome object that hampered movement and obstructed the view of individual dancers— the mattresses. Furthermore, the mattress served as a medium that initiated a transition from visual to acoustic expression and in turn informed the dance's muffled "music," which was a strange spoken text.

Given that music traditionally determines choreographic structure, it is significant that Rainer chose to include a spoken text. In this regard, it is tempting to declare that *Parts of Some Sextets* had overcome the silence imposed on choreography by classical dance. However, this text's particular subject and its unusual delivery are consistent with the presence of the screen, which withholds the content that it conveys. Accordingly, as withheld by the screen, this text was delayed in two ways: it was an actual historical document that referred to the past and also a recording, which Rainer had previously spoken. The impression of this delay is essential to the process of relaying remote events from beyond theatre's spatial and temporal confines. In his diaries, William Bentley, an 18th-century Episcopalian minister from Salem, Massachusetts, fastidiously recorded his daily life. Apparently unconcerned with literary style, his recollections were tedious transcriptions of mundane minutiae, the "quotidian record of Bentley's activities and those of his parishioners" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 99). Relative to Rainer's integration of mechanical reproduction, it is

crucial to note that she stressed the diary's archival remove from her audience by recording her reading on tape. Moreover, her slow, evenly-paced, "deadpan" interpretation of this dully droning text matched the mechanical repetition of its time structure and emphasized the technical degradation and delay of information (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 103). Rainer's style of speech thus reflected the diaries' indistinctly equal treatment of events, which were organized without a narrative frame. As such, Bentley's diary was a seemingly unending list, which without narrative order remained a confused mass of irrelevant, empirical details: "who died, what building burned, where Bentley strolled, with whom he ate, who came to him for counsel, who owed him money, to whom he owed [money]" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 99). Although these recollections may seem insipidly routine, they have something that fictional events do not— they actually happened. As actual events, they retained an emotional reservoir particular to personal experience.

This use of Bentley's diary was not Rainer's only attempt to relate biographical events. She previously included personal narration in an early solo, *Ordinary Dance* (1962), in which she recounted her home addresses and grade school teachers (Banes 1993, 66). Like Bentley's diary, without a narrative framework, this list of actual places and people from her life remained emotionally unintelligible. Two years later, in *At My Body's House,* Rainer improved her techniques of autobiographical expression. In this solo, she first used Bentley's diary, reciting his 1797 description of an elephant. Instead of a providing an absorbing image of this miraculous animal, Bentley's depiction conveyed the difficulty of its remote reconstruction. As if to apologize for his inadequate description, he emphasized the limitations that obstructed his perspective: "Went to Market House to see the elephant. The crowd of spectators forbad me any but a general and superficial view of him" (in Lambert-Beatty 2008, 101). Whether these visual obstacles were imagined or not,

Bentley effectively transcribed an image that neither he nor his reader had ever seen, and to which thus no concept was adequate. No description could suffice without having seen an elephant in person— or without the aid of technical mediation.

By using Bentley's historical accounts, Rainer's performances likewise integrated elements whose ensemble was incommensurate with their limited expressive capacity. In this regard, her use of Bentley's diary coincided with her attempt to relay events from beyond the stage. In the context of the dance's diverse events, Bentley's banal description likely receded to the background, as if mere monotonous noise. However, relayed through the mattress, these murmurs were actually expressions of virtual possibilities, which were yet to occur, or potential events that had been constrained to the archive of stillborn history.

Despite imparting such potential events, this process of mediation does not redeem the lost history of personal expression, which remains unintelligible and remotely apart. In fact, this separation is paradoxically essential to its communication. The recognition of its loss produces two reactions: cathartic release and fury. Because it cannot be attained, this momentary catharsis triggers a furious desire for justice that emerged in Rainer's chronically antagonized voice and self-disciplined determination. These two reactions are linked in a self-perpetuating circuit, which resembles the mechanical quality of continuous cuts in *Parts of Some Sextets*, and likewise, the "automatization" of autoimmunity— or its "machanalité."

The mattress too conformed to the contradictory logic of autoimmunity. Akin to Rainer's mounting "mucus," the mattress distended and immobilized expression, even as it relayed events from beyond theatrical space. Like Rainer, the mattress was literally stuffed up and figuratively crammed with overdetermined associations, which Rainer enumerated in a 1976 interview: "[the mattresses] suggested everything from a derelict flophouse to a hospital, sex, sleep, and dreams" (Rainer 1999, 73). These

associations evoke sites of perilous neglect— "a derelict flophouse"— or even the horrors of clinical isolation, which eviscerates identity, leaving only a squalid remainder of life. Although Derrida does not refer to the clinic in "Faith and Knowledge," he does discuss the potential harm that could be inflicted on politically unprotected subjects, such as those committed to correctional institutions. Derrida refers to the specter of this potential harm as "radical evil," which will be discussed in the context of William Forsythe's political performances in chapter four.

In a sense, radical evil defines the limit of Rainer's engagement with autoimmunity in *Parts of Some Sextets*, which did not expressly confront the specter of clinical and sexual abjection. Its mattresses remained mattresses: heavy, inert, and unremarkably ordinary. The mattresses' impassive quality— and their capacity to immobilize the dancer— was crucial to Rainer's early choreography. In surpassing its literal function, the mattress served as a screen. In contrast to a surface upon which film is projected, this screen was an impasse that separated spectators from performers and occluded a clear view of staged events. Like Rainer's congested choreographic structures, the mattress embodied obstacles that inhibited expressive movement. As a member of Judson, it is commonplace to observe that Rainer expanded the definition of dance to include any movement, but more importantly, she had also integrated non-movement: the supine state which normally dictates interactions with a mattress. As a screen, this impassive state of near immobility gained expressive value. In becoming immobile, Rainer's choreography relayed events from beyond the theatrical scene. Passing through the screen, these remote events produced unintelligible transmissions, whose medium withheld the content that it imparted. Such irritatingly enigmatic transmissions were autoimmune expressions of an impossible union: community, or "com-mon auto-immunity." As the hyphen indicates, collective life must be

understood as an afterlife, which is always set a-part by a screen that connects what it divides.

In *Parts of Some Sextets,* the choreography's abrasively intermittent structure— and its formal affinity to film— catalyzed the autoimmune process. To its audience, the aggravating quality of such intermittent movement certainly overshadowed this autoimmune afterlife. Admittedly, Rainer had not consciously articulated this process, nor was she to continue its development in her subsequent dance, *Trio A*. As a moment in Rainer's artistic career, *Parts of Some Sextets* was an important error, whose temporal structure was accidental, unrefined, and ultimately untenable. In fact, Rainer described its flaws in unflattering terms: "The dance 'went nowhere,' did not develop, progressed as though on a treadmill or like a 10-ton truck stuck on a hill: it shifts gears, groans, sweats, farts, but doesn't move an inch" (Rainer 1965, 178). In response to this irritated litany of coarse corporeal impediments upon movement, *Trio A* explored an exceptional form of motion, which relieved the symptoms caused by autoimmunity without returning to the formal unity that predicated classical dance. As if stepping out of bed and off the mattress for the first time, this exceptional choreographic process engaged a mode of movement that was antithetical to dance— walking.

CHAPTER TWO

THE AMBULATORY AESTHETICS OF YVONNE RAINER'S *TRIO A*

"We will imagine the human turning as it walks, deviating from its forward path in order, precisely, to move forward, advancing necessarily askew. To repeat: the turn is the deviation from itself by means of which the human, in being or 'moving' simply human, is understood to become technological."

-David Wills, *Dorsality*

Upon beginning her choreographic experiments for *Parts of Some Sextets*, Yvonne Rainer remarked that "it was necessary to find a different way to move" (Rainer 1965, 170). However, her ultimate assessment of the dance indicates that she felt that this goal had remained unrealized. In this idiosyncratic statement, Rainer describes *Parts of Some Sextets*, as if it were altogether incapable of movement, "stuck on a hill" like a "10-ton truck" (Rainer 1965, 178). Despite its comically cantankerous tone, this comment responded to the dance's demanding, paradoxical predicate: the continuous stopping of film's intermittent movement. In search of relief from the static insistence of this relentlessly successive structure, Rainer applied an alternative compositional method to her next dance in 1966, *Trio A*. As its name suggests, *Trio A* was the prototype for an exceptional form of movement that Rainer developed in reaction against *Parts of Some Sextets*— a choreography of continuous motion.

This chapter investigates the choreographic process of maintaining this exceptional method of continuous movement. In particular, it relates the process of maintaining such continuous, singular movement to a common method of pedestrian motion, walking. In order to distinguish between the actual act of walking and *Trio A's* formal process, I have chosen an abstract term as a name for this peculiar aesthetic paradigm: the ambulatory. As a means of animating continuous motion, the ambulatory replaces the process of incessant interruption that predicates Rainer's

preceding dances— autoimmunity. Like autoimmunity, ambulatory movement establishes a form of structural continuity that does not rely on dramatic unity. Given that both paradigms disinter dramatic unity, they are equally capable of relaying content from beyond theatre's spatial and narrative frame. As such, the ambulatory also relates to film, whose ceaseless movement produces an impression of animate life and transports the spectator beyond the immediate boundaries of place that define theatre. In *Parts of Some Sextets*, the autoimmune connection to life beyond the theatrical frame manifested itself in the mattress, which adopted and adapted a common component of the cinematic apparatus, the screen. As exemplified by the mattress' obtrusive presence, the screen interferes with theatre's conventional regimes of corporeal and visual expression and ultimately provided an intermediary— or medium— for events excluded from the scene.

Despite the absence of an actual screen in *Trio A*, I maintain that the ambulatory likewise cultivates consciousness of potential events that cannot transpire in theatre's immediate framework. Above all, these remove events relate to ordinary phenomena, which are literally located outside the theatre, and whose supposedly non-conceptual order is excluded from aesthetic expression. As an example of the ambulatory, it is necessary to separate *Trio A* from Rainer's previous choreography. Even in this regard, my reading diverges from most histories of the dance, which generally regard it to be the culmination of Rainer's oeuvre— her "masterpiece." Certainly, *Trio A* is her best-known dance. Over the course of four decades, it has enjoyed multiple revisions and revivals, including a 1969 nearly nude performance clad only in flags, a 1997 "geriatric" version, and its recent reworking in a series entitled *Trio A Pressured* (Rainer 1999, 30).

Despite this vaunted role in dance history, *Trio A* is unusually elliptical. It is short, and in performance scarcely lasts five minutes. Moreover, it is oddly

ambiguous in character and includes ordinary gestures in a way that purposefully

eludes consistent patterns of identification and thus induces an ethos of ambivalence.

Instead of attending to the numerous nuances of such ambivalence, canonical accounts

of *Trio A* attribute its success to a conveniently circumscribed category: the polemic

mode of stylistic opposition begun in her previous work, pedestrian movement. As

recounted in chapter one, Rainer was one of the foremost members of the sixties

performance collective, Judson Dance Theatre. Canonical dance history associates

Judson with its use of ordinary movement, which served as a polemic against the

virtuosity of classical dance. In these pedestrian performances, any movement was

valid, and according to Sally Banes, the historian responsible for preserving and

popularizing Judson's legacy in the early eighties, this rebellious act of artistic

repudiation broke open a new realm of choreographic possibilities that marked the

advent of "postmodern dance."[5] Although the dance unquestionably employs ordinary

movement, my reading contests this account of postmodern dance. In particular, I

argue that *Trio A* achieves a conceptual engagement with the ordinary by means of an

artistic process that relates to— but cannot be reduced to— pedestrian movement: the

ambulatory. Furthermore, since the ambulatory is instantiated in artistic practice, it

would be best to begin by turning to Rainer's elliptically uneventful classic of

contemporary choreography.

     Trio A begins with a hesitation. Standing in profile, the dancer— who is

choreographer Yvonne Rainer in this canonical 1978 film version— begins to turn her

---

[5] There has been a recent resurgence of critical interest in the history of Judson Dance Theatre, especially Yvonne Rainer. Led by Mark Franko, Ramsay Burt, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty, there is a growing consensus that Banes' history no longer supplies its subject with an adequate conceptual framework. Thirty years after its initial articulation, her central term— the postmodern— has become a dubious historical distinction. Furthermore, Banes' insistence on the inherently ephemeral nature of dance presupposes a fallacious dichotomy between the live and the mediated. I nevertheless consider her writing on *Trio A* in *Terpsichore in Sneakers* an exemplary act of close reading, whose poetic insights surpass the limitations of its theoretical foundation. Throughout this essay, I draw on this book's incisive observations in order to refine my own argument, but also to indicate the implicit conceptual complexity of her descriptive analysis.

head towards the audience.[6] Nearly immediately, she retracts this movement and returns her gaze forward. This sidelong glance lasts just long enough to attract attention, but its brevity precludes accurate identification and renders Rainer's intention uncertain. Was it an incidental slip? A hesitation? A knowing nod? Or perhaps, an arrested appeal to the audience? If an arrested appeal, this gesture would be consistent with one of *Trio A*'s fundamental compositional rules, which restricts visual contact between spectator and performer. This attempt to avoid the spectator's gaze has been one of *Trio A*'s defining legacies and a precursor to Rainer's rejection of live performance and emergence as a pioneering feminist filmmaker during the 1970s. In fact, despite a recent return to choreography, Rainer may be best known for her films— that is, save *Trio A*.

Following her initial hesitation, Rainer turns her head in the opposite direction, away from the audience, which suggests that she is slyly alluding to her restriction upon visual contact. Although such a reference to its compositional order would be structurally coherent, *Trio A* consistently eludes clear formal distinctions. In this case, since the choreography does not follow a set spatial structure, the dancer's orientation to the audience is incidental. It is thus impossible to ascribe a particular purpose to her ostensible hesitation, which may have been a peculiarity particular to this performance, an unconscious equivocation, or even an outright error.   The indecipherable nature of this gesture is consistent with the dance's quizzically inconclusive character. This "hesitation"— and the formal ambivalence to which it

---

[6] The only extant film version of *Trio A* was made by Sally Banes in 1978. As befits Banes' understandably limited experience with cinematography, this is a rudimentary film. Apparently intended for archival purposes, it consists of a single shot and proceeds without the application of editing techniques, as if to approximate a theatrical setting. On account of this format, throughout my argument I refer to *Trio A* in terms that correspond to the formal logic of theatre. This critical vocabulary will be most evident to readers from outside the field of theatre, who may not be familiar with Banes' canonical film. Although not necessary, it would be advisable for readers unfamiliar with *Trio A* to watch the film, especially since it is short in length and readily available on the Internet. Incidentally, the unusual ease of access made possible by such digital dissemination coincides with the special mode of mobility that is the subject of this chapter— the ambulatory.

corresponds— keeps spectator and performer alike off-balance and bound to a peculiarly pedestrian mode of movement, the ambulatory.

At first, it can be difficult to detect the elusive quality that characterizes ambulatory motion. As if a purely formal exercise, *Trio A* may seem devoid of emotional expression. It is short and hardly seems to begin before it is over. Furthermore, the little that transpires seems unremarkable. No words are spoken, no sound uttered. The choreography is famously understated, an abstract amalgam of incomplete technical phrases and gestural idiosyncrasies. Following an unhurried pace, it impassively proceeds with perfunctory precision through a series of unimposing postures: she stands, squats, stretches her arms, and slouches to the floor. This blandly banal range of movement corresponds to its apathetic execution. Apparently unconcerned with technical rigor, Rainer allows her arms to sway and swing, never extending them to their full length, and rarely leaps or leaves the floor.

Trio A's stylistic detachment is often associated with 1960s American minimalism, especially minimalist sculpture. Rainer herself introduced minimalist sculpture as a point of comparison in a seminal essay reflecting on *Trio A*'s composition. In this essay, she articulated her opposition to conventions of dramatic display in dance. As an inanimate object, sculpture provides an apt model for Rainer's attempt to neutralize dramatic expression. She recognizes that her previous choreographic strategies had sought to make the body like a "thing": "The alternatives that were explored now are obvious: stand, walk, run, eat, carry bricks, watch movies, move or be moved by some *thing* other than oneself." (Rainer 1999, 33). Since anyone could undertake such ordinary movements, the performer becomes interchangeable, or according to Rainer, a "neutral doer" (Rainer 1999, 33).

However, despite its impersonal mode of expression, *Trio A* is not rigidly mechanical. The choreography wavers, wobbles, and shakes, always unstable. Even

when simply standing, a faint trembling undermines its equilibrium. In one telling gesture, she inconspicuously unsettles a simple forward bend by holding one foot just above the ground. The choreography also employs preposterous physical feats that exaggerate her awkward imbalance.   In one such movement, Rainer dumps herself into a handstand, legs flailing above her; in another, she unexpectedly bears her head down, clasps her hands behind her and blunders thunderously forward, heavily hopping on each foot. In yet another, she hoists a knee waist-high and pivots in a circle. Forced to shift while on a single leg, her pointlessly peculiar method of locomotion emphasizes her cumbersome weight.

Were it not for the impervious detachment particular to *Trio A*, such stupidly spectacular displays of bodily excess might seem comic. Rainer had consciously pursued such comic clumsiness in her previous choreography. These conspicuous displays of unnecessary labor were intemperate acts of disobedience, conducted in opposition to the imposed elegance of classical dance. Nevertheless, the quality of movement in *Trio A* does not exclusively convey the body's immobile mass. On the contrary, a certain lightness, even grace, pervades its awkward physicality. This lightness manifests itself in peripherally passing accents, such as deft flicks of a foot, artfully arched palms, or several series of gentle tapping. These gestures primarily involve the hands and feet, which visually deflect attention from the body's core, the center of its weight. Although never on point nor airborne, Rainer frequently propels herself above the ground in relevé. Such balletic details introduce a trace of ethereal elegance into the dance, including its final image, in which Rainer punctuates a gentle sweep of her arms with a single step backwards, her foot flexed and alertly poised.

These details also convey a playful tone that is at once alert and absent-minded. It is possible to glimpse such an innocent image of child-like play in one gleeful burst of skipping. Other apparently playful gestures— batting her hair, rolling

on the floor, crouched rocking— suggest a more infantile character. These purposefully pointless tics reflect Rainer's earlier affectation of socially aberrant behavior, for which she cites "the loony bin and the NY subways as sources of inspiration" (Rainer 1965, 169). In her earlier choreography, such imitations of regressive behavior were intentionally petulant acts of strategic transgression. By demeaning herself, Rainer staged an assault on meaning, or in her words, "hierarchical distinctions of meaning." According to Rainer, this was the purpose of "collage strategies," a technique established by what she calls "that segment of the surrealist tradition which, from Schwitters to Cage to Rauschenberg... sought to equalize and suppress hierarchical distinctions of meaning" (Rainer 1999, 94).

To this end, *Trio A* incorporated multiple movement vocabularies, including balletic flourishes, modern contractions, ordinary gestures, and overdetermined eccentricities. Given these idioms' intrinsic conflict, it may seem that Rainer had again used "collage strategies" to pursue a transgressive agenda. Nevertheless, conflict does not define its tone, nor does collage inform its underlying structure. On the contrary, *Trio A* departs from the avant-garde's strategic provocations and stills its disruptive legacy. In particular, *Trio A* introduces a mode of structural continuity not predicated on unity. This mode of continuity has an unusual predicate, constant motion. Simply put, *Trio A* never stops. Albeit far from frantic, it proceeds in an unerringly purposeful pattern, in which "one discrete thing follows another" (Rainer 1999, 34).

This discretely singular pattern begins in the first moments of the dance. Its three initial gestures— bending her knees, turning her head, and swinging her arms— are each adjoined with a purposeful pause that emphasizes their independence or "discrete" value. Each movement is "discrete"— that is, separate and singular— because the choreography's construction consciously avoids repetition. As Rainer

recounts, this renunciation was a conscious choice. She writes that: "in a strict sense neither is there any repetition... this procedure was consciously pursued as a change from my previous work, which often had one identical thing following another" (Rainer 1999, 35). The absence of repetition in the dance prevents the development of particular themes or variations. Instead of mobilizing an ensemble of thematically related parts, each "discrete" movement arrests an incipient instant of narrative determination— the moment when a sequence truncates itself to become a self-contained series.

This division coincides with a perceptual limit beyond which it is impossible to account for such discrete movements. The arrival of this limit marks the advent of the index, the point at which representation takes recourse to reference. Since this indexical division overwhelms perceptual capacities, its approach induces a slight shudder. This scarcely detectable shudder informs the choreography's principal characteristics: its disconcerting disequilibrium, odd rocking, wobbling, and even its initial hesitation. As such, it emerges that its initial hesitation does refer to a fundamental compositional rule: the ceaseless deferral of dramatic action. Instead of moving forward, or advancing towards a climax, *Trio A* suspends linear progress.

Without a linear progression, the dance seems to regress into detours and digressions. In its choreography, these detours result in a perpetual process of turning. As Banes observes, "the body constantly revolves, circling back on itself" (Banes 1987, 51). Constantly in the act of "circling back," such ceaseless turning never completes a full revolution. Banes thus contrasts it to a "pirouette," which traces a perfect circle (Banes 1987, 51). Rather than a circle, the choreography conforms to a spiral, whose unending— or more pertinently, undivided— movement issues from a single point. Attached to this imperceptible point, *Trio A* remains redundantly in

place, at times appearing to literally pace in place, and always confined to a small area, albeit in constant motion.

This lack of forward progress contributes to the dance's elliptically impassive, almost solipsistic appearance— the appearance that it is missing something vital, such as meaning. In fact, something is missing in *Trio A*: a final goal. Unmoored from a teleological trajectory, this purposeless pattern of movement resembles an unremarkable form of locomotion, walking. In this context, Rainer's phrase for the dance's constant motion— namely, that "one discrete thing follow another"— could be rephrased as one *foot* following another. Used as a transition in *Trio A*, walking steps are the only repetition Rainer cannot avoid. Moreover, throughout its four decade history, *Trio A* has proven to be literally mobile. Performed by amateurs and professionals alike onstage and in city streets, it has traversed diverse bodies and spaces. Of course, such outward indicators of mobility are less important than its structural relationship to space. Because *Trio A* suspends the arrival of dramatic unity, it likewise defers the instantiation of a particular place— a site whose fixed location constitutes the theatrical frame.

This opposition to the constitution of place corresponds to Michel de Certeau's influential reflections on walking. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau proposes that places and spaces function as opposing orders. Unlike a place, which is organized according to "the law of the 'proper,'" situating "each [element] in its... own distinct location," space is a dynamically fluid network of incessantly changing constellations (De Certeau 1984, 117). De Certeau refers to these constellations as "mobile elements," writing that space is "composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. [...] In contradistinction to place, it has none of the univocity or stability of a 'proper.' In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street defined by urban planning is

transformed into a space by walkers" (De Certeau 1984, 117). Like the practice of everyday life, walking responds to incalculably variable conditions. The pedestrian begins, but invariably breaks off, improvising en route, ready to adjust, appropriate obstacles, or adopt a different direction altogether. Walking is at once ingenious and ingenuous, a routine activity that demands incessantly renewed resourcefulness.

Such unconscious cunning relates to de Certeau's term for the repertoire of ruses required in everyday life, "tactics." In an attempt to consider the literal application of walking in dance, the prominent dance historian Susan Leigh Foster explicates this concept of tactics. She writes that: "for de Certeau, tactics consist in momentary disruptions to the coercive power of strategic structures. Tactics have no goal beyond the sometimes playful, always critical exposure of... the normative" (Foster 2002, 130). As Foster notes, "tactics have no goal," and nor for that matter does *Trio A*, at least so long as it avoids repetition. Like de Certeau's notion of walking, such carefully— or rather, tactically— choreographed movements must maintain constant motion. Foster also observes that tactical movement is necessarily incessant and cites de Certeau's description of such ceaseless shifting: "a tactic depends on time— it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized 'on the wing.' Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events..." (in Foster 2002, 130). Even if not immediately evident, this constant manipulation permeates *Trio A*. For instance, Rainer states that the dance requires "many different degrees of effort" (Rainer 1999, 35). In its choreography, Rainer's own footsteps employ such varying degrees of effort and expressive quality. She moves on tip-toe, slides her foot flat along the floor, and uses a variety of hops and skips, including one, and only one, short jump. As an additional variable, Rainer frequently applies balletic turnout to her footwork, which inflects her gait with unpredictable lines of internal rotation.

With regard to ballet, Banes remarks on *Trio A*'s combination of dance vocabularies, which she calls "a kind of catalogue of movement possibilities" (Banes 1987, 47). In response to the need to avoid repetition, Rainer resorts to multiple movement idioms as a tactical necessity. Its choreographic logic is that of *braconnage*, which translates as "poaching." As proposed by de Certeau, poaching is common to all spheres of everyday life. In order to elaborate upon its practice in walking, he turns to ordinary language: "There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of 'turning phrases' finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path. Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses" (De Certeau 1984, 100). Similar to the collection of secondhand objects in "bric-a-brac" fashion, ordinary language indiscriminately "combines styles and uses." It occurs without conscious effort, as if naturally, a routine affair conducted in a state of distraction.

Such adept distraction aptly describes Rainer's "neutral" attitude in *Trio A*, whose emotional distance and relaxed limbs contrast its efficient execution. This efficiency resembles the result of long periods of practice, comparable to daily chores. Rainer actually describes *Trio A*'s choreography in terms of chores or domestic tasks. She states that: "In other words, the demands made on the body's (actual) energy resources appear to be commensurate with the task— be it getting up from the floor, raising an arm, tilting the pelvis, etc.— much as one would get out of a chair, reach for a high shelf, or walk down stairs when one is not in a hurry" (Rainer 1999, 34). Virtually everybody undertakes such ubiquitously ordinary activities, and accordingly, Rainer designed *Trio A* to be performed by nearly anyone, be it professionally trained dancers or unskilled amateurs. The dance does not depend on knowledge, or as Rainer insists, "You just *do* it" (Rainer 1965, 170). Severed from any imperative upon knowledge in action, or even the eventual arrival of self-knowledge, "task performance" in *Trio A* implies that Rainer's "neutral doer" need not be aware of their

part in a unified whole in order to adhere to an encompassing pattern. On the contrary, the production of structural continuity only requires singular action— putting one foot in front of the other.

In both *Trio A* and "Walking in the City," a constant succession of singular footsteps relieves and replaces unity as the ground for aesthetic expression. According to de Certeau, in lieu of the unity of place, spaces deploy a "polyvalent unity" (De Certeau 1984, 117). Instead of reducing and removing discontinuous elements, this "polyvalent unity" mobilizes heterogenous idioms and extraneous articulations, including diversions, digressions, and unexplained lapses. De Certeau delights in such erratic tumult, writing that "walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects... All the modalities sing a part in this chorus, changing from step to step, stepping in through proportions, sequences, and intensities, which vary according to the time, the path taken, and the walker" (De Certeau 1984, 99). De Certeau evidently admires the "unlimited diversity" of the pedestrian's proliferating syntax. Literally evoking song, his descriptive language resonates with the irrepressibly joy of a "chorus," whose harmonic confluence exceeds representation— and likewise, the representational unity of place.

However, in the context of Rainer's example, it is necessary to qualify that this chorus of footsteps *eludes*— rather than exceeds— representational unity. I maintain that on closer inspection de Certeau's analysis of walking coincides with the structural process of Rainer's choreography. Much like *Trio A*, he states that footsteps do not form self-contained series. De Certeau specifies that "their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series" (De Certeau 1984, 99). Furthermore, *Trio A*'s fundamental component, Rainer's "one discrete thing," also appears in de Certeau's description. Since the pedestrian's myriad steps do not become a series, they remain disparately singular. In de Certeau's words, "their

swarming mass [*grouillement*] is an innumerable collection of singularities" (De

Certeau 1984, 99).

This "swarming mass" of singularities relates to de Certeau's general subject,

the quotidian. Like an infinitely indefinite progression of steps, the quotidian is a

sphere of measureless diversity. Although actual, its diversity is incommensurable

with theatrical expression and lost in its narrative construction. As an aesthetic

activity that resists the production of place, walking re-assembles and relays the

everyday in intelligible form. In this regard, walking resembles an act of memory,

which reconstructs or recovers lost experience. The prospect of such redemption

inspires the delightfully ludic lyricism of de Certeau's prose, whose tone conveys a

comic vision of the world, in which nothing is lost and no step, no matter how errant,

is wrong.

Unfortunately, the ebullient optimism of this comic vision may be misleading,

especially since *Trio A* remains inscrutably enigmatic. Unlike de Certeau's city

strolls, Rainer restricts her choreography to a limited range, which lends its

performance to the theatre. In fact, *Trio A* does not transcend theatre's site, the

separation between audience and performer, nor narrative division. Its movement

instead cultivates a consciousness of this separation— that is, the necessity of division

in aesthetic expression, a fact which representation normally tries to conceal. Since

this structural division is not an object, its exposition is necessarily peripheral, or

elliptically ambivalent.

From its incipient hesitation, this ambivalence defines *Trio A*. Likewise,

despite his predominantly lyric tone, de Certeau also maintains that walking produces

ambivalence, or in his words, "equivocalness" (De Certeau 1984, 100). This

equivocalness— a term used in contrast to the "univocity" of place— results from the

perception of phenomena that are not yet subject to theatrical order and so remain in

flux. Like ordinary events, such phenomena are pointlessly provisional and have no "meaning." De Certeau compares the fluctuations of ephemeral footsteps to "a tremulous image": they create equivocalness "in the way a tremulous image confuses and multiplies the photographed object" (De Certeau 1984, 100). This reference to a tremulously moving image anticipates the medium through which *Trio A* articulates its aesthetic of separation, cinema.

Admittedly, since *Trio A* does not incorporate multimedia elements, its relation to cinema is not immediately evident. In contrast to the stage's stark physical boundaries, cinema proposes a previously unimaginable horizon: unimpeded access to actual events outside theatre. Cinema makes it possible to take a virtual stroll. Contrary to most multimedia performances, which rely on "collage strategies," *Trio A formally* emulates cinema. In particular, the choreography's ceaseless succession of singular gestures— its ambulatory movement— approximates the cinematic sequencing of individual images. In both *Trio A* and cinema, this ceaseless sequence produces a semblance of unbroken continuity between frames.

Despite its imperative on continuous movement, *Trio A* began in an enclosed space, "a tiny 6th-floor walk-up ballet studio," where Rainer explored what she calls "a different way to move" (Rainer 1965, 170). As befits such a small space, this new "way to move" integrated her immediate physical limitations: "I started at another place— wiggled my elbows, shifted from one foot to another, looked at the ceiling, shifted eye focus within a tiny radius, watched a flattened, raised hand moving and stopping, moving and stopping" (Rainer 1965, 170). In this description, Rainer seems practically paralytic and only capable of simple movements.

Such physical limitations also characterized *Convalescent Dance*, a version of *Trio A* that Rainer performed in 1967 after a nearly fatal illness. According to Rainer, *Convalescent Dance* was its "most perfectly realized version," having been

"suffused... with exactly the right quality of lightness" (Banes 1984, 52). Given Rainer's insistence on unemphatic neutrality, lightness is an improbable choreographic ideal. The word "lightness," especially in the context of "suffused," invokes an otherworldly atmosphere of ethereal grace. Having scarcely survived, Rainer was actually in a personal and physical state of graceful fragility. As such, the dance would have emphasized her weakened body— a body which, deprived of will, could be anyone's body. Emblematic of the tenuousness of life in general, such a weakened body compels compassion. Even though the title was the only indication of Rainer's exceptional state, her inability to master her movements likely caused a faint trembling. It was perhaps the ineffable lightness of this trembling that Rainer so prized in *Convalescent Dance*.

Since this trembling pervades *Trio A*, it is tempting to ascribe the dance the capacity to provide convalescent comfort or even to heal. Indeed, despite its reduced range of mobility, *Trio A* enables an exceptional form of walking, ambulatory movement. However, much as the cut between each frame inhabits the cinematic image, the ambulatory cannot transcend theatre's physical constraints, which immobilize its subjects.

Immobility haunts *Trio A* in the objectifying force of the spectator's gaze, which is ingrained into its choreography. The spectral presence of the gaze appears in Rainer's recent variation upon the dance, "Facing." In this 1999 duet version, a male partner follows the original soloist, with whom he must maintain eye contact. Rainer recalls that "I danced *Trio A* while his movements were predicated on keeping my face in view" (Rainer 2009, 14). Although "his movements" depend on Rainer, there is little evidence to indicate that Rainer acknowledges this potentially imposing male presence. According to dance critic Marcia B. Siegel, the male dancer can hardly keep up with the revolving movements of his imperturbable partner and must run "around

simply trying to keep the front of his body lined up with hers" (Siegel 2001). If Siegel's description is accurate, the dance transforms this sinister representative of surveillance into a comically inept clown, who is always late and a step behind. In this way, "Facing" demonstrates that the original choreography successfully inverts the power dynamics that correspond to dance's traditional gender roles— at least if one maintains its meticulous mode of ceaseless motion.

Despite her later interest in feminist aesthetics, Rainer's efforts to avoid the gaze originated in her dissatisfaction with dance's dramatic tendencies and the charismatic control she exerted on stage. She described dance in negative terms, narcissism and voyeurism. To enjoy being the active object of the gaze was narcissistic; the spectator, on the other hand, was an unrepentant voyeur. Rainer specified this relationship in a 1973 letter: "Dance is ipso facto about *me* (the so called kinesthetic response of the spectator notwithstanding, it only rarely transcends that narcissistic-voyeuristic duality of doer and looker)" (Rainer 1999, 5). In order to escape this duality, Rainer turned to film in the early seventies, which effectively removed herself from dance's narcissistic circuit.

As a provisional solution in *Trio A*, Rainer limited the connection between spectator and performer— in particular, their visual exchange. She recounts that "the 'problem' of performance was dealt with by never permitting the performers to confront the audience. Either the gaze was averted or the head was engaged in movement" (Rainer 1999, 35). This visual evasion requires multiple tactical maneuvers: she turns her head in circles, stares at the floor or in the air, and deliberately hides her eyes, which are themselves constantly shifting. However, this retreat had unintended consequences. In a strikingly original insight, Peggy Phelan states that "rather than eliminating voyeurism, *Trio A* displaced it" (in Phelan 1999, 6). Phelan also determines that this "displaced" voyeurism has a formal affinity with film:

"Rainer had, perhaps unwittingly, initiated a kind of filmic voyeurism into live performance. Since voyeurism is contingent upon looking while remaining unseen oneself, *Trio A* encouraged a less inhibited voyeurism than the one usually operative in live performance where the spectator must confront the possibility of being seen... Thus, in short, *Trio A* produced a *proto-cinematic* relationship between spectator and performer" (Phelan 1999, 5-6).

Phelan's definition of this "proto-cinematic" relationship depends on separating performer and spectator. Without the prospect of direct contact, this separation impairs the immediacy of live performance. In *Trio A*, as another important dance scholar, Mark Franko, observes, Rainer "ceases to appear as a live dancer" (Franko 1997, 299). Oddly inanimate, neither present nor absent, she becomes quizzically caught between conventional categories of difference. This lack of categorical distinctions causes the dance's indifferently ambivalent affect. Banes, in searching to find an adequate description of this unusual affect, arrives at a similar idea: "The beauty of *Trio A* lies not in ideas of grace, elegance, dramatic expression, or even of nature, but in *the material truth of its coexistent presence and distance*" (Banes 1987, 51).[7] This impression of distance in the present results from its process of indirect relation— that is, its process of aesthetic mediation.

In a recent study with the apt title "Mediating *Trio A*," art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty also examines this mediated quality. Rather than cinema, she compares the dance to photography, whose static frame may seem to conflict with the

---

[7] In order to more convincingly articulate this paradoxical experience of presence in *Trio A*, Banes turns to an unlikely text, Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art." She is particularly interested in how Heidegger describes the aesthetic appearance of elemental qualities, such as stone, wood, and metal. As manifestations of earth-bound elements, these qualities necessarily remain concealed in the artwork, which is by definition artificial. Although Banes does not elaborate upon these observations, they anticipate a pertinent subject, Heidegger's influential thinking on technology. The ambulatory also relates to the title of the collection in which Heidegger published "The Origin of the Artwork," *Holzwege*. The literal translation of *Holzwege* is "forest paths," but it is also a colloquial expression that means to go "off the beaten path" or "off-track." Like Heidegger's title, the detour defines ambulatory motion in *Trio A*, whose insignificant syntax of choreographic gestures avoids the teleological determination of meaning and ventures into uncertain territory "off the beaten path."

dance's mode of incessant motion. Nevertheless, her analysis identifies an aspect essential to ambulatory motion: the suspension of narrative division, which she refers to as "indexicality via the lack of division" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 157). She maintains that this lack of division is intrinsic to photography: "unlike other kinds of representation, a photograph does not involve a coding of reality into preexisting signs. Photography's mechanical reproduction automatically transfers the whole of the visual field to the surface of the image: 'the photographic message is a *continuous* message" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 157). Common to both cinema and photography, this continuity is presumably characteristic of mechanical reproduction— or technical mediation— in general. Such continuity alters the separation that *Trio A* imposes between spectator and performer. Instead of cutting off contact, this separation actually connects them, albeit through an intermediary, a screen.

This screen has little do with the popular conception of a self-contained surface for the projection of images. Rather than an object, *the screen* is an aesthetic paradigm that proposes an alternative to *the scene*, be it theatrical or cinematic. Although *Trio A* does not deploy an actual screen, it initiates its constitutive process, the ambulatory. The ambulatory's imperative upon ceaseless, singular motion— the motion that avoids repetition— causes an oddly elusive wavering in the choreography, whose back-and-forth pattern resembles weaving. Understood formally, this weaving generates the fabric of the screen. In a particularly poetic insight, Banes anticipates this woven fabric, calling *Trio A* "a braid... that forms itself in the spectator's vision and memory as a single, long, indivisible figure" (Banes 1984, 51). This apparently "indivisible figure" results from the ambulatory's suspension of narrative division. By precluding unity, this suspension establishes an alternative form of structural continuity. As manifested in the screen, this continuity stretches beyond the

immediate limits of the scene— or in de Certeau's language, place— and provides a surface across which it is possible to move in multiple directions.

As an aesthetic process, the ambulatory is itself a mobile principle, which may be applied to disciplines beyond dance. In the following chapter, I trace this disciplinary migration into the artistic field most closely connected to the ambulatory, cinema. Although in the seventies Rainer reinvented herself as a filmmaker, her films cease to explore the principles developed in *Trio A*.[8] Accordingly, in order to continue this analysis, it is necessary explore ambulatory movement in the work of another filmmaker, Chantal Akerman. Like *Trio A*, Akerman's early films seek to suspend the arrival of dramatic action and formal unity. In both works, the indefinitely deferred passage of dramatic action results in a quietly elliptical, uneventful character. The study of this peculiar character in Akerman's films makes it possible to identify a succeeding stage of ambulatory aesthetics— opacity.

As will be discussed, the concept of opacity relates to disciplinary and cultural concerns that do not immediately relate to dance, especially the artistic abstraction particular to *Trio A*. However, before embarking on this interdisciplinary excursion, it is important to pose a final question: once the ambulatory leaves the domain of dance what becomes of *Trio A*? *Trio A* marked a special moment in Rainer's career, whose early period had reached an unbearably insistent state of incessant interruption. In response to this apparent impasse, Rainer developed a singular mode of continuous motion, whose elusively impassive character still attracts the attention of both critics and choreographers. Nevertheless, despite the dance's seemingly self-generating afterlife in official and unofficial versions, its compositional method has never been repeated. As such an inimitably enduring example of choreography, it is surprising

---

[8] In fact, Rainer's films arguably revert to the process of incessant interruption that predicated her preceding choreography— autoimmunity.

that neither Rainer nor her trained successors have ever sought to create a dance based on similar structural principles. Perhaps such new versions would yield no further discoveries, given that *Trio A* is ongoing, at least so long as one heeds its cardinal rule, which provides a foundation for the aesthetic composition of the screen: the deceptively simple act of putting one foot— or discrete thing— in front of the other.

CHAPTER THREE

THE OPACITY OF CHANTAL AKERMAN'S CINEMATIC SPACES

The perpetual passage of the peculiar pattern of pedestrian movement in *Trio A* emulates cinema, whose visual continuity depends on an incessant succession of individual frames. However, *Trio A* does not aspire to transcend dance in order to become film. Rather than adapting dance to cinema's mechanical medium, the ambulatory principles of Rainer's choreography have consequences for the actual practice of filmmaking. Above all, the ambulatory accentuates continuous motion, which subtends the content of conventional narrative films. As in *Trio A*, the peripheral presence of such motion in film distracts the spectator and diminishes the emotional impact of personal expression. More importantly, its incessant succession suspends formal unity and thus alters dramatic form. As a result of this formal suspension, it is possible to sense a multitude of singular elements otherwise excluded from the structure of the scene, be it theatrical or cinematic.

This chapter explores the effects of ambulatory motion on cinematic form in the films of Chantal Akerman. As befits their oddly muted mode of expression, Akerman's films are particularly suited to an investigation of ambulatory aesthetics. Moreover, they consistently portray subjects who have been denied established identities and forced into a restless state of incessant recess along the margins of everyday life. Akerman's early career confronts her personal experience of such exclusion as a woman. Like Rainer, her early cinema became associated with the emergence of feminist film theory in the seventies. In keeping with aesthetics of the early seventies, their cinematic careers also both related to minimalism, whose sequential techniques permitted them to resist the predominant imperatives of dramatic form. As in *Trio A*, Akerman's early films used such continuous sequential

structure to initiate a mode of expression that could serve as an alternative to dramatic form— opacity.

As its name indicates, opacity also undermines the transparency of the visual image, which is pivotal to the cinematic medium. Hence, to begin, a sweeping statement: as an artform, cinema depends on images. In discussing Chantal Akerman's cinematic work— that is, her seminal films from the seventies and her recent video installations— it would thus be fitting to begin with an image. Not just any image, but one whose subject regards its audience. As if a self-portrait, it depicts the filmmaker at the age of twenty-four in her 1974 debut feature-length film, *je tu il elle*. In this shot, Akerman is undeniably the central figure. Situated in the middle of the frame, she stretches along its horizontal axis, whose length corresponds to a bed in a cheaply furnished apartment. Since there is little else of interest in this vacuously anonymous apartment, the spectator's eyes invariably settle on her figure. Nestled among pillows with her head propped on an arm, she likewise appears to contemplate her audience. Her regard may unsettle the audience, in part because it reverses the spectator's gaze and undermines dramatic illusion. This dramatic reversal is consistent with the artistic traditions that inspired Akerman, the confrontational legacy of avant-garde aesthetics. As she frequently mentions, Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot Le Fou* was a formational influence (in Bergstrom, 99).[9] This self-referential return of the gaze was also essential to feminist film, which refused to accept the objectification of the female subject. In Akerman's early cinema, these two artistic movements coincided in a mutual goal: the disruption of dramatic narrative.

To this end, it may seem that Akerman's self-portrait appropriates a subservient gender position from within art history, the odalisque. In this pictorial

---

[9] In an essay on her work's autobiographical aspects, cinema scholar Janet Bergstrom cites Akerman, who says that she "wanted to make films very young, after I saw *Pierrot le fou* by Godard."

tradition, the female subject's vacantly somnolent stare reflects her status as a passive object. Scantily clad amid sumptuous surroundings, the odalisque's elongated posture maximizes specular pleasure and offers an enticing invitation: the languorous luxury of endless repose. However, although Akerman's recumbent posture resembles the odalisque, her appearance is decidedly anti-erotic. In contrast to a degrading display of flesh, Akerman is fully dressed— she even wears shoes, which effectively cover every trace of exposed skin. It is only possible to see the slight circumference of her face, which is itself half-cast in shadow. Like shadows, dark, disheveled clothing renders her body shapelessly asexual. As if even indifferent to basic hygiene, she wears these unkempt clothes and shoes on a made bed. These clothes visually connect her figure to the bed, against which she seems to disappear, as if retreating from human contact.

Like her disheveled appearance, this retreat may be a defensive impulse: an attempt to shield the female subject from the male gaze. Although perhaps correct, it is more important that this disappearance anticipates a fundamental change in her cinema, which diverges from the avant-garde's aggressive aesthetics of disruption. This disappearance also indicates a change in the function of the cinematic image. In particular, even though Akerman seems to directly regard her audience, this enigmatic image repels the spectator. Despite ostensibly being its central subject, Akerman's presence is oddly inscrutable. In this self-portrait, the self is strangely absent: lacking any discernible trace of emotion, Akerman seems non-responsive. French art critic Damien Truchot has also noted the impassive presence of her gaze, which he describes as "impassible": "un regard qui n'est ni inquiet, ni interrogateur, mais simplement impassible: aucune émotion ne vient le troubler" (Truchot 2009, 177). It is even uncertain whether her eyes address the camera, or if her seemingly distracted gaze is directed elsewhere, as Truchot notes, away from an audience: "[her regard] ne paraît

nullement être addressé au spectateur, qui est mis à distance" (Truchot 2009, 177) If

not the audience, then whom, or what, does this image address? At best, this is a

curiously quizzical image, one which diffuses the visual content that it discloses. Its

character remains blankly vacuous and seemingly undefined— or in other words,

opaque.

This opaque character pervades Akerman's films. Its undefined quality also

corresponds to her initial formal impulse to resist dramatic narrative. Akerman

challenges dramatic narrative in an unusual way, non-participation— which is to say,

her films are nearly devoid of action. This absence of action defines her signature

works from the seventies: *je tu il elle* (1974), her three hour epic *Jeanne Dielman 23,*

Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), and *Les Rendez-Vous d'Anna* (1978). On

account of their infamously uneventful plots, critics have ascribed these films to

various sub-genres of experimental cinema, be it the "cinema of duration" or

"hyperrealist" style (Margulies 1996, 8). Such critical epithets seem especially

applicable to *La Chambre* (1972) and *Hotel Monterey* (1972), which sought to forego

narration altogether. In these films, a disembodied camera aimlessly explores the

sparsely inhabited corners and corridors of vapidly anonymous places, such as a rented

room and an inexpensive hotel. Despite lacking character or plot, these cinematic

experiments have a strangely hypnotic quality, which seems from emanate from

surrounding space. In the absence of human inhabitants, it is as if space itself comes

alive, at once disquieting and comforting— much like Akerman's elliptically

unsettling gaze.

Throughout her career, Akerman has consistently returned to such peculiar

places. In addition to boarding rooms and hotels, her cinematic subjects have included

city streets, highways, and train stations. Rather than disrupting dramatic narrative,

these peculiar places permit Akerman to explore its minimal conditions. Although

little takes place in her films, there is always something happening, even if it seems inconsequential. The peripheral presence of such insubstantial events produces a peculiar quality. This elliptically undefined quality animates Akerman's initial gaze and her characters, who seem withdrawn and distracted. In the absence of dramatic events, these characters are compelled to indefinite periods of waiting, as if confined to waiting rooms. In search of relief from such stasis, they develop a repertoire of practiced distractions— for instance, idle pacing.

It is not incidental that pacing is a common method of self-distraction. Indeed, walking relates to a discursive process that proceeds in a state of apparent distraction, which I call the ambulatory. More precisely, the ambulatory is an aesthetic process predicated on continual motion. As demonstrated in chapter two's analysis of choreographer Yvonne Rainer's 1968 *Trio A*, the ambulatory deploys a continuous sequence of "discrete" singular movements— which are comparable to Michel de Certeau's notion of footsteps— whose ceaseless motion delays the indexical division of series (Rainer 1999, 35). By delaying this division, ambulatory movement produces an alternative to traditional narrative structure, which depends on formal unity. In order to establish structural continuity in lieu of unity, it is necessary to maintain this continual motion. Consequently, the task of maintaining such motion replaces the primacy of emotion that traditionally characterizes dramatic expression. Accordingly, like Akerman's gaze, the emotional character of *Trio A* becomes mysteriously muted— or opaque.

On the one hand, opacity describes an oddly impersonal style that is hypnotically compelling. As a word associated with sight, opacity also refers to a visual strategy that contests the transparency of pictorial communication. Applied to images, it diffuses content, which seems suspended behind a translucent layer, as if blurred. Indeed, such diffusion is the logical result of ambulatory motion, whose

76

continuously even pacing blurs individual movements. In Akerman's films, this diffusion first emerges in visual correspondences between figure and space, which conceal characters within plain view. As her self-portrait demonstrates, Akerman seems to recede into the room, as if disappearing behind a veil of light. This light literally comes from off-screen, the space beyond the visual limits of the scene— and *seen*.

The peripheral presence of off-screen space— space beyond the visual limits of place— informs another aspect of opacity, its formal function. As a subsequent stage of the ambulatory, opacity suspends the unity of place and narrative. In *Poétique de la Relation*, the postcolonial writer Édouard Glissant has studied opacity in relation to narrative. He calls opacity a "force poétique," which "rayonne en place du concept absorbant d'unité" (Glissant 1990, 206). In order to emphasize this fundamental point, he states it again, adding that "ce que nous soustrayons de cette idée... c'est le principe d'unité" (Glissant 1990, 206). In this regard, Glissant's description coincides with de Certeau's analysis of walking, which also holds that the pedestrian's many minute detours avoid formal unity, especially the unity of place. "In contradistinction to... place," spaces deploy a "polyvalent unity" (de Certeau 1984, 117). The word "polyvalent" indicates the heterogeneous diversity of elements within space. Like the unpredictable pattern of roving pedestrians, such heterogeneous elements are in constant motion and do not form distinct, particular units. On the contrary, the fundamental unit of walking— the footstep— is singular. As de Certeau states, their "swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities" (de Certeau 1984, 97).

Glissant likewise insists that opacity preserves singularity: "l'opacité... n'est pas l'enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable, mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible" (Glissant 1990, 204). In contrast to such "irreducible

singularity," dramatic narrative condenses singular elements into particular units. This dramatic process produces a stable frame of reference, whose order depends on closure. As an alternative to such "enclosure," Glissant proposes that opacity is open. More precisely, he states that "Relation," the book's titular concept, "est totalité ouverte, en mouvement sur elle-même" (Glissant 1990, 206). Admittedly, this "open totality" does not transcend formal closure nor unity. Like the ambulatory, it requires "movement" to defer unity and coordinate its disparately multiple parts, which "peuvent coexister" and "confluer" (Glissant 1990, 204). Glissant insists that the movement of these fluidly coexisting parts does not culminate in a finite, teleological structure. In his words, "le tout n'y pas la finalité des parties: car la multiplicité dans la totalité est totalement une diversité" (Glissant 1990, 206). Instead of a unified end, Relation preserves and produces "diversity"— a resonant reserve of ceaselessly circulating singularities.

Despite its apparent abstraction, the formal structure of opacity effects the lived experience of relation. According to Glissant, opacity connects the self to possibilities beyond its boundaries— and likewise, to others. These others consist of multitudinous possibilities, which Glissant calls "la divergence exultante des humanités" (Glissant 1990, 204). Since this "divergence exultante" exceeds representation, no encounter takes place. In fact, opacity impedes direct contact with the other. For Glissant, such knowledge is unnecessary. He writes that "il n'est pas nécéssaire que je le 'comprenne' pour me sentir solidaire de lui, pour bâtir avec lui" (Glissant 1990, 207).[10] Rather than mutual understanding, opacity reinforces the

---

[10] The diminished importance of knowledge also informs de Certeau's concept of the quotidian. In the practice of everyday life, even routine activities contribute to aesthetically valid expression, regardless of the agent's conscious intent. This diminished role of knowledge corresponds an ongoing theoretical shift from *savoir*— the French word for knowledge, which notably contains the verb "to see" *voir*— to *faire*, or doing. Stated otherwise, daily doings need not consciously recognize the structure of relation to which it adheres— and repairs.

boundaries of personal and corporeal knowledge and therefore grounds relation on separation. Instead of symbolic unity, a common limit constitutes community.

The common limit of this community manifests itself in an actual object of separation, the screen. As the site that assembles diversely singular experience, it also relates to the formal process of opacity— in fact, the screen embodies opacity. Given that opacity designates a formal process, it would be erroneous to equate this screen with its ordinary function in cinema. Rather than a surface of projection, it results from the narrational network that relays singular content into sensible form. In order for this relay to succeed, it is necessary that singular elements are able to pass through the screen. As such, the screen cannot be an impassible limit. Like a membrane, its surface is a permeable partition that imparts alterity, but also keeps the other apart.

In Akerman's cinematic work, the screen likewise designates a formal process and an actual object. Its material presence is evident in her 2004 video installation, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator*. In this installation, the audience encounters its literal manifestation, an opaque partition. However, in order to assess the formal function of this partition, it is necessary to trace the emergence of opacity in her early films. In these films, the presence of opacity produces a peculiar quality— or rather, an inscrutable absence of qualities. This palpable absence reflects the Latin root of peculiar, *peculiaris*, which refers to something personal, private, and thus singular. In this regard, the peculiar designates the inexpressibly private nature of personal experience. Like her oddly absent gaze, peculiarity indicates the indirect presence of the personal, whose content remains undisclosed, as if withheld from a public audience by an object— the screen.

The Origins of Opacity in je tu il elle

According to its conventional definition, cinematic space is confined to the visual scene. Even in her earliest films, Akerman explores an alternative space, which eludes the gaze and permits its subjects— especially women— the liberty to live and love. This feminine space is particularly pronounced in her first full-length film, *je tu il elle*. *Je tu il elle* explores a specific form of feminine love, lesbian eroticism. Lesbian eroticism forcefully emerges in the film's conclusion, which depicts a sexual encounter between two young women. Lasting twenty minutes and consisting of only three shots, this scene is distinctly different from pornography, which uses substantial editing techniques. In an important reading of *je tu il elle*, feminist film theorist Judith Mayne notes that the "representation of the lovemaking departs absolutely from the codes of pornography" (Mayne 1990, 129). The absence of such "codes" of editing emphasizes this scene's poignantly personal, even uncomfortably private content. Unlike most narrative films, Akerman herself plays the protagonist, who is lost to the selfless abandon of erotic ecstasy.

The couple's desire is desperate, nearly painful. Amid instants of tenderness, they impatiently grab and grope each other, turning in spastic bursts that resemble fighting. Indeed, film scholar Maureen Turim observes a combative quality in their lovemaking, which she likens to "wrestling with the touch of their bodies" (Turim 1999, 19). If a battle, their struggle had a mutual goal: to achieve the impossible intimacy of a perfect union by laying the other bare and stripped of defenses. Seeking to wrest the other from its core, this couple confronts the physical limit that encloses the self, the skin. Apparently propelled by an insatiable haptic compulsion, they frantically explore their skin. With legs intertwined, torsos pressed together, and hair

draped over their faces, their individual identities recede into an indistinguishable mass of skin, which seemingly belongs to one being.

Of course, such undivided contact— like the formal unity of representation— is impossible. The impossibility of overcoming this limit fuels their erotic fury, which they direct at their own bodies, especially their skin. In this regard, skin refers to the limit of the cinematic medium, its literal screen. Although the sensuously luminescent surface of the cinematic screen seems to embody the other, it inhibits contact, like a wall. In this regard, the cinematic screen arguably incarnates an element of theatre, the "fourth wall." Since the fourth wall separates spectator and performer, Akerman's erotic intensity also concerns her aesthetic relation to the audience. Above all, Akerman strives to impart such intensity in its mise-en-scene, which physically approximates the dramatic confrontation with this relational limit. For instance, concentrated upon all-white decor, the blindingly bright lighting is uncomfortable, which reflects the pathos of the characters' painful passion. Akerman's use of sound also conveys this pathos. Since it is artificially amplified, the normally unremarkable noise of sheets and skin rubbing becomes a tangible texture, whose fictional frictional force is nearly possible to feel, as if from across the screen.

Despite such tangible traces of this erotic encounter, its expressive force depends on the film's narrative structure, which defers dramatic action in order to intensify its eventual arrival. For the majority of the film, there are few events and no dialogue. In the first thirty minutes, Akerman is alone in an apartment, where she fiddles, fumbles, undresses, and redresses, neither doing nor saying anything significant. She likewise remains silent during the next half hour, as she travels through an anonymous landscape of highways and restaurants with a trucker, to whom she hardly speaks. In these two sections, Akerman also maintains authorial silence: she withholds contextual details that explain the dramatic situation. It is thus

impossible to identify her characters' motivations until its sole event— its final erotic encounter— is irreversibly underway. As such, the film situates the audience in a position parallel to its characters, former lovers who have undergone a self-imposed separation. Their reunion is a relapse— a desperately desired relapse and long awaited release from a period of endured separation.

Due to this extended period of inactivity, *je tu il elle* initially resembles a radical experiment in the banal— that is, a categorical refusal to engage narrative. Accordingly, the sudden arrival of all-consuming sexual pathos disarms the audience and renders them momentarily "open." Like the film's characters, the audience is exposed and vulnerable. In formal terms, this sudden arrival is a finely wrought moment of peripeteia, a dramatic reversal whose surprise induces a sense of disbelief. Rather than skepticism, or even the "suspension of disbelief," this disbelief is tantamount to wonder. Such wonder accompanies an endlessly anticipated and deferred encounter: the ecstatic encounter with the other in an instant of pure being. This is a miraculous event of sublime beauty. Like the radiant whiteness that covers the scene, such sublimity seems to subsume all differences, as if inaugurating a new beginning or rebirth in which the divided subject will finally be together with the beloved other— a being no longer in pieces, but in peace.

However, the peace of this new beginning cannot last. It is an illusion, whose seductive force depends on the film's preceding narrative, especially its deliberate deferral of dramatic action. To this end, Judith Mayne argues against utopian interpretations of the final scene. Despite its bold portrayal of homoeroticism, Mayne insists that "there is no lesbian triumphalism in the film" (Mayne 1990, 132). In fact, she argues that *je tu il elle* is "less concerned with affirmative representations of lesbian experience" than the "ambivalence and pressure of lesbianism" (Mayne 1990, 125) In the context of feminist film scholarship, her objection to "affirmative

representations of lesbian experience" is necessary to avoid a common critical "trap":
"that is, of reversing the duality [of sexual orientation] without questioning it" (Mayne
1990, 133). In order to prevent such a lapse into heteronormative aesthetics, Mayne
emphasizes this "ambivalence," which she holds to be an inherent part of lesbianism.
As evidence of this ambivalence in *je tu il elle*, she directs her reader to "Akerman's
departure at conclusion of the film," which seemingly returns to "the first words
uttered by her voice in the first section": "et je suis partie" (Mayne 1990, 133).

Rather than rebirth, the conclusion suggests that this ecstatic ending belongs to
an ongoing cycle of repetition. In the film's final shot, Akerman leaves the next
morning, exiting the apartment through the camera's frame, which still depicts the bed
where her partner is asleep, presumably unaware as the door slams closed, off-screen.
Since the couple is not reunited, there is no narrative resolution. Moreover, this
closure literally returns to the beginning of the film, in which Akerman, alone and
with her back to the camera, sits while her superimposed voice delivers a fatidic line:
"*et* je suis partie." The inconspicuous conjunction "et" encloses Julie in a circular
narrative circuit, an end without end or proverbial *fin de partie*. As per its title, *je tu il
elle*, the film depicts a cyclical pattern that— like grammar— produces a universal
subject deprived of individual substance. Hence, even though Akerman plays the
protagonist, the credits only list a suggestive pseudonym, the nom de plume of a
collective nobody, "Julie."

In addition to such narrative clues, there are also formal reasons for this
cyclical structure. Instead of escaping the constraints of dramatic narrative, erotic
force supplies the semblance of formal necessity— and moreover, unity. Like
amorous unison, such formal unity is impossible, but this climatic conclusion offers a
sacrifice, the possibility of love and human contact. By undergoing a period of self-
sacrifice, the film approximates an instant of ecstatic communion. As its etymology

suggests, this instant seems literally *ek-static*, or outside static narrative structure. Since it seems to come from beyond, such an exceptional instant of rapture at once ruptures and supplements narrative structure. This rapturous rupture literally unleashes an orgasm, which also designates a formal function: *jouissance* is the amorous act that consummates the symbolic unity of narrative order.

However, orgasm only seems to achieve this unity. According to Lacan's analysis in "De la Jouissance," orgasm supplements unity: "vous remarquerez que j'ai dit *supplémentaire*" (Lacan 1975, 68). Love requires this supplement. As Lacan states, love is inherently impotent, or incapable of realizing the desire for oneness: "L'amour est impuissant... parce qu'il ignore qu'il n'est que le désir d'être Un, ce qui nous conduit à l'impossible d'établir la relation d'eux" (Lacan 1975, 12). He further specifies that the problem of being one, or "la relation d'eux," is of a particular kind of duality, which for Lacan may be irreducible— gender: "La relation d'eux qui?— deux sexes" (Lacan 1975, 12). Of course, Akerman's act of lesbian love undermines this binary logic and the supplementary function of orgasm. In Lacan's terms, it presents an image of "feminine jouissance." According to his definition, this concept relates to the subordinate position upon which grammar founds the subject, *elle*, "cette *elle* qui n'existe pas et ne signifie rien" (Lacan 1975, 69). As an event, feminine jouissance does not take place— at least within the extant field of representation. It instead takes place apart from representation, "au-delà du phallus" in a site beyond sight, which eludes rational determination or knowledge: "il y a une jouissance à elle dont peut-être elle-même ne sait rien, sinon qu'elle l'éprouve" (Lacan 1975, 69). In order to identify this extraordinary region "beyond the phallus," Lacan turns to a figure familiar with the spiritual realm, the mystic.[11]

---

[11] Shortly after introducing the female mystic, Lacan warns his reader against precipitously accepting the existence of feminine jouissance. Unlike the mystic, who does not require express knowledge of this epiphanic event, Lacan insists on the necessity of rational explanation. In this warning, he inserts

As a spiritual medium, the mystic does not need to prove the existence of this extraordinary event— on the contrary, "elle l'éprouve" in her body. In this regard, Akerman's quaintly quiet alter ego, Julie, resembles a mystic, albeit of an oddly ordinary sort. As is consistent with the ascetic discipline of mystical tradition, Julie rejects contact with the outside world, including the social act of eating. Hence, she refuses proper food in the film's first section and nourishes herself solely with a substance that provides no sustenance, powdered sugar.

The troubled relationship with food in *je tu il elle* has attracted copious critical commentary. Mayne observes that Julie has "all the contours of an eating disorder," which Maureen Turim associates with "bulimia" (Mayne 1990, 133; Turim 1999, 15). In the most thorough analysis of this apparent eating disorder, French film critic Françoise Audé specifies a particular pathology, "celui de l'anorexie" (Audé 1982, 151). However, Audé's psychoanalytic reading examines anoxeria as a formal phenomenon, which she connects to narcissism. In her words, "l'anorexie indique une composante narcissique importante du psychisme" (Audé 1982, 152). In particular, she is interested in how narcissism informs the "stade oral du développement de l'enfant," during which the child— "le nourrison"— solely identifies with food, "la nourriture" (Audé 1982, 153).

This infantile stage of development reflects the romantic ideal of united being. According to Audé, the child lives in a "paradise" in which it does not distinguish between self and "l'Autre," especially the other as mother, who is the sole source of comfort and sustenance (Audé 1982, 153). As such, the lover in *je tu il elle* acts like a

---

an unnecessary image— or rather, an image that withholds images, a screen: "Je crois à la jouissance de la femme.. à condition que vous y mettiez *un écran* avant que je l'aie bien expliqué" (Lacan 1975, 71). As proposed in this comment, this screen prevents the improper transmission of knowledge. Like the mystic's body, the screen limits direct knowledge. In what follows, I argue that this limit is not absolute, or irremediable. In this regard, the screen and the body may have a corresponding function, the mediation of spiritual experience, or events beyond the immediate boundaries of representation— the screen as mystical medium.

mother and provides food upon Julie's request— which are notably the only words she speaks during the film— before surrendering her body to the thrall of love. Mayne also notices this "link between orality and sexuality," which leads Julie to regard her lover as a "maternal object" with whom she wishes "to fuse" (Mayne 1990, 133). Like romantic love, the child and the maternal other exist in a state of unmediated intimacy, "une union-fusion idyllique" or "univers unifié," in which it is possible to attain "la satisfaction immédiate: 'tout, tout de suite'" (Audé 1982, 153).

Of course, like the joy of jouissance, such "immediate satisfaction" is illusory, which leads Audé to conclude that Akerman's films do not achieve such "idyllic" unity. On the contrary, she maintains that they end in a state of irreparable division, which she calls "exile" (Audé 1982, 165). Moreover, this desire for "everything, all at once" also corresponds to the mystical drive to realize union with the divine. In this regard, Julie's anorexia— which, in any case, is never "realistic"— proves to have an ascetic aesthetic purpose (Turim 1999, 15). Like a mystical ritual, it is necessary to close off the self to earthly desires in order to receive spiritual communion. Perhaps for this reason, Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 2* refers to Julie's anorexia in ritualistic terms— "une cérémonie de l'anorexie" (Deleuze 1985, 285).

In addition to eating, such asceticism also applies to the social world, against which Julie must shield herself. In an apparent effort to close herself off from external intrusions, she blocks out incoming sensations, especially light. On one occasion, she places a mattress over the window; on another, she drapes clothing over her face. This pattern of deliberate self-isolation emerged seven years earlier in Akerman's first short film, *Saute Ma Ville*. In this film, Akerman— who again plays her female protagonist— uses tape to seal the door of her studio apartment. This symbolic act of self-enclosure also apparently seals her mouth, her organ of speech. Like Julie, this early Akerman character is mostly mute, only capable of odd murmurs and muttered

nonsense. If mystics, these characters are perhaps holy fools, whose sweet simplicity and scattered demeanor belies their silent struggle to reach beyond themselves. In *Saute Ma Ville*, Akerman gleefully ignites a suicidal gas explosion that destroys her building and ends the film. This comic, cartoon-like catastrophe tcheerfully parodies its own inability to overcome urban alienation. In *je tu il elle*, Akerman stages another sort of explosion, orgasm. Although they significantly differ, both films establish a similar pattern of withdrawal and eruption. Like a process of self-purification, closure and cleansing is necessary to receive another kind of communion, contact with the spiritual beyond.

In contrast to *Saute Ma Ville*, the presence of this ecstatic communion suffuses *je tu il elle*. Even prior to the film's climatic conclusion, it is possible to sense the presence of this absent other. In its initial uneventful sections, the mysteries of mysticism meet the monotony of the everyday. These unremarkably ordinary occurrences have a peculiar quality that eludes precise definition— in other words, they are opaque. As a poetic mode of expression, opacity indicates the presence of a formal process that involves an everyday activity— namely, the ambulatory, a form of narrative whose structural continuity does not depend on unity. This formal affinity to walking is the subject of Damien Truchot's recent essay, "Vers l'intérieur: Les promenades en chambre de Chantal Akerman." Similar to the ambulatory, Truchot proposes a concept of interior walking that uses a sequential structure to assure "continuité" (Truchot 2009, 180). He calls this sequential structure a "système d'enchaînement," which deploys "des sequences les unes après les autres" (Truchot 2009, 180). The ambulatory likewise uses a sequential order, whose passage systematically delays the advent of dramatic events. As Truchot notes, "la promenade en chambre ne serait qu'une sorte de surplace, une flanerie qui n'avance pas" (Truchot 2009, 180). By deferring the impulse to advance a plot, the ambulatory introduces

detours that turn the narrative away from a conclusion and force the audience off-track.

The process of turning away from dramatic action begins immediately in *je tu il elle*. Indeed, rather than connection— especially the blissful being of erotic encounter— the film posits perpetually missed connections.[12] Accordingly, its first shot imposes a distinct separation, Akerman's back. In this shot, Julie sits in a chair, her back to the camera and turned away from her audience. This gesture demonstrates her deliberate disregard for dramatic convention. As befits a vaunted feminist filmmaker, she limits the spectator's visual and psychological access to the female protagonist. The film's narrative thus departs from an unlikely origin, one which impedes identification. The mise-en-scene directs the audience away from her person, as if instead introducing her apartment, of which Julie seems to become an indistinguishable part.

Pressed along the frame's right edge, Julie occupies an inconspicuous spot amid the clutter of her cheaply furnished room. Since in black and white it is difficult to distinguish her clothing and chair, she resembles an unremarkable thing, devoid of substantial qualities. Her figure recedes into the background and leaves a curious hollow or void. Deprived of solid substance, this void is difficult to discern. Nevertheless, a shallow hollow is visible in the scene's central object, an empty bed. Without occupants, this bed presents an image of absence. Like Akerman's absent-minded regard, this image reflects the spectator's vacant gaze, almost as if blankly staring back. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that this absence might elude the

---

[12] This ambulatory process of relaying a ceaseless sequence of singular delays— or missed connections— also takes place within the closed domestic space of *Jeanne Dielman*. Teresa de Lauretis describes these missed connections as "tiny slips": "narrative suspense is not built on the expectation of a 'significant event,' a socially momentous act... but is produced by the tiny slips in Jeanne's routine, the small forgettings, the hesitations between real-time gestures as common and 'insignificant' as peeling potatoes, washing dishes or making coffee— and then not drinking it."

audience. After all, the bed alludes to events of which the audience cannot yet be aware— namely, the romantic loss that frames the film.

Hence, even if never entirely manifest, loss pervades the film. The presence of this elusively oblique absence persists in a subtly self-referential motif, the film's visual frame. From the rectangular carpet to the contours of the bed, the scene is replete with empty frames that fill its space, which almost literally corresponds to actual size of the small room. Embodied by furniture, the referential weight of this emptiness overwhelms the room and immobilizes its inhabitant, Julie. In this regard, these obstacles reinforce the limits of cinematic form: neither Akerman nor her audience can escape its narrow confines. The apartment approximates the size of the frame, which also emphasizes such confinement. Without distinguishing characteristics, it is easy to imagine this anonymous space. Moreover, since the entirety of the apartment is almost present, its missing space seems unusually near to hand. In other words, off-screen space is peripherally present— although invisible, it can be sensed.

The ineffable sense of this peripheral presence alters the content of Akerman's images, but also enters the scene through a sense other than sight, hearing. Accordingly, although Akerman rarely speaks on screen, it is possible to hear her voice, as if from off-screen. However, rather than off-screen, her voice is a voiceover, which comes from non-diegetic space. As a form of narration, the voiceover arrives from beyond the immediate boundaries of narrative. Since it presents events from the perspective of future knowledge, this form of narration establishes a determined order.

Film theorist Kaja Silverman contends that the "synchronization" of voice and action enforces this closed narrative order and circumscribes its possibilities: "Synchronization […] drastically curtails the capacity [...] for introducing into the narrative something heterogeneous or disruptive (it minimizes, that is, the number and

kinds of connotations which can be activated)" (Silverman 1984, 132-3). According to her analysis, voiceover also limits possible meanings and establishes an aesthetic order based on masculine power: "the dis-embodied voice-over can been seen as 'exemplary' for male subjectivity, attesting to an achieved invisibility, omniscience, and discursive power" (Silverman 1984, 134). Although Silverman would like to believe that a disembodied female voice would necessarily challenge this male aesthetic order, synchronization typically attenuates its potential threat. Like "women's speech" in general, most female voiceovers are "synchronized" (Silverman 1984, 135).

However, there are exceptional examples that undermine such synchronization, including Akerman's 1976 film, *News From Home*— which Silverman cites— and *je tu il elle*. As is consistent with her use of the past tense, Akerman's calmly collected tone in *je tu il elle* reflects a speaker no longer tangled in dramatic events, but whose narration is nevertheless uncertain. Although she seems to be reading, her inflection is devoid of dramatic emphasis, which causes her voice to be strangely distant and somehow unsettling. This unsettling quality becomes manifest when her narration begins to stray from depicted events. Critics of *je tu il elle* have frequently commented on this odd inconsistency between voice and image. For instance, Mayne notes that "the voice-over is often out-of-sync with the image track" (Mayne 1990, 128). As an elaboration on this observation, Margulies adds that the lack of synchronicity causes "continuous mismatches" (Margulies 1996, 113).

These "mismatches" sometimes seem like incidental inaccuracies, which may be casually dismissed. For instance, she describes the apartment as "une petite chambre blanche au ras du sol," a statement which is partly correct: albeit on ground level, only half of the apartment's walls are painted white. Although such inaccuracies may be acceptably inconsequential, other reported facts overtly contradict

visible events. Despite her seated position in the first scene, her voice recounts that she is laying down: "je reste immobile, attentif, et couché sur mon matelas." Such contradictions undermine the relation between the narrator and visual events, causing ambivalence to inhabit the frame. Nevertheless, these contradictions are not absolute. Akerman later spends significant time on her mattress, which implies that the narration imprecisely overlaps the film, falling behind, advancing, and intersecting specific moments in unpredictable intervals.

Despite such odd imprecision, Akerman's narration could still correspond to the film. Since propositional validity does not require events to be demonstrable, her statements could be true, even if they do not refer to actual events. For example, just before the first scene fades out, she says, "j'ai peint les meubles en bleu le premier jour." There is no evidence that she actually paints the furniture. Akerman remains seated, and moreover, this particular action surpasses the perceptual capacities of the audience, whose experience is limited to black and white. Indeed, it does not matter whether the event actually occurs— it is enough that it is possible. However, her subsequent statement complicates the status of this possible event. At the beginning of the next shot, which again depicts Akerman sitting, she claims that on "le deuxième jour je les ai repeints en vert."[13] At its most elementary, this repetition relates to the dramatic situation, the romantic rejection of which the audience may be unaware. As a sign of such suffering, her sudden caprice reveals the indifference of action, for no feat can repair the loss of the beloved. Like the film, her world has become colorless,

---

[13] Film scholar Maureen Turim incisively observes that these colors may reference Michelangelo Antonioni's 1964 film, *Red Desert*. Like Julie, the protagonist of *Red Desert*, Guliana, proposes that the walls of her shop should be blue, but then corrects herself, stating that they should be green. In both cases, color corresponds to contact with the outside world, which neither Julie nor Guliana can bear— hence, their hesitation. However, whereas this indecision cripples Guliana, Julie is able to construct a protective retreat from the exterior. In this way, Akerman may be referencing— and surpassing— Antonioni's aesthetics.

and so this common perceptual limit connects the audience to Akerman's fictional character, whose grief it is impossible to share.

More importantly, the repetition of this event also has formal consequences. In particular, this repetition questions its possibility. By "repainting" the furniture in its original color, Akerman negates her initial act, rendering it null and void, as if it never took place. Such a voided event corresponds to the actual dramatic action, sitting. In repetition, this particular action loses its meaning and becomes a dully redundant contingency, which may or may not occur. Since the audience will never see this change, the color of the furniture does not matter. In essence, all actions produce the same effect, whose occurrence is thus indifferent. Without discernible change, Akerman's words cease to have referential value and instead indicate the presence of an alternative mode of signification, performativity.

In contrast to dramatic representation, which refers to actual events, performativity designates the constitutive condition of repetition that subtends signification— that is, its reiterative phase, or iterability.[14] This reiteration occupies an early stage of referential determination, prior to indexical division, the moment at which an expanding sequence truncates itself to become a self-contained series.[15] As Akerman's redundant act of repainting indicates, *je tu il elle* defers this decisive instant of division and preserves its reiterative structure. Margulies reaches a similar conclusion in her argument, which states that the film undermines its "indexicality" (Margulies 1996, 115). In place of a conventional indexical structure, Margulies asserts that *je tu il elle* initiates another aesthetic order, which she associates with

---

[14] As is well-known, Derrida proposed the concept of iterability in "Signature Event Context," a close analysis Austin's notion of the performative. Ultimately, a detailed discussion of this subject exceeds the dimensions of the present essay— it will have to suffice to recognize that iterability has been an essential part of performativity.

[15] The analysis in this section draws on my articulation of the ambulatory, a formal process that I have identified in a preceding study of Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A*. See Chapter 2.

minimalism— in particular, with minimalism's "ateleological serial gestures" (Margulies 1996, 125). Regardless of whether it is accurate to equate Akerman's films with minimalism— as discussed in chapter two, similar observations have been made about *Trio A*— this reference to "ateleological serial gestures" is consistent with the ambulatory, which deploys a "serial" sequence of singular parts that resist teleological order.

This ambulatory sequence begins in the film's first image, which depicts Akerman's back. At once universal and unremarkable, her back could belong to anyone— in other words, it is singular. As a singular element, it visually relates to another object that subsequently plays a prominent role, a mattress.[16] As if nullifying her social identity, Julie rapidly removes furnishings, sheets, and even her own clothing. Once empty, Julie compulsively re-arranges the mattress throughout the apartment's vacant space. The resulting pattern of successive shifts proceeds in singular order. Each shot shows one iteration of these shifts, which initially correspond to individuals days, as specified in the narration: "j'ai peint les meubles bleus le premier jour... le deuxième jour..." Instead of presenting an engaging image of particular events, these shifts seem inconsequentially contingent. As is consistent with the film's title— which solely includes singular subject positions— they resemble elementary conjugations, whose rote practice only has meaning as part of a repetitive grammatical exercise. Despite its repetitive form, this practice makes it possible to perceive a form of continuity that subtends each singular iteration, its sequential structure.

---

[16] In *Parts of Some Sextets*, Rainer also used mattresses. Although her use of mattresses— and the underlying aesthetic process to which they adhere— significantly differ from *je tu il elle*, it is nevertheless notable that they appear in both works. For a detailed analysis of the mattress in Rainer's dance, See Chapter 1.

As a sequence, this continuity depends on a fundamental aspect of cinema, movement. Admittedly, conventional narrative film ignores cinematic movement— that is, the ceaseless succession of frames— in order to produce dramatic illusion. In contrast to traditional narrative films, this perpetually passing motion permeates *je tu il elle*. Even before its first scene, this movement begins in the title sequence. Unlike a typical title sequence, this surprisingly elliptical introduction stylistically complements the film and exhibits its defining trait: a specific pace of slowly even motion. The title's words appear in cursive-like stencil at a slowly purposeful pace, one after the other. For Truchot, this "slowness" is essential to Akerman's ambulatory aesthetics, which he relates to flanerie: "la flânerie se caracterise dans les films de Chantal Akerman par une lenteur singulière" (Truchot 2009, 188).

The surface behind these words also reflects this inexorably unhurried progression. As Maureen Turim notes, the black background resembles a "primary school blackboard," which suggests the "long, repetitious process" associated with "the learning of language" (Turim 1999, 13). Over an extended duration, such rote learning induces a sense of mesmerizing monotony, whose entrancing calm persists throughout the film— or at least until the eruption of desire in its final scene. Detached from such desire, this hypnotic calm is soothing, but also subtly unsettling, or even haunting. As per the film's title, this haunting presence suggests that somebody may be missing. In this regard, it is significant that the title resembles handwriting, which is an irreducible marker of individual expression.

However, no one has authored this flawlessly impersonal script, which fluidly flows from a ghostly hand— cinema's mechanical medium. Indeed, Truchot's analysis of Akerman is part of a larger critical effort to link flanerie to mechanical reproduction, especially film. In an essay establishing the theoretical foundation for this connection, film scholar Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues describes "le concept de

'flânerie'" as part of an "apparatus," or a "sensibilité *appareillée*: vision ou écoute morcelée et sérielle, liée au mouvement de la marche inclus dans l'image quasi méchanique du monde, prélevée et par là-même montée (déjà cinématographiquement)" (Liandrat-Guiges 2009, 13).

Subject to such rote mechanical structure, it may seem that Julie is lifelessly inert. Certainly, she often resembles a dumb thing, especially when huddling, sleeping, or hiding.   In such inanimate states of stasis, her body's minimal movements still produce signs of life, such as blinking and breathing. As movement, such signs of life elude evident display and can be best seen over a long duration at an accelerated speed. At this speed, it is possible to recognize that movement animates every scene, even if apparently without activity. Such seemingly uneventful scenes likewise contain a myriad of improvised activities: Julie restlessly fidgets, fumbles, spreads out papers, obsessively scribbles, dresses, undresses, and of course, moves her mattress. Eagerly engaged in exploring her environment, she industriously transforms the terrain of her apartment. To a certain degree, these ordinary activities are a form of play. Rather than mindless, Julie seems sweetly simple-minded, as if a child.

Accordingly, although reclusive, Julie often appears animated and outwardly engaged. Like a child, she is buoyantly bright-eyed and busies herself in her environment, whose few remaining household items she repurposes and transforms.[17] Apparently unburdened by these objects' designated purpose, this transformation resembles the incessant invention of play. This proclivity for play likewise characterized the protagonist of *Saute Ma Ville*, who rambunctiously revels in her tiny kitchen, upsetting its domestic order. In addition to the evidently infantile nature of such boisterous blundering, her apartment contained a childish image of a cartoon

---

[17] The playfully improvisational nature of such unconsciously inventive activity corresponds to de Certeau's concept of quotidian creativity, which I have discussed with reference to walking. See Chapter 2.

character, a smurf. Short, squat, and prone to spontaneous bursts of song, Akerman's unnamed protagonist resembles a smurf— a fictional character, who has no bearing on the world beyond the boundaries of narrative, which self-consciously frames this short film, as indicated by its subtitle, "récit."

In contrast to such riotously regressive antics, Julie's ingenuously gentle disposition elicits the spectator's sympathy. She is shy, but nevertheless open to others, whom she attentively regards with a child's guileless affection. This sympathetic concern is apparent in her first relation with another person, the trucker. During her journey with the trucker, Julie becomes his constant companion and quietly accompanies him to anonymous roadside restaurants and bars. Throughout their interactions, Julie gives the trucker her full attention, regarding him with near admiration as he undertakes banal tasks, such as driving or shaving. Eager to please and naturally trusting, she is even willing to satisfy his sexual needs with a hand job.

As one might expect, this scene has attracted considerable critical attention, especially from feminist theorists. However, rather than outrage or disgust, the reaction of feminist critics is surprisingly reserved. For example, Mayne observes that it is "somewhat curious" that such a seemingly servile sexual act should occur in a film that concludes with "lesbian lovemaking" (Mayne 1990, 130). It certainly supports her emphasis upon the ambivalent status of lesbianism in *je tu il elle*, whose heroine does not conform to a clear sexual orientation. Moreover, Mayne also notes that these two scenes "contrast" each other in various ways, including camera distance, duration, and language (Mayne 1990, 130). These contrasting elements suggest that Akerman deliberately subordinates this potentially painful scene of sexual shame and abuse to the film's climatic conclusion, in which Julie is "definitely situated within the frame" (Mayne 1990, 130).

Despite its sordid nature, this sexual encounter does not seem to harm Julie, who appears blissfully ignorant of its social implications. In this sense, she is innocent, albeit not virginal. In the film's final scene, she appears angelically innocent, but also sexually mature. Given her sexual maturity, it is important to specify that Julie only resembles a child. Rather than a child, Maureen Turim calls Julie "a troubling third being" who wanders "through [masculine] spaces as a stranger, an alien. She makes no demands of masculinity, yet complies with its demands with bemused indifference" (Turim 1999, 20). As such a "third being" who is neither fully grown nor a child, Julie elusive errs between sexual orientations and gender. Margulies likewise describes Julie as an indistinct, "a-individual" being— or more precisely, an "a-individual singularity" (Margulies 1996, 126).

In this regard, Julie's oddly infantile regression relates to the film's formal structure, which consists of a continuous sequence of singular elements that suspends indexical division. Like this continuous sequence, the child inhabits a stage of development preceding self-division— prior to the mirror stage, as it were.[18] To this end, there a number of empty mirrors in the film, and when Julie looks into a mirror, it uncertain that she sees herself, let alone the alien other. Without the clear self-reflection that the mirror provides— nor a definite division between self and other— differences converge in a confused state that resists transparency, opacity.

Because it defers subjective division, this state of formal confusion resembles childhood. In addition to this division, opacity also suspends external reference, including spoken words. As such, Julie remains silent.[19] Despite this silence, she is

---

[18] The absence of self-reflection corresponds to a well-document aspect of Akerman's filmic technique, which avoids reverse shots.

[19] There is an exception to Julie's silence. Near the film's conclusion, she speaks twice to her lover in child-like monosyllables: "j'ai faim" et "encore." Rather than choosing particular words, it is only possible for Julie to pronounce these strange utterances because they relate to the film's formal predicate: the suspension of narrative division, which reflects her closed, empty condition, hunger.

neither inexpressive nor withdrawn, but instead exudes quiet excitement. In the spirit

of such excited silence, de Certeau describes "l'expérience jubilatoire et silencieuse de

l'enfance" (de Certeau 1990, 164). Childhood is "jubilant" because it lacks particular

words and can express the inarticulable nature of singular experience, whose

innumerable singularities produce a tumultuous "diversity" (de Certeau 1984, 99). In

his definition of opacity, Glissant likewise insists on the "irreducible" nature of the

singular: opacity subsists in "la singularité non-réductible" (Glissant 1990, 206). As a

mass, the disparately undivided diversity of such singularities animates opacity, "the

poetic force" that replaces "the absorbing concept of unity": "Nous avons déjà

prononcé la force poétique dont nous pensons qu'elle rayonne en place du concept

absorbant d'unité: c'est l'opacité du divers" (Glissant 1990, 206). To concisely

paraphrase Glissant, opacity is diversity— that is, the cumulative presence of

sequentially singular events.[20]

   The collective presence of such diversity is exalting and also distracting.

Opacity causes distraction in several ways. Applied to images, opacity troubles the

presumed transparency of visual transmission. According to Glissant, it likewise

provides a conceptual distraction, which disinters the image of "absolute truth": "La

pensée de l'opacité me distrait des vérités absolues, dont je croyais être le dépositaire"

(Glissant 1990, 206). Furthermore, opacity must itself be perceived in a state of

distraction.[21] As is consistent with de Certeau's subject, this state of distraction

---

[20] Throughout *Poétique de la Relation*, Glissant returns to the shoreline as an aesthetic model. In
particular, he is interested in its status as "souterraine et cyclique," whose "continuel passage" creates
"circularité" (Glissant 1990, 135-6). Since these words aptly correspond to de Certeau's description of
walking, it is striking evidence of their formal correspondence when Glissant subsequently imagines a
passing pedestrian as the envoy of this coastal economy. Moreover, as is especially relevant to the
present discussion of silence, Glissant specifies that his rapport with this pedestrian is silent, or "not
based on words": "Respectant l'inlassable mutité, j'ai néanmois voulu (par dépit de ne m'être pas fait
'comprendre' ou accepter) inaugurer avec le marcheur un système de relation qui ne fût pas basé sur des
mots" (Glissant 1990, 136-7).
[21] *Trio A* deliberately develops a similar style of distraction. See the discussion of "task performance"
in Chapter 2.

corresponds to a quotidian practice, the habitual execution of routine activities. Like chores, such endlessly repeated routines do not require complete attention and thus permit a form of peripheral perception. Like daydreaming, the mind in this state drifts towards the diverse possibilities of events occurring elsewhere, beyond the peripheries of the cinematic frame.

Such distracted daydreaming corresponds to Julie's infantile behavior. Although often eagerly attentive, she cannot maintain extended periods of concentration and conducts herself with a casual carelessness that verges on sloppiness. This carelessness causes accidents, which albeit inconsequential, in turn necessitate additional activity. For instance, while eating sugar, she looks off-screen and permits the bag to spill, which she subsequently cleans with the only available tool, a spoon. She endures this duty only briefly before abruptly laying down, perhaps in surrender to the endlessness of collecting grains of sugar with a spoon. Despite such a Sisyphean task, this scene does not convey existential despair. As her glance outside demonstrates, Julie has a different reason for giving up: the audible presence of external events.

In the form of ambient noise, events from outside her apartment attract Julie's attention. In her own words, the day was "too sonorous": "j'ai fait des efforts pour ramasser à cuillère le sucre qui me pénétrait et puis j'ai arreté... ils étaient trop nombreux et le jour trop sonore." As a source of relief from her painful isolation, such sonorous diversity is a pleasure and causes her to faintly smile. Admittedly, her aural enjoyment of such indifferently distant events seems unlikely, especially since they are unremarkably ordinary sounds of dogs barking, birds chirping, children playing, traffic, and construction. This disparate sonority connects Julie to life outside her apartment. However, Julie's pleasure depends on the walls of her apartment to diffuse the sonic tumult of urban experience. Thus diffused, this tumult of unrelated

events becomes a comfortably quiet din. In this way, such potentially chaotic quotidian events no longer require conscious orchestration in order to be intelligible. Their muted musicality makes it possible to appreciate the voluminous variety of everyday life without recourse to narrative order— or at least to its traditional form, dramatic narrative.

Rather than the referential value of language, opacity— as a poetic mode of expression— emphasizes its acoustic quality. Opacity also informs Julie's ability to immerse herself in the sonorous diversity of the everyday. In place of a unified whole, its structure relies on a ceaseless succession of singular elements— an ambulatory sequence. Since this sequence defers indexical division, it produces an immeasurable mass of endlessly accumulating singularities, whose diversity is delightful, but also confused and diffused. This diffused multitude constitutes opacity, which Glissant call "l'opacité du divers" (Glissant 1990, 206). In addition to the vivacious diversity of outside events, a variety of normally negligible noises also animate the apartment from within its walls. As in the final scene, Akerman amplifies Julie's movements in order to produce an aural texture of murmurs, footsteps, and shuffling. Surrounded by this texture, Julie is never still nor silent. Even in the apparent cessation of all activity, her voice reports that she plays with and listens to her breath: "je me suis écouté respirer... j'ai joué avec ma respiration." As a form of opacity, these sounds transmit singular elements— which like the breath— may be scarcely detectible, but are always present. In order to perceive the presence of these perpetually passing events, it is necessary to listen.

Listening and atmospheric sound also interest Akerman's most celebrated critic, Gilles Deleuze. In a brief passage from *Cinema 2*, Deleuze describes Julie's gestures as a sequential chain that demonstrates "le signe d'états de corps propres au personnage féminin" (Deleuze 1985, 255). He links this "chaîne des états des corps

féminins" to the acoustic diversity of events that animate the external environment in Akerman's films, "l'environment qui ne fait plus que se montrer ou s'entendre par la fenêtre d'une chambre"— such as the window of Julie's room in *je tu il elle*— "par le vitre d'un train, tout un art du son" (Deleuze 1985, 255). Although Deleuze does not elaborate on this "art du son," the capacity of sound to traverse fixed boundaries implicitly inflects his next sentence, whose subject is a special form of movement, nomadism: "Sur place ou dans l'espace, le corps d'une femme conquiert un étrange nomadisme qui lui fait traverser les âges, les situations, les lieux" (Deleuze 1985, 255). As demonstrated in *je tu il elle*, to be nomadic is not to literally wander, but rather to let one's mind wander in a state of distracted attention that resembles wonder— the singular wonder of everyday diversity.

In addition to this acoustic atmosphere, images in *je tu il elle* also relay this continuous sequence of singularities. This sequence begins in the film's first shot, which designates a single action in single day: "j'ai peint les meubles en bleu le premier jour." At first, each shot corresponds to a single day, but as this sequence continues, they blend into each other and finally lapse into amorphous lengths of time, "des jours après." Margulies too observes this lapse and states that "the strict succession of days gets lost" in "'defective' indexicality" (Margulies 1996, 116). Such "defective" indexicality relates to the ambulatory, whose measureless succession of singular elements suspends indexical division. Furthermore, Margulies observes that the film's visual imagery reflects these immeasurable quantities of singular elements: "Quantity— of eaten sugar, pages written, camera shots— is cleaved from significance; mounting numbers don't mean progress" (Margulies 1996, 117). In the ensuing absence of external reference, the days amass into indistinct expanses. Like the pile of sugar, literal masses appear around the apartment. For instance, according to the narration, it begins to prodigiously snow: "il a neigé très longtemps... pendant

quatre jours." As if from the mist of memory, such visual white noise literally relays lost time— that is, what might be happening elsewhere, or even what might have happened, but did not. In this regard, the insulating presence of accumulating singularities provides an indirect connection to the exterior of the cinematic frame— and the self.

The prospect of aesthetic communication without recourse to external reference also corresponds to Akerman's interest in the representation of women and female sexuality, especially lesbianism. As an exclusive connection between women, lesbianism is a possible model for an aesthetic process that does not rely on symbolic order, which is inherently phallic. Although Margulies and Mayne approach *je tu il elle* from opposing critical perspectives— artistic formalism and feminist theory— their analyses both investigate alternatives to symbolic structure. Margulies locates this alternative in the film's sequential structure— which I call the ambulatory— that resists indexical division. Mayne seeks this state of deferred division in Akerman's interest in feminine communication and community: "a female world that exists prior to or outside the realm of symbolic order" (Mayne 1990, 150). Admittedly, this lesbian "female world" in *je tu il elle* verges on two idealized forms, the utopian and the regressive. Mayne would like to avoid both these idealized forms, which undermine the transformative potential of feminist aesthetics. As such, she insists that the "marginality of lesbianism" generates an ambivalence that productively resists both such fantasies and thus gestures towards "another register of desire altogether" (Mayne 1990, 154). This enigmatic "register of desire" conforms to the mediated mode of presence that I believe animates Akerman's cinema— opacity.

As is consistent with the "marginality of lesbianism," the diverse events present in Julie's apartment remain unintelligibly ambivalent— that is, opaque. Opacity cannot transcend narrative division or language and its presence produces an

enigmatic residue. In *je tu il elle*, this residue persists in a silent form of verbal expression, writing. Oscillating between inactivity and concentrated bursts of work, Julie writes in a state of apparent distraction and produces a profusion of white pages. Despite an initial attempt to arrange these pages in a grid, their detritus soon litters the floor. Like the sugar and snow, these papers contribute to the visual accumulation of white noise. They likewise cause literal noises, including shuffling, scribbling, and the crinkling of crumpled sheets. The thoughts they contain are in a similar state of disarray. Acting without apparent forethought, Julie's indiscriminate efforts result in excessive repetition: "j'ai d'abord écrit trois pages pour lui dire... ensuite... j'ai écrit six pages pour lui dire la même chose." This narration notably specifies that Julie is writing to another, "lui." Although anonymous, this other is almost certainly her former lover, who had ended their relationship. It thus emerges that these wildly proliferating pages are actually letters. Addressed to a disinterested recipient, these letters have little hope of reaching their destination, which condemns them to endless circulation— the circulation of exile.

The agony of amorous exile in *je tu il elle* is never entirely evident. Likewise, upon first watching the film, an audience cannot recognize the reasons behind Julie's self-imposed seclusion nor her compulsive actions, which relate to its sole event, jouissance. Even after multiple viewings, it is impossible to identify her emotions, which like the content of her letters remain private and undisclosed. Although unseen, it is nevertheless logical to presume that such letters of unrequited love express the measureless despair of romantic rejection. This rejection is an ineluctable part of romantic love. To recall Lacan's assertion, love is "impotent," incapable of establishing a "relation between two," and necessarily ends in a catastrophe, the loss of the other (Lacan 1975, 12). In the film's formal structure, this catastrophe marks a constitutive limit, the impossibility of formal unity— or in Françoise Audé's words,

"une union-fusion idyllique" (Audé 1982, 153). According to Audé, the failure to achieve such amorous unity ultimately informs "le statut de Chantal Akerman et de son cinéma," which she defines as "exile" (Audé 1982, 162).

As such, these scattered scores of pages indicate her frustration with the futility of self-expression. This frustration results in edits and erasures that scar these pages. Although the audience never sees this text, the narration recounts that "j'ai barré... raturé..." Filled with such indelible scrawls, these unseen pages approach a formal limit, the first mark of memory, the letter. As a form of writing, the letter recalls the initial instant of division that founds human history— and likewise, all subsequent stories. Writing is a form of technical mediation, whose presence has informed narrative structure since day one, the immemorial beginning of exile.

In contrast to writing, the sensuous immediacy of cinema seems to overcome this exilic state of divided being. Of course, cinema cannot restore this undivided state. Even if muted, the traumatic loss of the other marks *je tu il elle*. The persistence of this mournful memory of lost love— the ecstatic experience of immediate, undivided contact with the other— may seem to conflict with opacity, which is an alternative to the tragic dimensions of dramatic narrative. As in *je tu il elle*, opacity conveys the presence of unmediated phenomena from a "pre-aesthetic" sphere, the quotidian.[22] In order to demonstrate how opacity mediates this loss, it is necessary to look towards the artistic forms that permit Akerman to fully develop this alternative to dramatic narrative: documentary, autobiography, and installation.

---

[22] In *Jeanne Dielman*, Akerman makes the quotidian rhythm of domestic life her subject, which she refers to as "the daily gestures of a woman." Despite being "the lowest in the hierarchy of film images," these daily gestures have aesthetic meaning. They thus correspond to de Certeau's insistence on the aesthetic validity of quotidian phenomena. In the words of Teresa de Lauretis, such apparently "pre-aesthetic" gestures are "fully aesthetic": "Take Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), a film about the routine daily activities of a Belgian middle-class and middle-aged housewife, and a film where the pre-aesthetic is already fully aesthetic."

Opacity After Cinema: The Screen in To Walk Next To One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator

These three genres— documentary, autobiography, and installation— culminate in Akerman's 2004 work, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator*. However, before discussing this installation, it is important to investigate Akerman's preceding documentary films, which she began to produce in the nineties. The first of these documentaries was her 1993 film, *From the East*, in which she continues to explore a theme integral to *je tu il elle*, exile. As its title indicates, *From the East* examines a particular area of exile, Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. Although this title implies that the film is about an exodus of refugees, *From the East* actually plots a journey eastwards on route to Moscow. In this regard, Akerman herself resembles a refugee, who crosses foreign cultures and cities in pursuit of a vague promise upon arrival in her distant destination. Like a foreigner, she is an anonymously unannounced presence throughout the film, which provides no context, narration, or discussion in order to facilitate the presentation of its unfamiliar subject. Without these narrative devices, *From the East* becomes a mysterious, melancholy meditation on distant events that cannot be understood through foreign eyes.

Furthermore, as the child of Eastern European refugees, Akerman is actually returning to the homeland that her Jewish family left after World War II. Akerman reluctantly acknowledges this autobiographical impulse in an essay that accompanied the film: "There might also be personal reasons for going, and there are" (Akerman 1995, 20). Regardless of such misgivings, Akerman admits that she felt a sense of kinship in Eastern Europe: "the way people lived, their way of thinking, was all too

familiar to me. I would find the same food on the table that my mother always made, even after fifty years of living in Belgium" (Akerman 1995, 21). In this "foreign country that was not altogether foreign," her encounter with such customs permitted Akerman to glimpse a potential homeland. As such, Akerman's travels through the East became a journey into her past, as if a process of self-discovery. Of course, *From the East* could never complete such self-discovery, since historical catastrophe— the Holocaust— had precluded the possibility of a past in such a home.

Despite the proximity of such lost personal history, *From the East* resists the autobiographical impulse to seek renewed self-knowledge. Contrary to conventional autobiography, Akerman avoids references to the self, markers associated with her personal identity, and "even bypasses the specific town from which her family came" (Lebow 2003, 36). In her essay on *From the East*, Akerman confirms her aversion to ordinary autobiography, observing that "even if the personal reasons are real, I don't want to make a 'back to my roots' kind of film" (Akerman 1995, 23). Her distaste for such a simplistically self-centered "back to my roots" film is consistent with her affinity for exile in her early cinema, which— as identified by Françoise Audé— relates to two causes: "la perte du paradis narcissique" and "l'absence des racines" (Audé 1982, 162). The "absence of roots" informs the autobiographical nature of Akerman's work, especially since it corresponds to her Jewish identity. In an extended reading of the Jewish aesthetics of *From the East*, film theorist Alisa Lebow proposes that the absence of roots inhabits a particular figure, "the wandering Jew" (Lebow 2003, 38). Even though Akerman is not religious— nor does *From the East* contain evident references to Jewish culture— she maintains that Akerman cannot escape this history of wandering. As such, Akerman herself becomes a wanderer, whose travels turn aimlessly around the history of her missing history. In Lebow's

words, "Akerman perambulates (i.e. wanders) around her Jewishness" (Lebow 2003, 38).

Regardless of the influence of Jewish history, Akerman's Jewish heritage does not define *From the East*. On the contrary, she uses the rootlessness intrinsic to Jewish culture in order to consider contemporary experiences of exile. Exile pervades her documentaries, which investigate the itinerant lives of individuals who inhabit politically unstable states. Akerman has made several documentaries on such marginal populations: illegal immigrants on the Mexican-American border, racially motivated social injustices in the American South, and everyday life in Tel Aviv, a city in a country at war. Her interest in political uncertainty continues the exploration of exile begun in her cinema, especially the absence of roots. In fact, Audé's description of "l'absence des racines" anticipates Akerman's affinity to social exclusion: "L'absence des racines vous fait, là où vous êtes, observateur muet, privé du droit à participer au débat, puis au vote" (Audé 1982, 162). Audé's intimation of such potential political violence relates to both Jewish and Soviet history, whose traumatic past remains uncomfortably close to the present in *From the East*. This traumatic past also informs Akerman's essay, which recounts political persecution and its lingering presence in everyday life. According to Akerman, even laughter betrays this history of oppression in the present, which resembles an "impending disaster": "And beneath this laughter you get a sense of impending disaster. It is impending from week to week but never comes— quite simply, perhaps, because it is already there" (Akerman 1995, 34).

This impending disaster assumes an elusive form. Rather than evident anarchy, *From the East* shows a strangely indeterminate state of transition, in which a new order has yet to succeed the previous political system. As a result, a fading historical era persists in common aspects of quotidian life, such as stolid Stalinist

architecture and outdated automobiles. Like these buildings and cars, social order in
this post-communist world is slowly breaking down and coming to a halt. For long
periods of time, Akerman traverses vacant, scarcely populated places: fallow fields,
abandoned industrial zones, and nearly deserted streets on the outskirts of cities. Of
course, communism had itself been crudely imposed on a peasant population, whose
history occasionally emerges during the film. For instance, it is possible to glimpse
traces of this folk history in women wearing traditional headscarves while working in
the dry furrows of an unidentifiably vast farm. In cities, distinct strains of Slavic
songs echo from cheap radios blaring pop music— the sort of cheaply produced pop
particular to places that have not yet mastered the Western system of media
production. This generic music reflects the ambivalent status of Eastern Europe,
which lacks identity and purpose. In the absence of purpose, such music also serves as
a distraction in a life filled with uncertainty. In *From the East*, this uncertainty fills
the faces of these countries' inhabitants, who are at once preoccupied and unoccupied.
Similar to her early films, Akerman is concerned with the ambivalence lodged in daily
life, whose repetitive rituals become an essential source of order. As discussed in
chapter two, Michel de Certeau maintains that the execution of such everyday
affairs— or practices— is essential to collective survival. *From the East* is a veritable
catalog of such everyday activity: shopping, eating, walking in the street, and
waiting— above all, waiting.

Although the prevalence of waiting in *From the East* may be evident, it
difficult to determine the intention of such aimless masses. It sometimes appears that
Akerman is surveying commuters, who listlessly gather at appointed sites as part of
their daily routine. Loaded with baggage, others have apparently been waiting for
indefinite lengths of time in overcrowded terminals, where it seems that nothing has
recently come or gone. In one such shot, a stationary camera slowly circles through a

hall of stranded travelers. Even though the camera retraces the same people and spaces, its circle creates an impression of endless repetition. Repetition also characterizes another recurring scene in the film, which depicts individuals alone in their apartments, whose interior may have not changed in decades. In these interior scenes, Akerman's subjects silently pursue ordinary activities— eating, drinking tea, watching television, sitting— while passively considering the camera.

The strange stare of these isolated individuals reflects the film's static visual structure. Akerman's spare technical vocabulary borders on unsatisfying simplicity, if not an outright absence of artistic intention. Given such stiflingly stiff techniques, it would be easy to mistake *From the East* for an amateur project. There is neither narrator nor voiceover to guide the spectator, and events occur without context in these foreign countries, whose occupants remain anonymous. The film does not use interviews, dialogue, nor does it provide translations for the few words that might be overheard in the background. Akerman imposes similar limits on the film's visual vocabulary, which includes frontal camera angles, slow, lateral movement, and scenes consisting of long durations in a single shot. In short, *From the East* does not establish a dramatic structure in either verbal or visual forms.

Without narrative structure, *From the East* becomes deliberately dull. Little happens other than a slow succession of extended images that depict inactivity, emptiness, and waiting. This absence of activity lulls its audience into an indifferent daze. Although apparently artless, this mesmerizing monotony reflects the apathy of the film's subjects, who are stranded in a historical hiatus. Despite this formal connection, the lack of intervening structure makes it impossible to understand these people, whose thoughts and feelings remain inaccessible. As such, Akerman and her audience resemble uninformed foreigners, whose voyage eastwards is limited to aimless wandering amid an endless array of faces.

Faces are one of the most common images in *From the East*. Indeed, it seems that Akerman wished to record every detail of every face, no matter how small— perhaps in order to obstruct the loss that inspired the making of the film. Her own writing hints at this encyclopedic ambition to preserve and redeem history: "I'd like to shoot everything. Everything that moves me" (Akerman 1995, 17). Lebow observes that this succession of faces is urgent, as if Akerman wanted to confer "humanity" on each: "[These faces] are presented as signs of hope, evidence of humanity in this otherwise desolate and depersonalized environment" (Lebow 2003, 57). Despite such "humanity," Lebow correctly concludes that even on film the audience cannot navigate these innumerable faces, which ultimately "mask meanings of their own." In fact, she compares such faces to a literal mask, which cannot "yield its secrets plainly," but rather "[conceals] as much as it reveals" (Lebow 2003, 57). Given that Akerman is recording real people, this comparison to a mask may seem counter-intuitive. However, these "masks" fulfill a contradictory function. Like a "facade," these faces impose a surface of separation that makes it possible to sense the existence of the other beyond the immediate boundaries of the frame (Lebow 2003, 57). In formal terms, they reveal the necessity of concealment— or the division incurred between frames— in aesthetic expression.

As a manifestation of this division, the faces in *From the East* depart from the dramatic conventions of narrative cinema. Whereas most films encourage identification with depicted events and characters, *From the East* refers its audience to a common formal limit, the frame. The film's visual tactics impose a static frontal structure that foregrounds the presence of the frame. Moreover, each shot consists of rectilinear units that are often actual frames, such as empty windows and doorways. In a reading of Akerman's subsequent documentary, *From the Other Side*, the distinguished film theorist Philip Rosen notes a similar "compositional emphasis on

framing" (Rosen 2006, 15). He likewise observes that this compositional emphasis results from a sense of stasis: "what is *not* present is movement of bodies from shot to shot, nor is there eyeline matching" (Rosen 2006, 15). This lack of movement-based transitions leads Rosen to conclude that Akerman deliberately resists the classical structure of narrative cinema: "in short, the film eschews the dematerializing interrelations of frames and shots in the name of consciousness that developed as a norm around Griffith's era" (Rosen 2006, 15). According to this argument, conventional narrative cinema uses movement within each shot to produce a semblance of continuity— and unity— between frames, which ultimately generates "consciousness." Without this movement, *From the Other Side* suspends a conscious connection to its foreign subjects. Like the faces in *From the East,* Akerman does not presume to know the inner experience of Mexican refugees, but instead leaves multiple interpretative possibilities open, which induces a state of ambivalence.

This ambivalence is a manifestation of the division between the spectator and the other. This division relates to the formal process at work in Akerman's documentaries. As Rosen suggests, her films resist the imperatives of classical cinema, especially "the dematerializing interrelations of frames and shots" (Rosen 2006, 15). Rather than "dematerializing" or concealing this relationship, Akerman's artistic process leaves a material residue that encumbers its audience. Rosen associates this material residue with the principle subject of *From the Other Side*, the fence that divides the Mexican-American border. For the community of refugees who inhabit this border, the fence dominates their lives. Even when off-camera, this fence likewise dominates the film. As in all of Akerman's documentaries, her visual techniques invariably refer to similar surfaces of separation: blinds on an apartment window in Tel Aviv, young women in Antwerp draped in cigarette smoke, uninhabited landscapes, dense snow in Moscow, and of course, faces, the countless

faces that Alisa Lebow compares to facades. Like facades, these barriers impede access to the visual field that defines the cinematic scene. In this regard, they anticipate an actual surface of separation, which emerges in Akerman's 2004 installation, *To Walk Next to One's Untied Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*— namely, an opaque screen.

Before discussing this installation, it is necessary to remember that the screen is the product of a formal process— opacity. To be more precise, Édouard Glissant proposes that opacity is a mode of poetic expression, which I have linked to a movement-based aesthetic process, the ambulatory. In Akerman's early films, the ambulatory was essential to articulating an alternative to dramatic form. For instance, *je tu il elle* establishes a sequence of singular elements, whose continuous motion defers indexical division. In the absence of this division, the film suspends the formal imperative upon the dramatic unities of time and place. As such, place dissolves into space, which lacks particular qualities and inspires aimless wandering— an absent-minded mode of circulation that characterizes ambulatory movement.

Although ambulatory movement is endlessly aimless, it is nevertheless circumscribed to small, bounded spaces. Akerman's walking in *je tu il elle* is restricted to interior spaces, such as restaurants, a truck cab, and her apartment. In only one scene does Julie appear outside, where she stands alone, a tiny figure in the middle of a massive freeway interchange. The uninhabitable terrain of this intersection anticipates the anonymous landscapes that fill Akerman's documentaries. Like the nameless protagonist of *je tu il elle*, the occupants of these uninhabitable spaces are restless itinerants, who have been relegated to endless, purposeless passage along the social margins. Such exilic wandering is a condition common to populations that have been separated from their homeland or otherwise denied a proper place in history: migrant workers, illegal immigrants, refugees, and women.

Despite this exilic condition, Akerman's documentaries establish a connection to social margins and their itinerant inhabitants. As animated by ambulatory motion, the margin becomes a site through which foreclosed historical possibilities may pass. In this regard, it is important that the manifestations of the margin in these works—blinds, snow, smoke, and above all, the opaque screen— are permeable. In addition to being literally translucent, this permeable quality corresponds to the formal function of opacity, which indicates the profuse presence of singular elements. According to Glissant's definition, opacity fundamentally relates to singularity, "une singularité non-réductible" (Glissant 1990, 204). Although such singular elements are normally incommensurate with cinema's narrative and spatial frame, opacity indicates the presence of unrealized histories, which enables Glissant to propose a poetic mode capable of relaying— and possibly repairing— the historical loss incurred during colonial occupation.

Opacity likewise permits Akerman to relay possibilities excluded from narrative form. In *je tu il elle*, this multitude of singular elements arrives in the form of quotidian events, which are conducted and diffused through the walls of Julie's apartment. Such sonorous diversity also exists in a variety of incidental noises and foreign languages that fill Akerman's documentaries. In her reading of *From the East*, Lebow observes that atmospheric sound relates to the presence of the past: "There is a pointed contrast between the absence of the past in visual terms and its undeniable weight in aural terms" (Lebow 2003, 49). However, instead of delighting in the quotidian confusion of such distantly diffused events— like the protagonist of *je tu il elle*— Akerman's documentaries are emotionally and physically somber. As Lebow notes, the past in her cinematic meditation on Eastern Europe "remains at a distinct yet perceptible remove" (Lebow 2003, 49).

In literal terms, these documents employ a muted palette, whose colors reflect the absence of direct light. As is consistent with such diffused light, they emphasize the presence of boundaries and borders that make it impossible to directly— if ever— reach a destination. This indirect process of aesthetic mediation thus requires waiting, which is anxious and uncertain. Rosen likewise insists that waiting is indispensable to "border crossing": "Because border crossing is a matter of actually traveling across space, it takes time. We must wait" (Rosen 2006, 15). Rather than overcoming boundaries, Akerman's documentaries propose that it is necessary to live with aesthetic separation. As in *je tu il elle*, Akerman's ambulatory act never goes outside bounded space— or beyond its border.

The somber tone pertaining to this uncertain process of historical recollection also informs *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator*. In terms of its physical construction, this installation forces its audience to navigate two unfamiliar interiors. As if shielded from the outside, these spaces employ softly diffused light, which emanates from its sole sculptural material, an opaque screen. Like its antecedents in Akerman's documentaries, this screen embodies a boundary that relays diversely confused content. As a result of passing through this boundary, such content becomes diffused, especially in visual form.

This visual diffusion manifests itself in both sections of the installation. In the first section, the audience enters a tall spiral screen whose surface displays a slowly circulating text written in French. Although these words were excerpts from Akerman's artistic reflections on the installation— their source is undisclosed within the exhibition— it is difficult for the audience to read them, even if able to understand French. In an insightful review, film critic Amy Taubin notes this difficulty: "because the projectors were placed at oblique angles to the tulle surface, which itself was curved, the letters went out of focus as they moved around and upwards, making it

difficult to follow more than a fragment of the text" (Taubin 2005, 61). There is a similar act of visual diffusion in the second section, which consists of a rectangular opaque screen that shows a small recorded image from a handwritten text. Several feet behind this screen there is another image: a black and white video of Akerman in conversation with her mother.

Given that this video is the principal object of interest in the installation, it would be easy to disregard the presence of the screen, especially since its translucent fabric does not impede viewing. It nevertheless functions as an alienation device— albeit in an unusually unobtrusive fashion— that interferes with visual expression and prevents the spectator from getting too close to the image, both in physical and psychological terms. In addition to diffusing the video's visual image, the screen functions as a physical impasse that undermines the passage of the audience through the installation en route to their apparent destination, the video.

As such, this impasse seems to repel its audience, as if sending them back into the spiral's corridor in the first section of the installation. Like a detour, the screen relates to the installation's formal structure, which depends on a circular mode of movement that suspends teleological form— the ambulatory. The ceaseless circulation of ambulatory motion inherently informs the spiral, whose constantly revolving shape expands from a single point to form an unbroken surface. Such continual turning also informed Yvonne Rainer's dance, *Trio A*, whose ambulatory aesthetics were discussed in chapter two.[23] In the context of Akerman's installation, it is interesting to note that the constant rotation achieved in Rainer's choreography resembles a spiral. Like *Trio A*, Akerman's spiral imposes a perpetual detour on its peripatetic audience, who are apt to lose themselves within its curves while contemplating the quizzical text drifting on its walls.

---

[23] See Chapter 2.

Admittedly, the endlessly aimless movement connected to the spiral may seem to conflict with the impasse in the second half, whose immobilizing form resembles a frame. Despite this apparent opposition, these two forms of movement— ceaseless movement and impassive immobility— both relate to the ambulatory. As for the itinerant inhabitants in Akerman's documentaries, ambulatory movement continually occurs without ever arriving at a destination. Accordingly, its movement seems trapped in the same limbo-like location: the border, which is suspended between places with established identities. As an embodiment of the border, the screen occupies a liminal site trapped between unified locations that are often defined in mutual opposition, such as Mexico and the United States, which Akerman explored in *From the Other Side*. In *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator*, such mutual opposition defined its two sections, the spiral and the frame. Akerman uses the same opaque fabric in both sections— tulle— which suggests that the spiral and the frame form a single aesthetic construct, the screen. Even if a single construct, this screen remains divided. In this regard, it is important to recall that the screen is both a literal object and a process that resists predicating artistic structure on formal unity and grounds a poetic mode of expression, opacity.

As a material manifestation of opacity, the screen mediates between opposing structures— such as the spiral and the frame— without uniting them into a single concept or image. In contrast to such a conventional concept of unity, this divided connection adheres to a formal process proposed by Walter Benjamin, the dialectical image. According to media theorist Samuel Weber, Benjamin established the theoretical foundations for the dialectical image in "one of his earliest writings, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,'" which describes a process that resists conceptual synthesis (Weber 2008, 49). In this essay, Benjamin writes that "besides the concept of synthesis, another concept, that of a certain nonsynthesis of two

concepts in another, will become very important systematically, since another relation between thesis and antithesis is possible besides synthesis" (Benjamin 1996, 106). Weber connects this notion of "nonsynthesis" to "the concept of the dialectical image," against which he contrasts "the familiar conception" of an image as "the illustrative depiction of an external object" (Weber 2008, 49).

In the context of Akerman's aesthetics of opacity, the dialectical image is a useful corrective to the prevailing notion of cinema, which is typically held to be a visual medium. In contrast to the immediacy of visual expression, the dialectical image assembles discontinuous elements that cannot be unified. This disruption of formal unity resembles an "explosion," which Weber relates to "non-integrative dialectics" (Weber 2008, 49). Citing Benjamin's description of this concept in *The Arcades Project*, Weber notes that this explosion responds to a movement that takes place in the "interior" of the image. This interior movement consists of two parts, "the arresting of a movement, the interruption of progression, but at the same time and above all the separation or division of its 'interior'" (Weber 2008, 50). Although such internal movement resists visual and conceptual comprehension, the dialectical image makes it possible to sense this division. In this manner, the dialectical image relays combinatory possibilities that exceed the immediate boundaries of the visual frame. Weber initially identifies these excessive possibilities as a form of "virtualization": "The interior turned inside-out marks the movement of medialization in Benjamin and stamps it at once as one of virtualization" (Weber 2008, 50). The presence of the virtual aptly applies to *je tu il elle*, which transmits a profusion of distant events from the quotidian sphere. However, virtuality seems less relevant to Akerman's documentaries, which address historical loss. Indeed, Weber subsequently revises his assessment to address the dialectical image as a historical process that makes it

possible to perceive the past in the present— or rather, what Benjamin calls the "now."

Benjamin's process of historical reconstruction has interested many critics of Akerman's recent documentaries. Although Taubin does not mention Benjamin, she maintains that *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator* employs a "dialectical" method: "Akerman's method in this strangely titled work is as dialectical as ever" (Taubin 2005, 61). In a reading of *From the East,* cinema theorist Sasha Vojkovic connects this "dialectical process" to "Walter Benjamin's philosophico-historical views" (Vojkovic 1999, 91). Alisa Lebow directly discusses *From the East* in relation to the dialectical image, which emerges as momentary flash in the "now" (Lebow 2003, 50). In his reading of Benjamin, Weber makes a distinction useful to these critics' common interest in Benjamin's dialectical process, especially as it regards the "now." He observes that "this 'now,' however, is never self-contained, integrated, simply present: rather it is a divider, a dividing-line or point, producing a 'cut' that is never in-between but always *outside* of that which it divides" (Weber 2008, 51). As if held apart or separated, the manifold possibilities of lost histories are "outside" the image. Hence, Benjamin describes the historical distance present in the dialectical image in terms that recall a figure who traverses the fading grandeur of the Parisian arcades: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill" (Benjamin 1996, 463).

Evidence of the ambulatory also appears in the reference to walking in the title of Akerman's installation, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in An Empty Refrigerator*. Granted, given other apparently unrelated elements in the title— untied shoelaces and an empty refrigerator— this reference to walking may seem incidental. However, it

can be demonstrated that these odd objects are consistent with the process of ambulatory motion developed in Akerman's early films. As depicted in *ju tu il elle*, the aesthetic act of walking is ascetic. Julie encloses herself in her apartment, from which she removes all furniture so that she may roam its vacant space, which thus resembles an empty refrigerator. This peculiar reference to a refrigerator also pertains to another absence in Julie's apartment, her lack of food. Rather than proper food, Julie solely consumes powdered sugar, which permits her to empty herself, as if preparing to receive spiritual sustenance from the outside. This spiritual sustenance arrives in the form of everyday events from outside. In this way, Julie is able even without leaving to take a virtual stroll beyond the walls of her apartment, which is suffused with the comforting sounds of quotidian life.

Despite the semblance of such comfort, ambulatory motion relies on a restless imperative: maintaining continual motion while avoiding repetition. This action establishes a sequence of singular elements, whose motion defers indexical division. As discussed in an analysis of *Trio A* in chapter two, the task of maintaining such motion requires incessant innovation. This process of improvisation relates to the ordinary obstacle imposed on walking in the title of Akerman's installation, untied shoelaces. Like improvisation, walking with untied shoes requires patient care with every step. Although apparently anodyne, such walking is an awkwardly acrobatic act that could be dangerous, especially should one's concentration falter, causing a fall into the broken state that the ambulatory avoids— indexical division.

The anxiety particular to this treacherous crossing— the process of deferring indexical division— pervades Akerman's recent documentaries. In *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*, Akerman considers this division in her personal history. In fact, the title actually consists of autobiographical references assembled from her artistic reflections on the installation. Although it is difficult to

notice such projected references in the installation, Akerman published them in an accompanying catalogue. In these reflections, Akerman describes her sense of "torn being," which she associates with the awkward act of "walking next to my shoelaces" (Akerman 2007).[24] In this context, "walking next to my shoelaces" is a metaphor for living without a coherent sense of self, which seems "torn in all directions": "And my whole life consists of these divisions, this state of being torn in all directions. And besides, I can also walk next to my shoelaces" (Akerman 2007). Akerman prefaces this passage with a remark that relates to the continuous, singular structure of the ambulatory. In this statement, such sequential continuity emerges in the conjunction "and": "In this polarized world, it is always this or that. I would sometimes much prefer that it would be this and this and this" (Akerman 2007). Hence, to walk next to one's shoelaces is to create a continuous chain of diverse, possibly contradictory elements.

As in *je tu il elle*, the distraction of such diversity relieves Akerman's isolation but cannot cure her sense of "torn being," which is connected to her personal history— that is, the history missing from her past. Such missing history partly compelled Akerman to make a film on Eastern Europe, a place itself subject to historical deprivation. In these cultures, Akerman also encountered a past she had been unable to live, save for shared customs that were "all too familiar to me" (Akerman 1995, 21). Akerman recounts that her parents never discussed their life prior to the war. As such, she only realized "much later" that her family was foreign: "For a long time— my whole childhood— I believed that their way of life, the way they ate, talked, and thought was the way all Belgians lived" (Akerman 1995, 21). This experience of cultural displacement is a frequent theme in Akerman's work. In interviews, she

---

[24] The catalogue of this exhibition was only published only in German. All translations are my own. Furthermore, Akerman's diary was printed without page numbers, which impedes academic citation, but is faithful to opacity, which blurs particular units into an indistinct amalgam.

freely concedes that the cause of this displacement was the Holocaust, a subject which her parents never discussed: "My mother was in Auschwitz, but she didn't talk about it much" (Macdonald 2005, 260).

This self-imposed silence caused a gap in their family history, which Akerman describes as "uprootedness": "because they didn't pass it down to us, what they did pass down was precisely this sense of uprootedness" (in Bergstrom 1999, 98). Accordingly, Akerman associates such "uprootedness" with the Holocaust, even if she did not directly experience it. This unintended act of traumatic transference across generations epitomizes a phenomena that literary theorist Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory." According to Hirsch, postmemory describes "the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor recreate" (in Lebow 2003, 48). As a form of postmemory, the Holocaust initiates a recurring cycle that perpetuates historical loss in the present.

This lineage of loss likewise informs an image in the title of Akerman's installation, the empty refrigerator. On its surface, this image of an empty refrigerator reflects the lingering lack that characterizes identity after cultural displacement. In her artistic reflections, Akerman also connects food to the Holocaust. She explains that eating during her childhood was an imperative, which permitted her parents to prevent the return of traumatic memories: "Eating, you had to eat— that was important. The refrigerator had to be full" (Akerman 2007). Moreover, the act of hoarding food repeats behavior learned in the camps, whose legacy is thus passed down to subsequent generations. In this sense, Akerman's reference to an empty refrigerator announces her intention to confront the specter of scarcity experienced in the camps, whose memory— or lack thereof— impedes her from knowing her cultural heritage

and ultimately herself. As the source of this historical void, Akerman must confront the Holocaust, which she did not experience and therefore can— in Hirsch's words— "neither understand nor recreate." In order to access these remote memories and reverse this continuum of disconnection, she requires a particular intermediary, her mother.

In *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*, this process of mutual remembrance and recovery transpires on video, which captures a singular conversation between Akerman and her mother, Sidonie. Rather than directly confronting the Holocaust, their discussion revolves around an artifact from their family history, the diary of Akerman's maternal grandmother. Over the course of this casual conversation, the audience learns that Sidonie had given her daughter the diary years before— a gift of both love and denial— which both women had since neglected. Sidonie's neglect was at least partially motivated by the need to avoid dwelling on her mother, who died in Auschwitz. As such, the diary was doubly discomforting for Sidonie, who suffered from the traumatic memory of the camps and also the guilt of having neglected her mother's memory.

However, Sidonie is obliged to translate the diary, which was written in Polish. Her discomfort with maternal memory emerges in the errors that fill this translation. In addition to linguistic inaccuracies, these errors often concern basic facts of family history, such as the diary's date of composition or her mother's date of birth. In response to these lapses, Akerman must interject, as if assisting the process of historical recollection: "No, that's impossible. If she were 35 years old in '42, she was born in '07 and so was fifteen [when she wrote the diary]" (Akerman 2007). Sidonie also uses the condition of the diary as an excuse for her faulty memory. For example, she points out that the "tiny" handwriting is almost illegible: "Look at this little writing, have you send this tiny handwriting?" (Akerman 2007). Despite such

expedient impediments, Sidonie must confess that the language— her native language, Polish— is also an obstacle. She defends her lack of facility in the language with embarrassed ambivalence: "You know, Polish is a difficult language, how should I still know it? How long has it been? Sixty years… Fifty-five years, yes, fifty-five years" (Akerman 2007). In contrast to her previous protestations, this murmured recollection of the many decades since she has spoken her native language is tantamount to an admission of her self-imposed cultural displacement— the long labor she has committed to forgetting her life in Poland before the war.

Like a surrender, this admission becomes a turning point in their conversation, after which unbidden memories begin to return. However, contrary to the traumatic return of the repressed, these memories recall a prosperous, loving family. In this regard, she begins to supplement her translation with contextual details, which are vital for her daughter. Indeed, it was only possible to learn such personal history from her mother, who was the sole connection to Akerman's grandmother. During the process of this historical recovery, the sight of a self-portrait drawn by her mother— Akerman must still gently point out that "this is not a photo, mama"— Sidonie remembers an essential aspect of her mother's life: "She was an artist!" (Akerman 2007). Given her time and social milieu, the artistic disposition of Akerman's grandmother was exceptional. Such artistic interests would have been impossible for women in most Jewish families. However, Sidonie explains that she had an equally exceptional grandfather, who she still describes with reverence after fifty-five years: "He had traveled so much! He was very… with his time" (Akerman 2007). In fact, this forward-thinking forefather brought a gift home from one of his trips that ultimately made this communion between Akerman and her mother possible— he returned with a diary.

Like art, it was generally prohibited for Jewish women in religious families to pursue private forms of self-expression, even a journal. For Akerman's grandmother, the journal proved to be an indispensable outlet for such forbidden self-expression. Like a lifeline to the world beyond the domestic, it permitted her to cultivate an imagined sphere of experience that belonged solely to her. Although gratifying, this imagined experience could not substitute for the life denied to her as a woman. This conflicted affection for such private self-expression characterizes a passage from the dairy that Sidonie reads aloud: "I am a woman! I can therefore not state all my desires and thoughts aloud. I may only suffer in silence. But to you, my diary, I would at least like to entrust a few of my thoughts, a few of my desires, sufferings, and joys, and I am certain that you will never betray me— you are my only confidant" (Akerman 2007). This young woman is agonizingly aware of her irremediable isolation, and her voice poetically captures the intertwined despair and joy that the diary, her only "confidant," affords her— it is as if Akerman's grandmother were still suffering in "silence."

In effect, Akerman's grandmother has continued to suffer this silent expulsion from history. Even in the present, such exclusion continues in multiple forms: the oppression of women, the Holocaust, and ultimately her repression, which has inhibited the transmission of family memory. This chain of oppression also subsumed Akerman's mother, who fell victim— although perhaps in part willingly— to the habitual culture of male domination. In her artistic reflections on *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*, Akerman recounts that "when I asked my mother whether she regrets something, she said yes. 'That I didn't study, that I didn't do anything myself. I worked with your father'" (Akerman 2007). Like her willing act of cultural displacement, this self-subordination to male dominance was related to war trauma: "You know, I didn't do anything. When I came back… I still wanted to

study, I started, but I didn't go on— that didn't work anymore. I was broken, I was finished" (Akerman 2007).

Despite this cycle of oppression, Akerman's discussion with her mother reveals an alternate historical continuum. Sidonie first senses this in her mother's artistic ambitions, which had been realized two generations later by her daughter, Chantal. She finds additional evidence of this enduring continuum in the diary, which she and her two daughters had inscribed and subsequently forgotten. Upon rediscovering these succeeding responses, Sidonie recognizes a historical chain that connects three generations of mother and daughters— a chain of love, whose force forgives and assuages. Accordingly, she is moved to tears and embraces her daughter in a gesture of reconciliation.

For the audience of *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*, this spontaneous embrace is a certain sign that this event heals the unspoken rift between Akerman and her mother. As such, Akerman writes that "all these films have earned me that. That she finally feels better. Finally she cried" (Akerman 2007). However, after this apparent instant of reconciliation, Akerman finds herself in familiar state of ambivalence and questions this long-sought goal: "Thirty-three years with so many detours— finally she feels better. Was that what I was looking for? I don't know. Maybe. I would like to believe it" (Akerman 2007). As is consistent with "so many detours," this instant of personal redemption is transitory. Such elusive historical connection continuously recedes, as if fading like the diary's print— or retreating behind a screen.

Such endless recess corresponds to the ambulatory, whose process perpetually reconstitutes this chain of historical transmission. As an ambulatory sequence, this chain consists of ceaselessly circulating singular elements. This singular compositional structure informs the personal events in *To Walk Next to One's*

Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator, which principally concerns Akerman and her mother. Indeed, such singular, personal history is also consistent with the ambulatory, which suspends symbolic structure in order to deploy a sequential form of signification. As in *je tu il elle*, this sequential structure relays events from beyond the boundaries of the frame. Although the process of such perpetual passage is less evident in this installation, it also relays the presence of the past— literally the memory of Akerman's grandmother— and also potential events, which had been foreclosed from history by systematic injustices, including the Holocaust and gender-based oppression. In response to such oppression, Akerman traces an ambulatory history that passes through women.

In Akerman's early work, feminine gestures animate this chain. In an influential essay on feminist film, film theorist Teresa de Lauretis identifies the fundamental role of gesture in Akerman's 1975 film *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Rather than visual and narrative framing, de Lauretis demonstrates that this film establishes formal continuity by means of "a woman's actions, gestures, body, and look" (de Lauretis 1985, 159). In this regard, de Lauretis cites Akerman, who likewise emphasizes the importance of gesture to feminist expression: "I do think it's a feminist film because I give space to things which were never, almost never, shown in that way, like the daily gestures of a woman" (in de Lauretis 1985, 159). Writing in a different context, Gilles Deleuze arrives at similar conclusion. His reading of Akerman's films is grounded on the concept of "un gestus féminin," which consists of a continuous sequence that forms a "chain," "la chaîne des états des corps féminins" (Deleuze 1985, 255). In both instances, feminine sequential structure provides a connection to the other— or rather, the mother. As Deleuze notes, this chain invariably passes through the mother, whether "descendant de la mère ou

remontant jusqu'à la mère" (Deleuze 1985, 255). Hence, the connection to unseen events from beyond the frame relates to the memory of maternal love.

This connection to the mother— and the motherland— is a guiding principle in Akerman's documentaries and autobiographical installations, especially *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*. However, this maternal connection in *je tu il elle* ambiguously fuses the figures of lover and mother. According to Judith Mayne, such confusion between lover and mother assigns lesbianism— an exclusive form of feminine relation— to a regressive stage of oral development, which is prelinguistic. In the absence of speech, Mayne states that this maternal connection manifests itself in "gesture and orality": "The realm of female activity in both films is that of bodily gesture and orality, and the access to speech and social communication occurs with great difficulty (in *je tu il elle*) or virtually not at all (in *Ticket of No Return*). Both films evoke, then, a female world that exists prior to or outside the realm of the symbolic order" (Mayne 1990, 150). Insomuch as this "female world" exists "outside" symbolic order, it corresponds to the formal process that defers indexical division in Akerman's films— the ambulatory. Without this division, Akerman's films do not take recourse to external reference and thus remain silent. As such, this silence likewise pertains to forms that— to use de Lauretis' term— are traditionally held to be "pre-aesthetic," such as letters, journals, or a diary.

As is consistent with these personal, pre-aesthetic forms of communication, the maternal connection in Akerman's work remains singular. Like a diary, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator* does not organize its content for the spectator's visual pleasure. In other words, it does not conform to the frame, whose formal structure in cinema converts singular elements into universally intelligible particulars. Without the organizational structure provided by the frame, this diverse mass of singular content remains disparately disorganized and opaquely diffused.

Rather than a framework, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator* establishes a literal network or screen, which consists of an opaque fabric, tulle. Like a network, this surface of shared aesthetic separation recovers histories that elude the boundaries of the frame, albeit never in their transparent entirety. Unlike the prevailing notion of a network, the screen cannot directly relay such histories, whose presence depends on ambulatory movement and must proceed with one foot— or stitch— at a time.

In the following chapter, I continue to investigate how the cover provided by the screen recovers remote history. As in Akerman's cinematic works, this excluded history could consist of two forms: actual events from a forgotten past and the peripheral presence of potential permutations excluded from the formal construction of frame. In order to demonstrate the impact of the screen on theatre, it is necessary to return to dance that takes place on stage. For this reason, I have chosen to examine William Forsythe's recent choreography, which applies advanced technology to the artistic practice of translation. Like *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*, the formal process of Forsythe's choreographic translations produce a screen. Rather than providing a direct connection to the other, the screen imposes a common limit upon knowledge, both within and between cultures. As a literal surface of separation, the screen protects the self from the drive to specular knowledge and control. This insulating aspect of the screen produces the strangely uncertain serenity particular to opacity. However, in contrast to such calm, Forsythe's encounter with the foreign induces a reaction of horror, which indicates the intrusion of an unknown, possibly malevolent agent into a sovereign body. In response to the body's defensive instinct, Forsythe's choreography deploys a corresponding counter-reaction: the divisive principle of incessant self-interruption that informed Rainer's early choreography— autoimmunity.

CHAPTER FOUR

FORSYTHE'S BOX: ON THE AFTER-LIFE OF CHOREOGRAPHY

In contrast to the conciliatory instant of feminine community achieved in Akerman's cinematic oeuvre, choreographer William Forsythe's recent dances and installations resonate with masculine aggression and power. This potent masculine aggression pervades the uncomfortably charismatic commands to which Forsythe subjected the audience of his 2008 dance, *Yes We Can't*: "Shut the box... yes you can't, yes you can... it's out of the box..." These words, spoken into a microphone by a menacing male dancer with a shaved head, wavered between command, threat, entreaty, invitation, and temptation. Of course, there was no box on the scenically spare stage of *Yes We Can't*, but only three microphones and an ordinary white exercise mat. In the absence of a referential object, the audience was confronted by the overdetermined associations of "box," which might refer to graves, secrets, storage, archives, theatres, or, ominously, a crudely depersonalized female sex. Although such an extreme implication may seem far-fetched, just such a salacious shadow of sexual violence haunted the work. The uneasy proximity of "box" and "sex" was made explicit when a female performer breathily baited the audience with the words, "put your stuff in *the* box... put your stuff in *my* box," repeating phrases that alliteratively intermingled indefinite and definite articles. This linguistic technique became a central device that instigated slippages between can/n't, would/n't, could/n't, and *cunt*.

Cunt? If such petulant crudity seems unlike Forsythe's sublimely cerebral ballets, *Yes We Can't* was astoundingly unfamiliar territory. His mesmerizing displays of technical achievement had vanished, leaving his spectator perched on the edge of an incipient nightmare, as if having been admitted to an all-too-private dimension of wildly dystopian desire. Nor was this an isolated experiment. During the last decade, a decisive shift has occurred in Forsythe's work leading to the inclusion of elements— non-dance movement, interaction with props, and spoken language— previously foreign to the purity of his formal vocabulary. On the surface, this might appear to be a calculated move into dance theatre. Indeed, the first piece of these new works, *Kammer/Kammer*, loudly proclaimed itself in 2000 to be a "dance theatre performance art piece," that would discuss "some person named Pina Bausch," *Tanztheater*'s grande dame. Consequently, Forsythe's consistent use of minimal decor, rehearsal-like costumes, and performance sequences clearly derived from studio exercises appeared to explore stilted, overtly uncomfortable content in order to make use of the stylistic provocations common to an increasingly successful generation of European choreographers who have adopted Bausch's legacy.

However, this resemblance to dance theatre was deliberately deceptive. As theatre scholar Peter Boenisch has noted, "theatrical elements" in Forsythe's work "(mis-)lead the audience's attention" (Boenisch 2007, 16). Forsythe has himself confirmed this intention in an interview included in the program to *Kammer/Kammer*: "I wanted the audience to misread the tone of the performance right off the bat" (Groves 2006). Unlike his contemporaries, Forsythe's goal was not to antagonize his audience, even given the inelegant obscenity characterizing *cunt* and the unpalatable presence of masculine power. Such aggressive masculinity also conforms to the aesthetic impulses of twentieth-century theatre, whose repertoire of puerile provocations sought spectators from the presumed passivity of their seated position.

However, as for Yvonne Rainer's early choreography, this proximity to avant-garde theatre was deliberately misleading. Indeed, like Rainer, Forsythe's recent work has developed an alternative to the aesthetic influences of the theatrical avant-garde— and thus a new understanding of theatre itself.

Accordingly, Forsythe's new dances—especially *Kammer/Kammer* (2000), *Decreation* (2003), *Heterotopia* (2006), and *Yes We Can't* (2008)— have progressively abdicated irony as a means of strategic provocation. Without irony, which served as a marker of artistic intention, these dances' uncomfortable content was stripped of aesthetic purpose and became enigmatically uninflected. Authorial interests thus obfuscated, his works presented an almost aesthetically unmediated staging of the obscene. Understood literally, the obscene takes place off-stage and out-of-sight. Hence, as his spectator drifted dangerously near the horrors lurking on the edge of the scene, Forsythe devoted his attention to the impermeable potential of the prefix "ob," which means towards, against, in the way of, or in front of. By formally emulating theatre's impenetrable limits in the radical technical restriction of his linguistic, corporeal, and spatial idioms, Forsythe has permitted his spectator to indirectly sense the obscene as an immeasurably mediated presence, as if occluded behind an impasse or obstacle— the box.

The presence of the obscene also reflects Rainer's early choreography, which in the mid-sixties developed a process capable of conveying expressive possibilities censored from theatre's visual scene— autoimmunity. As explained in chapter one, Derrida's aesthetic theory defines autoimmunity as a process in which the self attacks its own immune defenses in order to integrate vital foreign supplements, such as prosthetic instruments. This analysis examined the autoimmune integration of prosthetics in terms of the structural affinity between her choreography and film. The foreign presence of prosthetic technology in dance's corporeal medium triggered an

131

immune reaction, which subsequently necessitated an autoimmune counter-reaction. This counter-reaction produced a formal and visual impasse or screen that impeded conventional choreographic expression. In addition to providing an additional example of artistic autoimmunity, Forsythe's recent dances emphasize other aspects of Derrida's theory— above all, its relation to translation. However, before addressing this expanded concept of autoimmunity, it is necessary to examine the emergence of the screen in Forsythe's choreography.

From Cinematic Romance to Spiritual Self-Sacrifice

The screen is present in the first moment of *Yes We Can't*, which started with a dramatic moment— a scream. Although Forsythe sought to resist subjecting his audience to violence, this beginning appeared to be nothing less than an orchestrated offensive upon the spectator. Its introduction unleashed a crescendo of light and sound: dense electronic music blasted as white, industrial lamps, illuminated a nearly empty space through which a male performer, entering center upstage, rushed towards the audience, his arms stretched to his sides as he released a resounding roar. His gesture blew its audience back, and when the dancer concluded his potent scream, paused, and withdrew into a complex duet with another dancer, the audience was pulled into the breach that ensued in the retreat of this sonic-visual tide. The force of this cry would repeatedly erupt in *Yes We Can't*, causing its dancers to collectively unfurl and recede in successive sonic waves.

This gesture exemplified the enigmatic tonal balance particular to *Yes We Can't*, which was at once alienating, forcefully captivating, and unapologetically adolescent. Indeed, despite the seductive intensity of this cry, it resembled a quintessentially primal scream of heroic rage that unrepentantly enacted a cliche of

dramatic pathos. The presence of this uncontrollable rage was puzzling, especially given that it devolved into a prolonged sequence of crude vocal experiments, including unseemly grunts, snot-filled snorting, and incomprehensible utterances. Such baseless babble was intentionally offensive. By gyrating isolated body parts, overarticulating his facial expressions, and overtly grabbing and immodestly manipulating his crotch, the performer deliberately evoked physical behavior associated with the mentally handicapped.

This dancer's physically helpless, abjectly uncoordinated appearance became a conscious choreographic strategy in *Yes We Can't*. In a similar sequence, Forsythe used rubbery movement and child-like clapping games, whose loose, floppy appearance was reminiscent of popular dance as found in everyday settings, such as bars, clubs, and parties. Instead of celebrating the diversity of everyday movement— as did Judson Dance Theatre, which was discussed in chapter one— the abject appearance of popular dance in *Yes We Can't* evoked the disquieting dissolution of formal boundaries. Like Rainer's interest in muzak, the absence of traditional cultural values threatened to turn meaningful artistic codes into vapidly unintelligible mimicry. This seemingly negative portrayal of popular culture also appeared in one of *Yes We Can't*'s most quizzically gratuitous moments, in which a female performer, crouching beneath the tautly lowered hood of her sweatshirt, waddled laterally to a microphone, where she croaked a senselessly self-indulgent line, "Obi-Wan Kenobe." The association of mass culture and abject regression in contemporary performance is hardly novel, but unlike most representations of such sophomoric subject matter, these grotesque scenes bore little trace of irony or humor. On the contrary, they produced a repulsion consistent with the poor taste of displaying inappropriate subject matter, especially imitating the mentally handicapped. This repulsion operated on a formal

level—Forsythe's artistic intentions were rendered tangibly enigmatic—and also effected the tone of the performance, which conveyed a sense of shame.

The genesis of this shame may be traced to *Kammer/Kammer* (2000), which combined two first-person narratives: Anne Carson's "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd Draft)" and Douglas A. Martin's autobiographical novel, *Outline of My Lover*. From its first moments, Martin's protagonist, "The Boy in the Blue Sock Hat," put on a shamefully pubescent display, idiotically upbraiding the audience in a pinched voice: "Any one have a bottle? There's no bathroom in here," or "Is 'sexyhairymusclebuttfucker' in the audience? I have a date with him tonight. We met on the Internet." His overbearingly pubescent sarcasm informed the performance "right off the bat," precisely as Forsythe had intended: "I wanted the audience to misread the tone ...Once they warmed up to the apparent casualness in the opening scene, they can be... receptive ...in a different way..." (Groves 2006). Forsythe was aware that this technique's "similarity to strategies of seduction [was] not at all coincidental" (Groves 2006). As an appropriation of these "strategies of seduction," such a deceptively informal entree is widely used in contemporary performance to heighten the spectator's emotional susceptibility. However, The Boy's antics were far from inviting and undermined the "apparent casualness" struck by the dance company's air of rehearsal-like activity and instead aggravated the audience (Groves 2006).

The irrepressibly offensive irony of The Boy's theatrical display was inextricable from *Kammer/Kammer*'s second defining feature, the omnipresence of video and visual media. In an unusually self-referential fashion, *Kammer/Kammer* staged a film production of itself in live video feeds. Its set was dominated by cheap film flats, which sectioned off rooms, (or in German, *Kammern*, which literally means "chambers"), that served as playing spaces only visible on screen. Although the video

projections of these rooms provided a glimpse of private spaces typically excluded from theatre's boundaries, cinema's visual ubiquity in *Kammer/Kammer* ultimately had little emancipatory value. Necessarily manipulative, cinema and irony were symptoms of an inability to overcome the self-consciousness impeding unmediated human contact— that is, being reunited with the beloved other in a state of romantic rapture.

In contrast to the idyllic intimacy of love, irony characterizes a media-dominated world in which appearances are never what they seem, as if doubled or broken. Irony was nevertheless a necessary means of resistance against cinema's seductive force, which envelopes its willing victims in "beautiful white rapids": "Knife of boy. Knife of girl... Where is the ironic work that picks threads back from the surface, holding rapids in place?" This tense, tender text was spoken by "Catherine Deneuve," the star in one of *Kammer/Kammer*'s astonishingly touching stories. Each recounts a descent into the solipsistic despair of unrequited love. Martin's novel is a thinly fictionalized account of being abandoned by his rock star lover, and Carson's self-castigating tale casts herself as "Deneuve," a classics professor with a penchant for Sappho who falls into a failed affair with a rebellious star female student. These narratives' shared emphasis on the self-compromising experience of romantic rejection lent them an irresistibly sympathetic appeal. This appeal resulted from the instinct to identify with the emotional exposure caused by a momentarily upset power structure. Despite—or perhaps because of—its self-consciously manipulative aspects, Martin's text and character were especially adept at capturing such human vulnerability. Forsythe has drawn attention to Martin's acuity in this regard, citing The Boy's line: "I cried because he couldn't hold me exactly how he wanted me, made me feel how I need to be contained, entered by him, how dangerous this was. I have no business with someone like him" (Groves 2006).

"I have no business with someone like him": these words cut to the heart of *Kammer/Kammer*'s emotional authenticity and nakedly human need. Unlike Forsythe's apparently indifferent attitude towards imitating the mentally handicapped, these parallel narratives established his personal investment in the socially marginalized status of queer desire. Queer desire stands in here for a general truth— namely, that by definition, all romantic love is unrequited. To recall Lacan's terms as cited in chapter three, the "impotence" of romantic love necessitates the impossibility of a relation between two lovers or "d'eux": "l'impossible d'établir la relation d'eux" (Lacan 1975, 12). Moreover, not only is love predicated on failure, but this image of homoerotic squalor provides a glimpse into universal longing for amorous abjection. In this regard, Forsythe's compassion for the obstacles particular to queer desire relate to *je tu il elle*, in which Akerman's thinly veiled alter ego mourns a lost lesbian utopia. However, rather than laboring to repair this memory, The Boy's words reflect the terms that define Forsythe's "box": "he couldn't hold me... how he opened me... I needed to be contained... entered by him..." This frightful affinity between box and sex directly informed the crucial power imbalance that makes these stories human, but this analogical inadequacy is too horrifying to bear and must be displaced in an act of repression. The muffled, inarticulable shame that has pervaded Forsythe's recent work results from the apprehension of this pre-verbal deed.

This shame is inextricable from romantic love, which rarely transcends narcissistic self-love— at least according to Carson. Such narcissism is the subject of Carson's self-loathing narrative of star-struck fantasy in *Kammer/Kammer* and also her essay "Decreation," which inspired Forsythe's 2004 dance, *Decreation*. In order to overcome love's narcissistic limitations, this essay considers Sappho's erotic poetry as a predecessor to a feminine form of divine love, which was exemplified by two women: 14th-century Christian mystic, Marguerite Porete, and the theologically-

oriented French philosopher, Simone Weil. This feminine love relates to the maternal bond that Akerman realized in her installation, *To Walk Next to One's Shoelaces in an Empty Refrigerator*. In this regard, Forsythe's interest in feminist aesthetics approaches the sequential structure of this installation, which depends on ambulatory movement. In its feminine form, the ambulatory establishes a form of signification that proceeds without recourse to symbolic unity— i.e., phallic structure. However, in contrast to the benevolent passage of maternal memory in Akerman's work, Carson insists that these women's mystical discipline permits them to realize that all love— even divine love— is a narcissistic impediment to communion with God: "loyalty to God is actually obstructed by her love of him because this affection, like most human erotic feeling, is largely self-love" (Carson, 193).

In his adaptation of this essay, Forsythe also rejected the narcissistic ideal of romantic reconciliation. By extension, he rejected cinema, whose sensuous immediacy fed fantasies of celebrity in *Kammer/Kammer*. In contrast to such fatuous cinematic fantasies, *Decreation* staged a common romantic scene and bereft of glamour— a divorce. Nevertheless, prior to this divorce, love made a final appearance in *Decreation*, which culminated in an ostensible conclusion that resembled an operatic finale. In this finale, one dancer in the middle of the stage serenaded the audience with exaggerated arias while another— who would subsequently become the wife during the ensuing divorce— girlishly entreated love to return. In an improbable cameo, love actually appeared, albeit in a sardonically literally guise of a "fairy" costumed in purple silk pajamas. In addition to his flamboyantly effete attire, this queer cupid balanced a small, bright orange ball on his head. This delicate balancing act suggested the fragility of love, which must be encouraged to appear and carefully protected, as if a timid creature. In fact, covered in rounded pegs, the ball resembled a sweetly defenseless animal, the hedgehog.

Although this similarity may seem incidental, the hedgehog relates to formal aesthetics, at least according to Derrida, for whom it epitomizes poetry— or more precisely, poetic revelation. In "Che cos'è la poesia?," Derrida states that poetry is caught between "public and private," but is "neither one nor the other" and thus resembles "the animal thrown onto the road, absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball": "the *hérisson*" (Derrida 1991, 224). Like Derrida, Forsythe's irony in this comic crescendo revealed the incapacity of poetic revelation to expose its formal failure— that is, the falsehood of dramatic conclusion. However, this ebulliently ironic instant abruptly ended and led into a dystopian act of catastrophic self-mortification: the excision of love, which took place in the succeeding scene, a divorce.

As an irreparably bitter ending to romantic love, divorce was a fitting beginning for Forsythe's subsequent works, especially *Yes We Can't*. Without the luminescent relief provided by ironic play, amorous rejection became a source of crippling shame. This asphyxiating shame dominated *Yes We Can't*'s most surprising and pronounced feature, its exacting, innovative use of spoken language. Its language consisted exclusively of one form, which might be called "language games": acting exercises, tongue twisters, and spoonerisms. Presumably, in the spirit of the child-like hand-clapping sequences, these games were in some sense playful. However, hardly innocent, they were instead saturated with sinister intensity and marked by a relentless pressure that in repetition induced excessively obscene errors. For instance, the common acting exercise, "I am a pheasant plucker's son," was transformed into variations such as: "He's not a pleasant fucker, he's a fucking peasant's son, he keeps on fucking peasants until the fucking pheasant's done." In shorter phrases, the space for such explicitly transgressive invariants was radically reduced, but the pressure to articulate alternatives remained. In one such sequence, with a cold smile and menacing gaze, a demonically cajoling performer repeated the sentence "take my

hand." Between each iteration, he angled his standing posture right and left, extending his opposite arm forward in an ostensible gesture of invitation before pronouncing the phrase anew by altering the stress of its syntax, as if methodically trying different approaches to a problem.

However, if the problem lay in the theatrical drive to reach the audience— literally with his hand— this task would necessarily be unattainable: no combinatory sequence of variations could possibly suffice to fulfill that particular proposition. Regardless of the ingenuity of his efforts, the text contained him like a box, whose terms in turn negated themselves: "shut the box... yes you can... yes you can't... it's out of the box." As if caught in a vicious circle, every effort to seal the box "shut" reinforced its irreparable state of disrepair and catalyzed a wave of compulsive contractions. Despite this self-reifying condition, it was impossible to desist from engaging in this instinctive act of resistance. After all, one cannot— or *can't*— do otherwise, for there is no language for what might be, what could be, or what one might want to be. As its title suggests, only affirmation exists in *Yes We Can't*, even be it affirmation of what is not.

Similar to a preclusive condition of grammar, the box reduced all attempts to overcome its terms to an identical result— failure. Such expressive failure contributes to the ethos of shame that permeated *Yes We Can't*. Given his commitment to exploring choreography in theatrical space, Forsythe has no choice but to accept such insufficiency as an artistic predicate. In spite of his speaker's leering hostility and precise enunciation, which at first appeared to indicate his hostile intent, the dance's conclusion revealed that he was himself subject to an unknown, coercive force. In its final image, he appeared panic-stricken and shrieked each line with hysterical ferocity, after which he was seemingly thrown back, as if buffeted by the rebounding force of his own linguistic effort. Evidently ill-at-ease, he began to shrink uncertainly away

from the microphone, stepping backwards, perhaps seeking to escape the confines of his scripted task. On each occasion, he was just as soon seized by two male performers who indifferently hurled him forward in order to deliver another agonizing salvo of language.

As if both victim and perpetrator, the aggression asserted by Forsythe's speaking subjects was equally applied to them as objects. This redundant rage was also evident in the only section performed in German, in which a dancer, arms stretched above his head, shrilly called out numbers with a drill sergeant's fury as he sharply gestured with his fingers, assigning an arbitrary pair of digits to either "fingers" or "holes": "Vier Finger!...Sechs Löcher!" Presumably, each finger should correspond to a hole, but unable to reach such balance, he finally punctuated the scene by impotently screaming an English sentence: "You do the math!" Whether phrased as a command, a request, or desperate plea, the lesson is the same— like the paradoxical proposition imposed by the box, the math does not add up. Language, like the body, precludes the mathematically conceivable totality of combinatory possibilities. Unable to overcome its own physical limitations, the body is itself a box, a container coextensive with theatrical space.

Faced by the incalculable odds of overcoming, or even maintaining, this tautological condition, it is tempting to read Forsythe's one-sided struggle with theatrical form as his primary subject. However, Forsythe does not surrender to the prevailing logic that holds this form to be an unassailable limit. He instead cultivates the compulsion to repetition—the encounter with representational limits—in order to generate almost unidentifiably compacted traces. These traces result from a non-synthetic process, which does not resolve formal oppositions into a unified ensemble: autoimmunity.

In contrast to dramatic form, autoimmunity does not reconcile opposing drives, which causes incompatible forces to exist co-presently on Forsythe's stage. However, before discussing autoimmunity, it is necessary to examine the origin of these incompatible forces in dance, *Decreation*. Near its conclusion, *Decreation* staged a scene that epitomized the conflict caused by the presence of irreconcilable differences— a divorce. In this banally horrifying scene, two female dancers played the character of the "wife." They were pitted in deliberate oppositions, which suggested that they were halves of a single divided subject. One stood facing the other and could not speak. Her chest was archly overarticulated, and she clasped hands to hips so that her elbows thrust grotesquely backwards. The second, seemingly unable to walk, sat with her back to the audience, and as if in an appallingly limited conversation with her counterpart, released a stream of unintelligible babble. As if simultaneously undergoing and conducting an interrogation, the "husband" sat to one side with an absent, traumatized expression and painstakingly stammered a few ominous words that finalized the divorce: "You give me everything and I give you nothing." Literally a legal sentence, these last words instigated the irreparable break-up of dramatic form. They were also a death sentence, which dictated contractual terms imposed upon the subject, in which the weak—in this case, women— were banished from the divine light of creation and condemned to enclosure in the structure named in *Yes We Can't*: the box.

Despite its traumatic finality, this scene did not conclude the performance, but instead gave way to a singular sequence whose revelatory motion marked a definitive shift in Forsythe's aesthetics. In the wake of the fatal word "nothing," *Decreation*'s full cast rose and proceeded with precise economy to dismantle the already minimal scene. Its only significant set piece, a round table, was carried downstage, and an accompanying white tablecloth, revealed to be a large sheet of paper, was hung like a

backdrop on which the table's circular imprint was outlined in streaks of charcoal. The sixteen dancers sat solemnly around the table, and a staccato series of events ensued, each punctuated by a performer shouting a numbered list of propositions concerning states of the soul.

As specified in Carson's titular essay, the source of this markedly mystical rhetoric in *Decreation* was Marguerite Porete's fourteenth-century theological treatise, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. On account of this treatise's reputedly heretical sentiments, Porete was condemned to burn at the stake. Her method of execution corresponded two scenic details: the charcoal smeared on the tablecloth and a live video feed from beneath the table, where a huddled dancer continuously lit matches. For Forsythe, Porete's appeal as a Christian mystic consisted in the intensity of her erotic-spiritual yearning to a pure state of being, the divine. Ultimately, her need was so total that its expression eclipsed its language of enunciation, leaving only the compressed, carbonized remains of her desire for God's unmediated love.

Despite also being self-punishing, Forsythe's final scene offered no prospect of Christian redemption or saintly veneration. On the contrary, its compulsively rhythmic staging and ritual structure of call-and-response evoked an archaic religious ceremony: coordinated bursts of ornate clapping, sudden choruses of stomping chairs, voodoo-like table dancing, and baleful wailing. Although the purifying potential of the sacred was a principal theme in twentieth-century theatre, *Decreation* did not start a sacred revolution, but instead staged a private revelation whose constitutive negation held more relevance for Forsythe's own artistic trajectory than his spectator's aesthetic satisfaction.

Nevertheless, a sacrifice did indeed take place during the course of this revelation. Like human sacrifice, this act produced the conditions necessary for the emergence of a life form— which Carson calls a "creature"—from beyond the box. In

its most critical moment, *Decreation*'s ritual revealed this creature in the form of a character, "the Soul who had grown tired of performing." As this ceremonial name suggests, the "Soul" could not be stirred, even when a second female dancer, wrought with grief, howled, pled, prodded, and pulled its body across the coal-covered tabletop. Apparently devoid of will, this inanimate being had seemingly arrived from a territory suspended between life and death. In the preceding scene, the divorce had annihilated the female subject's hope for salvation and thereby delineated the box's harrowing legal dimensions, which left no room for spiritual life. However, in *Decreation*'s catastrophic conclusion, the apophonic force of this mystical act of will disinterred a fragile fragment of spirit and lay it bare upon the stage, as if an unborn entity that had arrived from the celestial beyond.

Decreation and Autoimmunity

Since its cultic origins, access to divine knowledge has depended on sacrifice. Sacrifice is the subject of Carson's essay, "Decreation," which examines the common concern that Sappho, Porete, and Simone Weil share in the self— or rather, in self-sacrifice. For these women, the self is an obstacle that "blocks God's light" (in Carson 2002, 194). Carson maintains that Weil, like Sappho and Porete, "wanted to get herself out of the way so as to arrive at God" (Carson 2002, 194). To this end, Weil uses the word "decreation" to name "a program for getting the self out of the way" (Carson 2002, 194). As is consistent with mystical tradition, decreation is an act of self-sacrifice that borders on self-destruction. In order to achieve this sacrifice, it is necessary to subdue the biological imperative upon the preservation of one's own life. The suppression of this survival instinct requires a ceaselessly renewed act of will, which Carson calls "absolute spiritual daring" (Carson 2002, 202).

Such daring indifference to injury epitomized Forsythe's choreography, especially in *Yes We Can't*. In its most singular rendering, a female dancer unexpectedly entered center upstage by propelling herself forward in astonishingly high leaps initiated with a single hand—an almost physically impossible feat of strength and dexterity. As in this instance, Forsythe's choreography often posed technical challenges that demanded exhausting physical effort. Although the exaltation of such exhausting technical discipline was the signature of his virtuosic ballets, his recent dance has become clumsily convoluted. The execution of these awkwardly angular actions resembled acrobatic contortions, in which dancers appeared locked in battle with themselves. As an act of will, such "wrestling" seemed intent upon wresting the self from the body's frame, whose physical form restricts choreographic possibilities.[25] In order to approximate these formal constraints, Forsythe bound dancers with actual restraints, including ropes, complicated labyrinths of string, or other dancers, whose immobilizing grip resulted in self-nullifying struggle.

The nullifying force of Forsythe's choreography corresponds to Carson's concept of decreation, whose mystical process requires self-sacrifice. However, despite its sacrificial conclusion, *Decreation* did not advocate an artistic return to the sacred. In contrast to most twentieth-century experimental theatre, theatre scholar Johannes Birringer notes that the sacred is antithetical to Forsythe's penchant for technical precision: "His distance from expressionism and *Tanztheater* is as obvious as his distaste for utopianism and the spiritual" (Birringer 1998, 99). Given this evident distaste for "the spiritual," it is necessary to consider *Decreation* in terms of an aesthetic paradigm that is not grounded on theological principles, but nevertheless

---

[25] The final scene of Akerman's *je tu il elle* also uses a semblance of struggle in order to apply pressure on the formal limits that separate beings, such as the film's lesbian lovers. However, Forsythe's "divorce" caused an irreparable division that arrests the ideal of amorous unity.

resembles the process of mystical self-nullification named its title. Decreation has a biological equivalent— autoimmunity, a condition in which the body's immune attacks itself.

As established in chapter one, Jacques Derrida has investigated the aesthetic consequences of this contradictory condition in "Faith and Knowledge," an essay on the contemporary "retour de la religion" (Derrida 2000, 14). In "Faith and Knowledge," Derrida argues that autoimmunity constitutes a formal principle of "self-destruction," which is directed against the self or *autos*. In his words, it is "un principe d'autodestruction ruinant le principe de protection de soi" (Derrida 2000, 79). Like decreation, autoimmunity "ruins" the instinct to self-preservation and renders its subject defenseless and open— as if ready to receive divine love.

Although Derrida develops this concept in an essay on faith and knowledge, there was little evidence of such spiritual subject matter in Rainer's early choreography, which used autoimmunity as a formal predicate. Rather than religious themes, autoimmunity emerged as the central figure of her "mucus rant"— "snot." The presence of this mounting mucus effected her movement and speech, which became inelegantly contorted, as if congested. Admittedly, Forsythe has made no such reference, and it may thus seem improbable to relate his choreography to autoimmunity. His recent dances nevertheless display similar modes of constricted motion and spastic speech, which in Rainer's work were principle characteristics of autoimmune expression. Furthermore, Forsythe's choreography intersects with different, but equally important aspects of Derrida's theory, such as its engagement with religion.

Derrida's interest in religion concerns forms of aesthetic relation that maintain a connection to life beyond the self— that is, to a community. In contrast to a community based on faith, Derrida proposes a concept of collective being that does

not culminate in the eternal bliss of divine beatitude: "communauté comme *com-mune auto-immunité*" (Derrida 2000, 79). The autoimmune community is always at odds with itself and never whole or unified. Rather than unity, the visual breaks within the phrase "*com-mune auto-immunité*" gesture towards the paradoxical aesthetic predicate that divides and connects autoimmune community: the prosthetic presence of technology. Prosthetics impair and repair life, which causes Derrida to also hyphenate this common condition of collective survival, which he calls "sur-vie" or "living-on." The living-on of such prosthetic "sur-vival" requires perseverance to endure the division incurred within the self, which becomes "invisible et spectrale," as if lingering on in a disembodied state of disrepair and mourning (Derrida 2000, 79).

Like Rainer's early work, the prosthetic presence of technology in Forsythe's choreography triggered an immune reaction, which necessitated artistic intervention in order to remain open to the other. Although lacking figurative lymph, Forsythe's recent dances have exemplified the mournful condition that characterizes autoimmune sur-vival: "spectralité" (Derrida 2000, 78). In its most literal manifestation of this spectral state, Forsythe's recent choreography assumed a ghoulish appearance. Its contorted forms resulted in bodies that seem to have been broken and rashly re-assembled, as if undead— or more pertinently, as if a machine, which is a being without a soul. This ghastly appearance characterized one dancer in *Decreation*, who laboriously lurched across the stage as she twisted her limbs into unnatural positions: a shoulder thrust to her chin, her opposite arm cocked backwards, and limping with a knee bent sharply inwards, as if fractured.

Admittedly, this awkwardly macabre monster was an exception in Forsythe's choreography. As befits Derrida's description of "sur-vie," this spectral presence primarily occupied an "invisible" form, the voice. Beginning with *Decreation*, Forsythe developed a technique that used electronic filters to amplify and distend the

voice. Like an infinite number of masks, these electronic filters reduced voices to the same violent reverberation, which obscured individual identity. Although similar to his contorted choreography, these distorted voices were even more disconcertingly invasive, perhaps because sound passes through bodies, but has no body of its own. Able to penetrate solid surfaces, this ghostly voice could enter anyone in search of a host. Without means of defense, the audience in *Yes We Can't* was subject to its sinister entreaties, which resembled commands: "take my hand" or "shut the box."

As an electronic entity, this maliciously imperious specter provoked a latent fear of technology, which has the power to surround, command, and control. From this dystopian perspective, technology likewise inhibits access to living beings, who are lost amid countless layers of mediation. As such, mechanical mediation could cause the sensation of being cut off from others, as if physically enclosed in a box. At the same time, it is also possible to perceive that this technological presence violates the body's boundaries. In this scenario, the body is open to painful prosthetic intrusion, such as rape.

This uncertain state of vulnerability relates to autoimmunity, which neutralizes the body's defenses in order to integrate prosthetic devices. However, being open to the other— as relayed by prosthetic technology— exposes the self to potential harm. Autoimmunity therefore induces an impression of malevolent intelligence, which Derrida refers to as "radical evil." He states that "il lui faut prendre en charge, on pourrait dire en gage, la *possibilité* de ce **mal radical** sans lequel on ne saurait bien faire" (Derrida 2000, 71). As if in debt to the other, the act of accepting this perilous "gage" is tantamount to a moral duty. Although she does not identify the concept of radical evil, dance scholar Sabine Huschka senses a similar "horror" and "the inescapable necessity to expose oneself to such experience" in Forsythe's choreographic installations (Huschka 2010, 62). This horror is an inevitable effect of

autoimmunity, which opens the self to "la venue ou l'amour de l'autre," but also to "la mort" (Derrida 2000, 79). Haunted by radical evil, such death may entail a fate worse than loss of life.

Such an unenviable fate characterized the lives of Christian saints en route to veneration. Prior to sainthood, these mystics risked excruciatingly savage acts. For instance, Marguerite Porete was burned at the stake in the name of religious truth. Although Porete died during the dark ages, Derrida acknowledges the recent return of religious violence, whose most infamous form is terrorism. In contrast to the ethical constraints imposed by international law, this "nouvelle violence archaïque" is indifferent to human life and perpetuates real horrors: "ce sont les tortures, les décapitations, les mutilations de toute sortes," which often include sexually motivated crimes, such as "viols" and "sexes meurtris" (Derrida 2000, 81).

Certainly, the specter of such violence— especially sexual violence— suffused *Yes We Can't*, whose title referred to a series of shocking associations between can't, cunt, and box. Should words indeed be deeds, Forsythe's explicit speech acts effectively imparted an uncomfortable impression of impending violence. The primary vehicle for this violence was his speakers' archly overdetermined tone and syntax, which simulated seductive ill intent. "Take my hand": upon hearing this phrase so spoken, it was impossible not to momentarily imagine the worst— utter subjection to another's unmediated desire. Albeit an almost imperceptible instant, the merest allusion sufficed to evoke the specter of rape. This paralyzing fear lent "cunt" its disproportionately antagonistic weight in *Yes We Can't*; cunt is the unspoken domain of dystopian desire whose repression makes public speech possible.

The unwelcome involuntary projection of rape provoked by the phrase, "take my hand," inched closer to graphic realization when a female dancer huskily breathed, "put your stuff in my/the box," into the microphone. Of course, it was unlikely that a

spectator would even fleetingly permit himself to imagine fulfilling this starkly

unethical proposition. Nevertheless, her words triggered an involuntary interpretative

response, as the spectator, thus resembling Forsythe's speakers, ascribed a series of

possible significations to the phrase. Moreover, these fleetingly unacknowledged

significations surrendered to her imperious voice, whose forcefully exaggerated

pronunciation alliteratively performed the action it described. As if unable to shake

off a pair of spectral quotation marks, "stuff" inscribed itself upon the complicit

spectator, who knew just what "stuff" was, just as well as what one could do with it.

       Forsythe's other recent dances likewise bore traces of such violence, albeit in a

different form— war crimes. Similar to the archaic character of religious violence,

crimes committed in defense of terrorism disregard the sanctity of human life. As is

well-known, legitimate states have employed inhuman tactics in order to extract

information from individuals denied the rights of sovereign citizens. The perilous

proximity to such political non-being was the subject of his 2005 installation, *Human

Writes*. As Forsythe overtly states, its title refers to the 1948 United Nations'

"Universal Declaration of Human Rights," which the dancers— bound with ropes in

torturously contorted positions— wrote with charcoal on large white sheets. Due to

their restricted range of motion, these transcriptions became illegible scrawls that

resembled expressionist drawings. Similar to expressionist art, these scrawls'

dramatic style implied their authors' anguish, which corresponded to their captive

appearance. Although theatre scholar Patrick Primavesi likened this field of failing,

flailing figures to a "chamber of horrors," it was nevertheless possible to rationally

interact with the dancers, who could solicit audience assistance (in Huschka 2010, 64).

According to an account of *Human Writes* by dance theorist Sabine Huschka, the

dancers made surprisingly deferential requests, such as: "Would you please hold this

leg on the rope and guide it?" (Huschka 2010, 63). Even if it did not characterize the

dancers' emotional state, painful pathos pertains to the failure to realize universal

political equality— a repeated failure to which Forsythe demonstratively dedicates his

work. Applied to Forsythe's choreography, the repeated failure to realize formal unity

approximated torture, whose practice is antithetical to the accepted ethical standards of

universal human rights.

As an implicit theme, torture pervaded the tormentingly teasing, compulsory

word games of *Yes We Can't*. Before torture became a thread embedded in his work,

Forsythe expressly explored its political implications in his 2005 dance, *Clouds after

Cranach*. As many critics have observed, *Clouds After Cranach*— which in 2006 was

expanded into a longer version, *Three Atmospheric Studies*— was a reaction to the

Iraq War.[26] The Iraq War inspired its two sections, which were based on an actual

photograph depicting "a wounded body being carried by soldiers from the scene of a

car-bomb explosion" (Solway 2007). Rather than a dramatic exposition, the dance

used this explosion to explore the inability to accurately remember a witnessed event.

Instead of an objectively unified instant, this event consisted of irreconcilably

contradictory perspectives.

The second half of *Clouds After Cranach* demonstrated the self-fulfilling

failure to reconstruct the fractured field of this event. In this section of the dance,

Forsythe invented a fictional character, the mother of the wounded Iraqi boy from the

photograph. It started as a conventional dramatic scene, "in which she is reading a

report that is being translated into Arabic by a disinterested bureaucratic" (de Ferrari

2006). As they proceeded through the report, the interpreter's routine questions

---

[26] *Three Atmospheric Studies* was presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2007. Since many of Forsythe's preceding major works— including *Decreation* and *Heterotopia*— had not been seen in the United States, Forsythe's apparent political opposition to the Iraq War disproportionately dominated its reception. For instance, the New York Times cultural correspondent refers to *Three Atmospheric Studies* as "Forsythe's Guernica." In contrast to such superficial treatments of Forsythe's aesthetically complex choreography, my present analysis uses autoimmunity in order to identify formal reasons for his interest in such political subject matter.

provoked hesitations and inaccurate answers. On account of such inconsistencies, he

began to treat the mother with suspicion, despite her indubitable status as the victim.

Her frustrated attempts to rectify these errors exacerbated the situation, which slowly

evolved into an interrogation. This interrogation had devastating consequences for the

mother, whose increasingly frantic speech and body language degenerated into abject

nonsense, which exactly reflected the divorced, divided wife in *Decreation*. With her

limbs flung back into overarticulated positions, she spastically twitched while

incomprehensibly moaning, as if her will to resist her male captor had been broken.

Simultaneous to this interrogation, Forsythe staged another scene in the same

space. In this scene, a dancer conducted an overlapping analysis of the war

photograph and a historical painting, Lucas Cranach's 1502 *The Crucifixion*. In

addition to spoken analysis, this dancer physically enacted both images' perspectival

structure. Despite his best efforts to explain these structures, their complexity

frustrated his dance and description. His attempts to reconstruct their contradictory

form became self-defeating and descended into the despairing disrepair that

characterized the adjacent interrogation. Instead of accurately approximating the

image, his analysis emphasized its enigmatically complex quality. As discussed in

chapter one, this enigmatic quality also informed Rainer's presentation of William

Bentley's 1797 account of an elephant in her 1964 solo, *At My Body's House*. Having

never seen an elephant, Bentley's description unduly attended to obstacles impeding

his view. Like Bentley's unseen elephant, Forsythe's absent images in *Clouds After

Cranach* remained outside the aesthetic framework that defines intelligible expression.

In order to emphasize this enigmatic distance, Forsythe and Rainer used the space

literally outside the theatre— the lobby, where it was possible after the performance to

see reproductions of the two images described in *Clouds After Cranach*.

Such proximity to space beyond theatre corresponds to the subject of Cranach's *The Crucifixion*, spiritual self-sacrifice. Christ's suffering exemplifies spiritual sacrifice, which demands self-mortification in order to access the eternal beyond. This process of mystical self-mortification likewise informs decreation, the spiritual discipline that Simone Weil likens to an "affliction" (Weil 1951, 117). However, such spiritual affliction fundamentally differs from the punishments inflicted on politically unprotected individuals, such as the Iraqi mother in *Clouds After Cranach*. As an evocation of both crucifixion and interrogation, *Clouds After Cranach* implemented an artistic transition from decreation's spiritual process of self-sacrifice to autoimmunity, which is political.

As its name implies, autoimmunity's principle of defensive self-destruction neutralizes the political immunity granted to citizens of a sovereign state. Without this sovereign status, the citizen loses legal rights and becomes subject to the will of foreign intelligence, which often uses advanced technical means in order to conduct surveillance. In contrast to the benevolence of divine will, it is impossible to discern the intentions of such foreign intelligence, which could be— as Derrida reminds his reader— evil. The menacing presence of potential evil characterized an additional element in *Clouds After Cranach*, a black box. Similar to an electronic speaker, this box transmitted sound, albeit in a way that impeded its ostensible purpose: this sound came from within its closed confines. Without an external amplifier, this speaker muffled its transmissions, which became mysteriously unintelligible. As one reviewer noted, these strange sounds resembled the guttural groans uttered by the mother as she succumbed to a grueling interrogation: "This scene […] is underscored by a box next to the mother, from which a whining, accusing tone emanates, a tone that might arise from the center of her being were she not suppressing it" (Michalzik).

This whining voice expressed the fear of isolation, as if enclosed in a box that denies access to light— both cinematic and divine. Without this luminescent connection to the beyond, decreation loses its mystical allure. As a demystified form of mysticism, decreation resembles "le messianique," Derrida's name for "une messianicité au-délà de tout messianisme" (Derrida 2000, 30). At once theological and not, the messianic adheres to autoimmunity's contradictory process of self-destructive opening, "l'ouverture à l'avenir ou à la venue de l'autre" (Derrida 2000, 30). Like autoimmunity, this revelatory "arrival of the other" takes place without ritual or preparation— "sans horizon d'attente et sans préfiguration prophétique"— and summons an unwelcome presence: "mal radical," which might "surprendre à tout instant" (Derrida 2000, 30). Furthermore, the messianic does not correspond to "aucune opposition reçue de notre tradition, par exemple, l'opposition entre raison et mystique," nor for that matter, related oppositions, such as the dichotomy between the technology of mechanical reproduction and the human body (Derrida 2000, 31).

The prospect of changing this dichotomy is crucial to Forsythe, who has consistently integrated technology into his compositional method. Forsythe first used technology to enhance the capabilities of his virtuosic ballets and has also applied advanced technical means to the choreographic process of his recent dances. Rather than creating a multi-media collage, his dances have formally emulated technology. As examined in chapter one, Yvonne Rainer achieved a similar break from collage-based strategies in her early choreography by redefining "juxtaposition" in contrast to "superimposition." According to Sabine Huschka, the technique of "juxtaposition" in Forsythe's choreographic installations was equally unconcerned with differences between artistic media: "Forsythe's choreographic work is not about the sensuous and aesthetic juxtaposition of the live body with the virtual movement image" (Huschka 2010, 68). Instead of making visible juxtapositions, Forsythe used technology to resist

the subordination of dance to theatre's visual field. Although visual media is necessary to Forsythe's choreographic process, Huschka also observes that it did not produce images: "In the latter we have movement represented as a set of visual images, whereas with Forsythe the visual medium itself provides the movement method" (Huschka 2010, 68). Given this relationship between images and movement, it is interesting to consider Huschka's "latter" example, the late 19th-century photographic pioneer, Etienne-Jules Marey. In particular, she refers to Marey's chronophotography, which were "illustrations of movement in stop-action photography" (Huschka 2010, 68). Although Huschka does not elaborate upon this comparison, she implicitly identifies an affinity between Forsythe's choreography and an ostensibly opposing medium of mechanical reproduction, film.

The contradiction inherent to this opposition fuels autoimmunity, whose self-destructive process opens life to the prosthetic presence of death— or rather, the "non-vivant" (Derrida 2000, 78). Once begun, autoimmunity becomes an automated process that incessantly instigates itself. This "automatisation" or "machinalité" generates an irresistibly repetitive action, whose movement resembles an involuntary "reflex": "quasi spontanée, irréflechie comme un reflexe" (Derrida 2000, 64). Derrida also defines the irrepressibly reflexive quality of "machanalité" in sequential terms: "Nous l'appelons *méchanique*, car elle reproduit, avec la regularité d'une technique, l'instant du non-vivant ou, si l'on préfère, du mort dans le vivant" (Derrida 2000, 78). The movement of such successive "regularity" corresponds to the mechanical medium that Forsythe's choreography approximates, film. As Marey's "stop-action" photography demonstrates, filmic motion paradoxically consists of constant stopping— and likewise, incessant interruption. As discussed in chapter one, such ceaselessly successive stopping also predicated Rainer's *Parts of Some Sextets*. Art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty establishes that its structure "was built on continuous

stopping" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 107). Like Huschka, she compares *Parts of Some Sextets* to chronophotography, albeit that of Marey's contemporary, Edward Muybridge. Lambert-Beatty argues that Rainer's dance integrated chronophotography's sequential interruption, which she calls "the Muybridgean stutter" (Lambert-Beatty 2008, 112).

In both Rainer and Forsythe's dances, such incessantly reflexive interruption— the movement of autoimmunity— provoked an aggressively aggravated artistic response. However, it is more important that the cinematic "stutter" caused by ceaselessly succeeding frames effected their choreography's formal structure. Like actual films, autoimmune movement is capable of relaying events from beyond the theatrical scene. In contrast to the conventional conception of film, such remotely relayed— or spectral— events are not fully present and therefore cannot be seen in the space that defines the scene, be it theatrical or cinematic. In fact, autoimmunity generates a surface of separation that covers the scene and obfuscates visual communication— namely, the screen.

The material presence of the screen results from autoimmunity's contradictory process, which weakens the body's defenses and simultaneously causes an increased production of antibodies. These excessive antibodies form an impasse, which in dance distends verbal and physical expression. In Rainer's *Parts of Some Sextets*, the screen emerged as a mattress; in Forsythe's *Decreation*, it was an equally impassive thing: the annihilated "soul," which had been rejected from the self, shorn of will, and reborn upon the table. Dressed in white, motionless, and emotionless, this inanimate being incarnated the prosthetic presence of technology— and thus, as Derrida would have it, "the arrival of the other."

Like a protective shield, this impasse mitigated the unsettling proximity to obscene fantasies, especially those involving sexual violence. The impassive presence

155

of this impasse was tangible even in one of the most uncomfortable, extended scenes in *Yes We Can't*, which appeared to depict a male rape. At first, its events unfolded inconspicuously. Amid a series of densely overlapping sequences, a dancer had lain face-down on the ground. His lack of expression initially lent his appearance a merely peripheral valance, but once a second dancer laid on top of him, shifting his hips and producing sounds of strained breathing into a microphone pressed against his nose, the scene's dumb discomfort became disproportionately engrossing. Although rape imposed itself as the inevitable conclusion, a careful observer could have noticed incongruous details: both dancers remained fully clothed; they did not interact or make eye contact; there was no cry or reaction, and neither opened their mouth. Such inexpressive conduct might well have been evidence of traumatic withdrawal, but it also indicated the presence of resolutely irreconcilable elements, whose opposition resisted interpretative resolution.

The Choreography of Contradiction

The proximity of contradictory elements yielded, in Forsythe's words, an enigmatically "open... field of association" in his 2006 dance, *Heterotopia* (Hüster 2006). One such "open" scene depicted a couple wrestling on the ground while another stood between them, as if indifferent or unaware of their struggle. By no means realistic, this struggle proceeded according to predetermined rules and roles. The first performer sought to escape his female partner's imperious grasp without the use of his hands, which forced him to expend tremendous core body strength in willfully coordinated spasms. With his complete attention devoted to this strenuous task, his detached, calculating gaze did not betray the slightest awareness of his adversary, who used hands and feet alike to resist his force and oppose his efforts.

Although this dancer's eyes were conspicuously trained on her rival, her gaze was equally impersonal and neither menacing nor emotional.

This strangely silent struggle— if a struggle at all— reflected the allusions to rape in *Yes We Can't*, which likewise involved close physical contact and psychological distance. Such paradoxical proximity and detachment also characterized *Heterotopia*'s third dancer, who appeared indifferent to or unaware of the events unfolding at his feet, even as his legs were enlisted as a prop in its progress. Like the rape, his apparent indifference before the sight of human suffering implied an absence of ethical regard, the horror of which could shock an audience, who were witnesses to suffering but could not intervene in events on stage.

The conclusion of *Heterotopia* also depicted emphasized such ethical impotence. In its final scene, a dancer dressed in a suit encountered a female dancer trapped at his feet. Like the women in *Decreation* and *Clouds After Cranach*— roles all played by the same dancer— she spastically writhed, spat, and gurgled, as if a specimen of damaged life. Although the male character was evidently concerned, he also found this damaged being repulsive. He reached to help, but upon touching her body, shrieked and jerked back his hand. While anxiously mopping his forehead, he swore in a foreign language and glanced about, apparently uncertain whether to stay, go for for help, or flee. Unable to assist or escape this repulsive being, he reached an ethical bind that limited possible human contact.

However, rather than forcing his character to heroically accept this abject burden, Forsythe's staging emphasized the ordinary nature of such moral indecision. Moreover, the structure of *Heterotopia* demonstrated that it is not necessary to expose oneself to such horror. On the contrary, Forsythe's precise structural oppositions suggested the presence of an underlying formal logic. This logic proceeded from Forsythe's contraction of theatrical structures into condensed narrative traces. If

applied in the real time of theatrical space, such condensed traces would manifest as

non-synchronous clusters of events, which would no longer be casually governed by

immediately perceptible relations. As a result, the idle dancer's apparent inhumanity

might be more accurately ascribed to the dumbness of content that is enclosed in these

highly mediated traces and thus seems unintelligible.

As its title suggests, Forsythe applied this predicate in *Heterotopia* to the

physical location, or *topos*, of theatre itself. The term "heterotopia" derives from

Michel Foucault's 1967 essay, "Of Other Spaces," which addresses a notion of space

capable of containing heterogenous, contradictory elements. Theatre, whose

presentational frame adheres to a thoroughly prescribed spatial regime, is at odds with

the concept of heterotopia. Despite this contradiction, Forsythe did not reject

theatrical space. Contrary to utopian attempts to overcome the gap between spectator

and spectacle, Forsythe radically compressed theatrical form and thereby preserved

this constitutive division. Accordingly, he set *Heterotopia* strictly on stage by

excluding the house— where the audience's seats are located— and introducing

spectators directly into one of two distinct playing spaces.

The first space consisted of a fragmented grid of heavy industrial tables.

Although a grid's uniformity conforms to theatre's exclusionary order, this grid

resembled the remains of a structure that had collapsed into itself. Within this

fractured grid, it was possible to move in three spaces: on, beneath, and amid

vertically upended tables, which contained multiple gaps. Although the audience was

free to roam the grid's margins, these gaps were evidently inadequate spaces for dance

and conveyed a claustrophobic impression. This uneasy sensation corresponded to

real dangers imposed by the tables, whose considerable weight was emphasized when

dancers unexpectedly shut a gap with a resounding slam. Moreover, a horizontally

overturned table placed in the middle of each the grid's edges turned these hazards

outwards upon the audience. At once a warning and a measure of protection, their metal legs imposed literal obstacles on overeager onlookers. As psychological and literal obstacles inhibiting the view of the interior, the protruding table legs also served an artistic function— they reminded the spectator of the fragmented, visually disparate nature of this broken grid, which could not be surveyed from a single point-of-view.

In order to further dislocate the visual field, *Heterotopia* occupied two separate spaces. Although the audience and performers could move at will between the grid and a second proscenium stage, the separation between these spaces precluded the spectator's ubiquitous gaze. As such, it was impossible to escape the consciousness of what one was not seeing and the insurmountable knowledge of not being able to see it all. This limitation upon seeing and understanding— in a word, *savoir*— also informed the work's enigmatic content, especially its use of sound, which combined a variety of unverifiable, but convincing foreign languages. This potentially meaningless muttering formed a background of babble that also included a surprisingly realistic repertoire of bird calls, animals noises, and alarming shrieks, along with the occasional crash of tables and bodies.

Despite its unsettling, aleatory character, this cacophonous landscape served a crucial function— it connected the two spaces. This connection demonstrated that the halves of *Heterotopia* were not irrevocably separate. Forsythe had embedded their means of relation so that the audience would "discover" it during the performance. In each playing space, what appeared to be microphones in transparent, plastic dishes were actually a receiver and transmitter that relayed sound from the grid into the proscenium stage. Discovering this apparatus resulted in a euphoric instant, especially since it anticipated human contact— which is to say, the possibility of communication and community.

However, the indecipherable nature of these transmissions necessarily muted this brief instant of delight. Rather than direct contact, this means of muted expression gestured towards an incommunicable principle of mediation— the impasse or screen. This mute medium is crucial to understanding the enigmatic nature of Forsythe's work. During the associatively overdetermined rape, the muteness conveyed by the dancers' impassive bodies reserved interpretative possibilities other than the visually immediate conclusion forced upon the audience. Like a curtain or a veil, such mute bodies effectively diminished the senses' primacy. By retreating from the demands of sensuous immediacy, this corporeal impasse referred its audience to that which cannot be represented in theatrical form. The perception of such non-sensuous elements produces a sensation of muffled distance or muted separation, for the expression of the inexpressible as mediated by the screen is literally inexpressive.

This meditational impasse— that is, the screen— too the form of the sole scenic counter-point in *Yes We Can't* to the ominous black microphones: a white mat. Albeit of seemingly peripheral importance, this mat was a resting place that inspired an insulating calm amid the dance's spastic, destructive energy. In one scene, a tall, physically striking, Japanese dancer wrapped himself in the mat. Like a cloak, womb, or protective covering, he became embalmed in its folds, and his long, slender figure disappeared from sight, remaining only as an amorphous bulge. Despite engulfing his body, this improvised shelter nevertheless proved permeable to others, such as a female performer, who awkwardly inserted herself into its opening. She was able to pass entirely through the enclosure and emerged on its opposite side without disturbing the other dancer. Needless to say, this was an ambiguous sequence, which suggested various interpretations. Its fetal form implied a birth or gestational process, but if meant to be a metamorphosis, it did not realize any evident transformation. On the contrary, the dancers' close contact, but psychologically abstract interaction

conveyed impersonal intimacy. As an impasse permeable to the passage of another, this interval of intimate distance connected bodies, even as it separated them.

In a different sequence, which appeared to be a visual joke, the mat literally connected and separated two individuals into one "body" lying on the ground. As if belonging to one impossibly tall individual, a dancer's head was visible at one end of the mat, while a second performer's feet stuck out at its opposite side. Like the abject disfigurations of the body in *Yes We Can't*, this image bore no trace of humor, but nor was it monstrous, and the dancers' sedentary, inexpressive appearance was almost tranquil. As if in the eye of a storm, their muted detachment had an aura of Zen-like stillness. However, the dancers' conduct in these scenes was not coolly resolved, but bluntly numb. This layer of meditative reserve was present throughout the dance, albeit overshadowed by a variety of overlapping, often intensely negative events. Although it opposed the enraged mode of expression dictated by the microphone, the mat and microphone both adhered to the same aesthetic principle, autoimmunity.

As an exemplary artistic application of autoimmunity, Forsythe's recent work arguably represents one of the most substantial innovations in contemporary theatre and dance. Indeed, rather than merely being exceptionally forceful, its merit consists in Forsythe's refusal to conform to conventional conceptual premises that have defined experimental theatre since the late sixties, particularly the presumed opposition between human presence and mechanical mediation. Accordingly, Forsythe's theatre does not rely on the categorical drive to realize the new, which rests on theological principles. As a challenge to these theological principles, autoimmunity requires that its contradictory principles be assessed as a process that mediates life that lies beyond the formal confines of theatre's box. The memory of this unlived life has been preserved in the name that theatre has assiduously sought to eradicate— God.

The domain of God is a vanishing terrain. Understood as *Geist*, as spirit and mind, this domain embodies the confluence of possibilities incommensurate to the particularity of the body and theatre. Although doubtlessly pursuing such unrealizable possibilities, Forsythe has remained rigorously faithful to the legacy of cruelty that sought to displace divine authority. He attunes his spectator to this disappearing horizon of unrealized potential by approximating the vanishing language of dance, whose mathematical complexity itself exceeds the particularity of theatre's representational capacity. The memory of histories and bodies unfit for representation on the public stage and foreclosed from speech are mediated in a form of expression that sought to surpass the prosaic confines of instrumental language— music.

Muffled Music and the Language of Spiritual Imparting

Forsythe's recent works have been replete with musical allusions to the lyrical memory of impossible plenitude. This theme emerged in *Kammer/Kammer*: Tony loved a rock star and listened to Bach on headphones, Deneuve crooned a Lynn Anderson country ballad, and the introduction and intermission featured a video artist's final project, in which he played a violin for the first time after a lifetime of his family's express disapproval. This mournful aspect of music also informed Forsythe's 2005 installation, *You Made Me a Monster*. Like his preceding works, this installation addressed romantic loss, albeit with a notable difference: its subject was an actual person from Forsythe's life, his former partner, dancer Tracy Kai Maier, who died of cancer in 2000. In *You Made Me a Monster*, the history of her decline was projected on a large screen that displayed text describing "false and biased diagnoses […] a bout of interminable bleeding during a rehearsal," and "a purportedly successful operation" (Huschka 2010, 71). Despite Forsythe's unusually direct presentation of this

narrative, the surrounding space was eerily enigmatic. In this space, three dancers improvised undulating movements, which were set in a strange sculptural environment consisting of an incorrectly assembled cardboard skeleton. As if assisting an act of mourning, the audience was free to arrange this skeletal sculpture, which consequently became malformed. These malformed remains of a human figure conveyed the sickening sensation of succumbing to an irreversible disease, especially one— like cancer— that ruins the body on a cellular scale.

Ruin also characterized Forsythe's use of sound in *You Made Me a Monster*, which threatened to degenerate into meaningless noise. Similar to the noise of construction, certain sounds produced an irritating background of "humming, shrill buzzing, and hammering" (Huschka 2010, 66). Other sounds resembled "ear-splitting wails" and "electronically amplified screams, wheezes, and raspings" (Huschka 2010, 66). As per the installation's title, these ghoulishly discordant sounds evoked the grief that presumably afflicted Forsythe. Unable to accept this loss, any creature capable of such cries would have been wrought by rage. Such superhuman rage corresponds to the Romantic ideal of the artist, whose suffering exceeds human measure and borders on the monstrous. Hence, the Romantic artist resembles a monster, whose diabolical power is to be revered and reviled.

However, its howls were electronic, which suggested that this creature was a technological monstrosity. Accordingly, the installation's projected text included a quintessential example of mass attraction and repulsion to technology, Ridley Scott's film *Alien*. *Alien* recounts the lethal consequences of exploring outer space, which unleashes a cunning horde of deadly extraterrestrials. Although Scott's aliens are killing machines, they nevertheless need the human body as an incubator in order to propagate their species. It should be no surprise that the incubation of a foreign being ends disastrously for its infected human host. The film depicts this disaster in an

image that converts birth into a fatal event, in which an alien erupts from a human chest.

If taken as its negative manifestation, this extraterrestrial eruption resembles autoimmunity, which opens the self to the technologically-mediated arrival of the other. However, autoimmunity suspends the conceptual opposition that feeds this fatal alien fantasy— the opposition between the human body and technological artifice. In this regard, it is important to consider the changes that Forsythe made in 2006 to the installation's second version, *Monster Partitur*. As might be expected, Forsythe dispensed with the reference to *Alien*. In addition to this technophobic film, he also removed all remaining narrative references and the screen on which they were displayed. Without a narrative framework— and this conventional concept of the screen— it was impossible to ignore the amplified wails of the lone, writhing dancer. Like its first version, *Monster Partitur* included an erroneously assembled cardboard skeleton, whose form reflected the dancer's eerily amorphous physical and vocal range.

Although these groans and gesticulations resembled a monstrous pantomime, the elements revised in *Monster Partitur* emphasized the choreography's formal nature. As is consistent with its title, a tripartite score— or *Partitur* in German— rested on a stand in the middle of the room. This score provided structure for the dancer's improvisations and also coordinated collaboration with an electronic musician, who responded with an array of digital distortions. The ceaseless adjustments of these collaborative improvisations established a self-generating method of movement production. Forsythe had developed this self-generating method throughout his choreographic career, including his ballets. According to Heidi Gilpin, the Ballett Frankfurt's former dramaturge, this improvisational process permitted the

164

dancers to become "agents of their own compositional strategies" in "self-organizing systems" that functioned as a score (in Birringer 1998, 99).

These self-organizing systems redefine the role of a score in dance. As observed in chapter one, a musical score traditionally operates like text, whose established structure determines choreographic possibilities. In contrast to such conventional subordination of dance to music, Forsythe's choreography suspends its structural dependency on an external frame of reference. This separation from external reference became pronounced in his post-balletic dances, which ceased to use classical measures of proportion. In the absence of a universal measure, these dances have threatened to dissolve into irrational nonsense, as if succumbing to a disease— like cancer, which was the subject of *Monster Partitur*.

Without visual and textual references, it was impossible to discern the story of Maier's cancer in *Monster Partitur*, and its monstrous appearance appeared to be provocative nonsense. However, these ghoulishly exaggerated aspects— especially the skeleton— were indivisible from Forsythe's painful personal history. The skeleton was an artifact from Forsythe's life with Maier, who had received it as a gift during her final Christmas. Forsythe recounted in an interview that he and his children "stood by in baffled silence as she opened it," and that it took him ten years "to finally figure out that I would just put the model together without looking at the instructions" (Solway 2007). In a way, Forsythe's decision to ignore the instructions was an act of surrender. However, rather than giving into grief, his solution was to give up making sense of this loss, which was an arbitrary event that may have no meaning. He likewise ceased to supply an aesthetically meaningful structure for his audience, who were confronted by an apparently irrational display in *Monster Partitur*.

Despite such nonsense, it was nevertheless possible to sense the presence of this personal history. This presence depends on the choreography's self-generating

process, which no longer predicated its possibilities on external structure. Instead of following a given text, the score in *Monster Partitur* was a dynamic document that deployed multiple possibilities. Forsythe defined it as "a score thought entirely otherwise" that permitted "the whole to break up" in order to catalyze a "field of possibilities" (Müller 2006). Even if such possibilities do not take place, this expanded field makes an audience aware of potential events that are ordinarily excluded from theatrical representation. In *Monster Partitur*, the unintelligible experience of Maier's cancer corresponded to these potential events. Unlike a dramatic narrative, such personal history is composed of singular elements. The singular nature of personal expression was addressed in chapter two, which considered Michel de Certeau's analysis of everyday life. In literal terms, everyday life is relegated to space beyond theatre's visual field— the obscene. Even though these outside events cannot be seen, Forsythe's score made it possible to sense such distant, disparately singular possibilities. In this regard, the score became a screen, a surface of separation that directs attention away from theatre's immediate spectacle and towards events beyond its scene.

As is consistent with such separation, Forsythe's score used an aesthetic process that diverges from an original text— translation. In particular, his translations transmitted artistic material between two- and three-dimensional forms. According to his description, the "score" in *You Made Me a Monster* generated "a chain of translations": "First the human body is translated into a flat cardboard model that is then folded three-dimensionally and casts shadows. These are read by dancers and again translated into three dimensions" (Müller 2006). Rather than reproducing an original text— in this case, his personal history— this successive process of translation relayed a multiplicity of possible permutations, which underwent ceaseless transformation as they passed between media. Accordingly, Forsythe's use of

translation cultivated a consciousness of excessive possibilities. However, this process also incessantly lost elements particular to a given medium. Although it is impossible to recover these elements lost in translation, they were nevertheless present in *Monster Partitur*, even if in a form unintelligible to theatrical expression— for example, the singular content of personal experience, including Forsythe's grief for his deceased partner.

Translation in Forsythe's choreography communicates elements inexpressible in theatrical form. As an expression of such incommunicability, this use of translation conflicts with its usual purpose, the transposition of a coded message between two languages. Although unconventional, incommunicability is the basis for Walter Benjamin's influential theory of translation in his 1921 essay, "The Task of the Translator." In this essay, Benjamin contests the assumption that translation is a form of *Mitteilung*, which in English means communication. In a statement near the beginning of the essay, he boldly grants translation unqualified, autonomous form: "Translation is a form" (Benjamin 1996, 254). Rather than a form of communication, Benjamin insists that translation preserves "something that cannot be communicated," *ein Nicht-Mitteilbares*, which is present in "all language" (Benjamin 1996, 261). He defines this incommunicable "nucleus" that "goes beyond [Mitteilung]" as "that element in the translation which does not lend itself to a further translation" (Benjamin 1996, 257-8).

Instead of domesticating this foreign element, translation makes it perceptible. It likewise conveys the "foreignness of languages" in general, albeit in "a somewhat limited way," which is never final (Benjamin 1996, 257). This "foreignness" corresponds to Forsythe's staging of translation in *Clouds After Cranach*. Rather than similarities, *Clouds After Cranach* emphasized intrinsic imprecisions between languages that impeded communication and reduced the mother's speech to

incomprehensible babble. Although such babble may seem meaningless, Forsythe tested this assumption in his next work, *Heterotopia*. On the one hand, the strange transmissions connecting the halves of *Heterotopia* suggested that such unintelligible language could be aesthetically valid. However, certain scenes challenged the audience's ability to distinguish between legitimate language and babble. In these scenes, dancers delivered wild rants in unidentifiable foreign languages. There was no reason to doubt the veracity of these languages until the dancers imitated bird calls, which were evidently inauthentic and could not be not construed as meaningful.

Such babble also resembles the religious convention of speaking in tongues. The ability to speak in tongues results from a direct connection to God, whose language exceeds human comprehension. Although Benjamin certainly does not consider such a crudely literal example of divine speech, his theory of language nevertheless departs from theological premises. The theological references in "The Task of the Translator" pertain to the incommunicable element of translation. Above all, Benjamin insists on an incommunicable continuity between languages, which he calls "the innermost relationship of languages" (Benjamin 1996, 255). Translation "points the way to this region," which resembles an edenic state of undivided being: "the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" (Benjamin 1996, 257). Like a blissfully eternal afterlife, there is presumably no need for mediation in this "realm of reconciliation," where the plenitude of possibilities is immediately present. Hence, Benjamin states at the beginning of the essay that translation responds to a need that exceeds mortal memory— "God's remembrance" (Benjamin 1996, 254).

As its iconographic aspects demonstrated, salvation also informs Forsythe's work. The lyrical memory of such plenitude— which is often confused with romantic love— provides formal impetus to overcome the limits of theatrical form. However,

neither Benjamin nor Forsythe intend to restore this immediate plenitude. In this regard, Benjamin specifies that that the reconstruction of this "realm of reconciliation" has already "failed"— it is "*versagten*" (Benjamin 1991, 15).[27] Although it may be impossible to reconstruct the incommunicably diverse phenomena that belong to this failed realm, they may nevertheless be transmitted by means of translation, which proceeds without a mediating structure of meaning. In this regard, Benjamin states that the translation of the "Nicht-Mitteilbares" must be "*unmittelbar*" or immediate: "Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly [unmittelbar], without any mediating sense [vermittelnden Sinn] [...] this text is unconditionally translatable" (Benjamin 1996, 262). The similarity between "unmittelbar" and "Nicht-Mitteilbares" suggests the conceptual proximity between immediacy and the incommunicable. As Benjamin would have it, the incommunicable may be translated only where a text is without mediating sense— a phrase that recalls Forsythe's unintelligible nonsense.

Moreover, as media and literary theorist Samuel Weber has demonstrated, the word "unmittelbar" has a special resonance in Benjamin's writing. This word previously appears in Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." As is consistent with "The Task of the Translator," this essay insists on the "*Unmittelbarkeit*" of all "spiritual Mitteilung," which emphasizes communication with the incommunicable beyond. Contrary to typical translators, Weber renders the word Mitteilung in this phrase as "imparting" (Weber 2008, 41). Weber chooses "imparting" in order to indicate the self-reflexive process of spiritual communication, which happens immediately in two ways: at once, but also without external mediation. Rather than "*through* language," this imparting takes place "*in*

---

[27] Both Harry Zohn's version and the recent Harvard edition translate the word "versagten" as "hitherto inaccessible." This mistranslation is perhaps due to the contradictory adjective with which Benjamin pairs "versagten," "*vorbestimmten*," meaning "predestined." It is also worth noting that other aspects of the essay echo the contradictory necessity of predetermined failure, such as his later comparison of translation to the broken shards of a greater language.

language," which "imparts itself [*teilt sich mit*]" (in Weber 2008, 41). In this way, language is inextricable from the content it imparts. In fact, language impedes imparted content, which is occluded, as if kept apart.

In a crucial twist, Benjamin adds that this immediate process is the "medium" of Mitteilung (in Weber 2008, 41). This definition challenges the conventional notion of a medium as a transparent, passive vessel for communication. Weber establishes this classical definition, which holds that: "The medium must […] be diaphanous. It provides the element 'in' and 'through' which the data of sense pass on their way to their addressees" (Weber 2008, 35). According to Benjamin's definition, communication imparts itself in the medium of language, which therefore impedes the passage of "data of sense" and withholds them from "their addressees," as if separated. Weber argues that this separation is inherent to the word "Mitteilung," which "is composed of two parts: the root, formed from the verb *teilen* (to separate or partition), and the adverbial prefix *mit-* ("with"). Literally, then, the word suggests 'partitioning with' " (Weber 2008, 40). Instead of passing away, the medium "leaves a certain residue of in-communicability, *Unmittelbarkeit*, behind" (Weber 2008, 42). As is consistent with the word Mitteilung, the incommunicable residue of this medium resembles a *Teilung*— namely, a partition or screen, which withholds the "spiritual being" that it imparts in language (Weber 2008, 41).

This impermeable partition— or screen— manifested itself in Forsythe's work in several ways. It first appeared as the "annihilated soul" born at the end of *Decreation*, which introduced prosthesis into dance. As a prosthesis, this impassive body muted artistic expression, but also relayed the presence of diverse possibilities excluded from theatrical form. Although she follows a different course of argument, Sabine Huschka likewise contends that "the dancer's body is the medium" for "an intertwined process of movement production and movement perception" (Huschka

2010, 61). Unlike the traditional definition of dance's medium, she states that these bodies form a "media-body" that mediates remote events, such as "*embodied memories*" (Huschka 2010, 61-2).   However, in contrast to the dynamic phenomenological activity of this "intertwined process," I wish to emphasize the impassive quality of imparting, which mutes the expression of such diverse possibilities.

After *Decreation*, the impassive body reemerged in *Yes We Can't* as a mat, whose white, inert material literally resembled a screen. As addressed in chapter one, the screen assumed a similar form in Rainer's early choreography, which explored the expressive limitations incurred by using mattresses in dance. Like Rainer's mattresses, the mat in *Yes We Can't* constrained, contained, and even enveloped the dancers. Incidentally or not, Benjamin describes translation in similar terms: "the language of translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds" (Benjamin 1996, 258). The sluggish excess of this fabric impedes the clear-cut meaning of the original, which Benjamin likens to "a fruit and its skin" that enjoy a perfectly taut relationship between center and whole (Benjamin 1996, 258). Contrary to this image of organic unity, the artificial fabric of translation's "royal robe" corresponds to the screen, whose prosthetic presence distends physical and vocal expression— such as the indecipherable alliterations in *Yes We Can't*.

In this regard, the process of imparting effected Forsythe's speech, which seemed obstructed, as if by a dividing partition. Forsythe again applied this vocal strategy in his 2009 dance, *The Returns*. Rather than "cunt" and "can't," this dance proposed an alliterative pair that alluded to the presence of an imparting partition: "part" and "art." Moreover, the word plays derived from this pair were pronounced— or rather, mispronounced— by a Japanese dancer, whose exaggerated accent suggested the formal relevance of translation. In rapid succession, this Japanese

narrator hysterically recited a litany of variations, bemoaning "cold old art," jubilantly demanding "more art," and speculating on "a time before art was a part," or "a part before art"— as if prior to aesthetic mediation.

The desire to return to a time prior to technical artifice could have been the subject of this dance, particularly given its title, *The Returns*. However, *The Returns* instead demonstrated the inevitable fragmentation of aesthetic experience, whether in art or everyday life. As evidence of the intrusion of art into life, the majority of the dance staged a ferociously funny fashion show, in which dancers modeled wildly misconceived costumes— costumes that could never be returned once purchased. In order to indicate this irreparable condition of disrepair, individual dancers incessantly strode down the runway for an exaggeratedly extended length of time. Especially since deafening electronic music accompanied this fashion show, their relentless return induced a state of shock. This shock resembled Benjamin's description of reactions to cinema in his canonical essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

In this essay, Benjamin writes that "the spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of film" (Benjamin 1968, 238). Like Benjamin's definition of this cinematic "shock effect," the incessant interruption in *The Returns* disrupted "the spectator's process of association." In fact, such associative disruption also informed Rainer's *Parts of Some Sextets*, whose automated process of incessant stopping forced "the eye to jump back and forth in time" (Rainer 1965, 172). The continuous movement of this displacement "back and forth in time" corresponds to another characteristic of film identified by Benjamin: intermittence, which in *The Arcades Project* he refers to as "the measure of time in film" (Benjamin 1999, 843).

In a general context, intermittence designates an unpredictably disruptive event. It is an irritant that comes and goes, a form of random interference that, like noise, inhibits communication by impeding the passage of a transmitted message between its two determined points, sender and receiver. The introduction of filmic intermittence into choreography challenges this conventional concept of communication. Instead of traveling across or beyond— as the root "trans" implies— each transmitted expression must pass with— or *mit*— its medium, even if that medium obscures its content. This impaired process of communication corresponds to Benjamin's concept of *Mitteilung* or "imparting," a form of aesthetic transmission that connects what it divides.

According to Benjamin, this process of self-division occurs with relentlessly mechanical regularity— like autoimmunity, which Derrida describes as "automated." In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin also emphasizes the ceaselessly self-reflexive succession of intermittence, which "means that every look in space meets with a new constellation" (Benjamin 1999, 843). Such incessant interruption creates "a world of strict discontinuity" that is almost unbearable and thus resembles "the time of hell," in which men become monsters, such as those in *Monster Partitur* (Benjamin 1999, 843). In this dense passage, Benjamin also links intermittence to "the gambler." As in *The Returns*, the gambler is condemned to the fickle fate of fortune, which recurs with the incessant consistency that characterized the dancers' endless parade on Forsythe's catwalk.

In addition to this fashion show, fragmentation in *The Returns* also characterized the stage, which was divided into two parts. The first part was a chaotically messy set, whose disorder consisted of playing cards, ping-pong balls, and racquets on a bright blue carpet. This set also contained an array of larger objects, including life-size playing cards with disfigured faces, oddly angled mirrors, and a

large-format printer, which continually produced cryptic nautically-themed quotations that littered the floor. These quotations were from two 19th-century maritime novels, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Edgar Allen Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Like the playing cards and games, these adventure novels emphasized an unpredictable life of fortune. In a formal sense, the ceaseless return of such fortune fragments aesthetic order— and likewise, identity, which caused Forsythe to include warped portraits and apparently fractured mirrors.

Like this fragmented, excessively symbolic set, such fascination with the eternal return of fortune was an established theme in experimental theatre, especially that of Richard Foreman. *The Returns* even included a reappearing character from Foreman's theatre, a crossed-dressed fortune-teller. Given such similarities, it may seem that this dance had "returned" to the artistic principles of experimental theatre. However, this contradicts Forsythe's statement that he intended his audience to "misread" such theatrical elements. In this regard, it was important that there was a larger, empty space beyond this crowded set. Although a hallway connected these two spaces, its relatively narrow confines hindered the view of this expansive area. Like a connecting impediment— or screen— this partial view made the audience aware of nearby events that were irremediably apart from their immediate sight.

Even if beyond the visible boundaries of this scene, the audience could nevertheless sense these events, especially in one unusually muted moment. In this moment, the company played ping-pong throughout the theatre, including off-stage space. Instead of a competition, the purpose of this game was to keep the ball aloft and in motion, as if alive. While the dancers quietly concentrated on this task, the room resonated with the softly amplified echo of clicking ping-pong balls. The dull din of this incessant exchange produced an atmosphere of muffled musicality. This muffled quality resulted from the presence of an interceding partition, the screen. As a

formal manifestation of imparting, the screen relays diverse events that otherwise could not be perceived on stage. According to lyrical tradition, such diverse events correspond to the immediate plenitude of music. However, the muted music of ping-pong balls in *The Returns* could only indicate the distant presence of such plenitude, not its actual form.

In *Yes We Can't*, music—distant, numinous, and serene— likewise evoked awareness of events beyond the peripheries of the scene. Amid the performance's fragmented morass, an unmistakably live piano began at some late, uncertain juncture to softly play off-stage. As its strangely sonorous, mildly unmelodious chords progressed, scattered voices joined from the theatre's wings. As if unaware of their contribution to a collective song, these occluded accompanists remained just off-key and out-of-sync, never really achieving an orchestrated instant of harmonic confluence. Due to its ephemerality, this moment of inconclusive musical rapport may seem merely incidental. However, despite being inconspicuous, this scene was revived in a singularly analogous instant. The Japanese dancer— who had earlier wrapped himself in the white mat— quietly entered the stage and stepped swiftly to a microphone with the apparent intention to speak. Given that Forsythe had avoided imposing speaking parts on his two Asian dancers, his sudden address was surprising. However, he did not speak, but released a single extended note that resembled the chords previously performed on the piano.

In contrast to the discordant wailing and babble dominating Forsythe's recent dances, such strangely serene harmony was a relief. This relief also informs the task— or *Aufgabe*— of the translator. As this word suggests, the translator must "give up" and let go of meaning. Benjamin himself states that it is necessary to "let go" of meaning in order to release a more fundamental form of language in translation that resembles "harmony": "as regards the meaning, the language of translation can— in

175

fact, must— let itself go [*sich gehen lassen*] so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (Benjamin 1996, 260). This harmonic supplement is inextricable from the medium of language "in which it expresses itself," which is to say, imparts: "*in der diese sich mitteilt*" (Benjamin 1991, 18).

As if always parting or passing away, the emergence of this distant harmony relates to the "afterlife" of translation (Benjamin 1996, 255). Admittedly, the word afterlife is indissociable from its commonplace Christian concept, which designates an eternal state of divine bliss in which original, undivided being is redeemed. Like Eden, this afterlife restores a time prior to the technological intrusion of aesthetic mediation. However, Benjamin proposes a different notion of the afterlife and thus uses "another German word […] not just *Nachleben* but *Fortleben*: living on, but also living away" (Weber 2008, 67). As Weber notes, the survival of the original in translation depends on a language that is subject to historical change. "Fortleben" indicates the task of persevering in a divided life in order to preserve life. In recognition of the burden of bearing this division, Weber translates "afterlife" as "after-life" or "living-on" (Weber 2008, 67). This concept of "living-on" coincides with Derrida's notion of autoimmune life, which also lives on in an impaired state of "sur-vival" or "sur-vie," a word that literally means "on-life"— and perhaps, "living-on." As realized on Forsythe's stage, it is impossible to foresee this after-life of choreography, whose expression depends on a prosthetic partition that impedes the musical profusion of possibilities that it imparts— namely, the screen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agamben, Giorgio. "Bartleby, or On Contingency." In *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen, 243-274, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Akerman, Chantal. "On *D'Est*." In *Bordering on Fiction: Chantal Akerman's D'Est*, ed. Janet Jenkins. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Walker Art Center, 1995.

Akerman, Chantal. "Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln in einem leeren Kühlschrank Laufen." In *Neben seinen Schnürsenkeln in einem leeren Kühlschrank laufen*, ed. Cilly Kugelmann. Berlin: Stiftung Jüdisches Museum/Laconic Press, 2007.

Allen, Susan Lubkemann. "Chantal Akerman's Cinematic Transgressions: Transhistorical and Transcultural Transpositions, Translingualism, and the Transgendering of the Cinematic Gaze." In *Situating the Feminist Gaze in Postwar Cinema*, 255-288, Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2008.

Asselin, Olivier and Timothy Barnard. "Digital Screens." *Parachute*, 113 (January/February/March 2004): 6-11.

Audé, Françoise. "Le Cinéma de Chantal Akerman, la nourriture, le narcissisme, l'exil." In *Chantal Akerman*, ed. Jacqueline Aubenas, 151-163, Brussels: Ateliers des Arts, 1982.

Augé, Marc. *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Paris: Seuil, 1992.

Banes, Sally. "An Open Field: Yvonne Rainer as Dance Theorist." *Radical Juxtapositions: 1961-2001*. Ed. Sid Sachs. Philadelphia: The University of the Arts, 2003. 21-40.

Banes, Sally. *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962-1964*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993.

Banes, Sally. 1987. *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften, Band IV: Kleine Prosa, Baudelaire-Übertragungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.

Berger, Christiane. *Körper Denken in Bewegung: Zur Wahrnehmung tänzerischen Sinns bei William Forsythe und Saburo Teshigawara*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006.

Bergstrom, Janet. "Invented Memories." In *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. Trowbridge, England: Flicks Books, 1999.

Birringer, Johannes. *Media & Performance: Along the Border*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Birringer, Johannes. *Performance, Technology, & Science*. New York: PAJ Publications, 2008.

Blau, Herbert. "Theater and Cinema: The Scopic Drive, the Detestable Screen, and More of the Same." *Ciné-Tracts*, 3:4 (1981): 51-65.

Boenisch, Peter. "Decreation Inc.: William Forsythe's Equations of 'Bodies Before the Name'." *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17:1 (2007): 15-27.

Brandstetter, Gabriele. "Defigurative Choreography: From Marcel Duchamp to William Forsythe." *TDR*, 42:4 (Winter 1998): 37-55.

Brannigan, Erin. *Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Brannigan, Erin. "Great Directors: Yvonne Rainer." *Senses of Cinema,* <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/rainer.html>

Brannigan, Erin. " 'La Loïe' as Pre-Cinematic Performance: Descriptive Continuity of Movement." *Senses of Cinema*, 22 (Sept-Oct 2003): <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/28/la_loie.html>

Buchmann, Sabeth. *Denken Gegen das Denken: Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer, und Hélio Oiticica*. Berlin: B-Books, 2007.

Burt, Ramsay. *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Burt, Ramsay. "Steve Paxton's *Goldberg Variations* and the Angel of History." *TDR*, 46:4 (2002): 46-64.

Campbell, Timothy. "Bios, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito." *Diacritics*, 36:2 (Summer 2006): 2-22.

Carroll, Noel. "Yvonne Rainer and the Recuperation of Everyday Life." *Radical Juxtapositions: 1961-2001*. Ed. Sid Sachs. Philadelphia: The University of the Arts, 2003. 65-86.

Carson, Anne. "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God." *Common Knowledge*, 8:1 (2002): 188-201.

Cixous, Hélène and Jacques Derrida. *Veils*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Crimp, Douglas. "Yvonne Rainer, Muciz Lover." *Grey Room* 22 (Winter 2005): 48-67.

Driver, Senta, editor. *William Forsythe*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Derrida, Jacques. "Che cos'è la poesia?" in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf, 221- 240. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Derrida, Jacques. *Foi et savoir*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

Derrida, Jacques. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1985.

De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984.

De Certeau, Michel. *L'invention du quotidien: 1. arts de faire*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990.

De Ferrari, Gabriella. "William Forsythe." *Bomb*, 96 (Summer 2006).

De Lauretis, Teresa. "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema." *New German Critique*. 34 (Winter 1985): 154-175.

Esposito, Roberto. "The Immunization Paradigm." *Diacritics*, 36:2 (Summer 2006): 23-48.

Ettinger, Bracha. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Forsythe, William. *Suspense*. New York: DAP, 2008.

Forsythe, William. *Ballettanz Jahrbuch: Forsythe's: Bill's Universe*. Berlin: Friedrich Berlin Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004.

Foster, Susan Leigh. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Foster, Susan Leigh. 2002. "Walking and Other Choreographic Tactics: Danced Inventions of Theatricality and Performativity." *SubStance 98/99*, 31: 125-146.

Franko, Mark. "Some Notes on Yvonne Rainer, Modernism, Politics, Emotion, Performance, and the Aftermath." In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane Desmond, 289-303. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poétique de la Relation*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990.

Groves, Rebecca. Program Notes. *Kammer/Kammer*. April 3, 2006. Amsterdam, Westergasfabriek Zuiveringshal West.

Hagglund, Martin. *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the time of life*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Hirsch, Marianne. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Hirsch, Marianne. "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile." *Poetics Today* 17:4 (Winter 1996): 659-686.

Huschka, Sabine. "Media-Bodies: Choreography as Intermedial Thinking Through in the Work of William Forsythe." *Dance Research Journal*, 42:1 (Summer 2010): 61-75.

Hüster, Wiebke. "Die Hölle haben wir erschaffen." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. October 27, 2006.

Johnston, Jill. *Marmalade Me*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

Krauss, Rosalind. "Notes On the Index: Seventies Art in America. Part 2." *October*, 4 (Autumn 1977): 58-67.

Kristeva, Julia. "Modern Theater Does Not Take (a) Place." In *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray, 277-281, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Lacan, Jacques. *Le Séminaire: Livre XX Encore 1972-1973*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975.

Lambert-Beatty, Carrie. *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008.

Lebow, Alisa. "Memory Once Removed: Indirect Memory and Transitive Autobiography in Chantal Akerman's *D'Est*." *Camera Obscura* 18:1 (2003): 35-82.

Liandrat-Gigues, Suzanne, ed.. *Propos sur la flânerie*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009.

Lingis, Alphonso. *Dangerous Emotions*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Longfellow, Brenda. "Love Letters to the Mother: The Work of Chantal Akerman." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 13.1-2 (1989): 73-90.

Manning, Erin. *Relationscapes: Movement, Art, Philosophy*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2009.

MacDonald, Scott. "Chantal Akerman: on *D'Est*, *Sud*, and *De l'autre côté*." In *A Critical Cinema 4*, ed. Scott MacDonald. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005.

Margulies, Ivone. *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.

Mayne, Judith. *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

McCarren, Felicia. *Dancing Machines: Choreographies in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003.

McRobbie, Angela. "Chantal Akerman and Feminist Film-making." In *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

Michalzik, Peter. "*Desastres de la guerra*: How William Forsythe's *Three Atmospheric Studies* Turns Dance into Political Tanztheater" program notes from *Three Atmospheric Studies* in The Forsythe Company Press Archive, http://press.theforsythecompany.com.

Michelson, Annette. "Yvonne Rainer, Part 1: The Dancer and the Dance." *Artforum* 12:5, (January) 1974: 57-63.

Müller, Katrin Betina. "Der Mensch ist sehr gefährlich." *Die Tageszeitung*, May 13, 2006.

Murray, Timothy. "Introduction: The Mise-En-Scene of the Cultural." In *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. Timothy Murray, 1-26, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Narboni, Jean. "La Quatrième Personne du Singulier (*Je tu il elle*)." *Cahiers du Cinéma* 276 (May 1977): 5-14.

Naas, Michael. " 'One Nation... Indivisible': Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God." *Research in Phenomenology*, 36:1 (2006): 15-44.

Pakesch, Peter, ed.. *Videodreams: Images in the Sapce Between the Cinematic and the Theatrical— Defining a Position*. Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2004.

Phelan, Peggy. "Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism, and Performance." *TDR*, 32:1 (Spring 1988): 107-127.

Phelan, Peggy. 1999. "Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film." In *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, ed. Yvonne Rainer, 3-17. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Rainer, Yvonne. 1965. "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965." *The Tulane Drama Review 10*, 2: 168-178.

Rainer, Yvonne. *Work: 1961-1973*. Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974.

Rainer, Yvonne. 1999. *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Rainer, Yvonne. 2009. "*Trio A*: Genealogy, Documentation, Notation." *Dance Research Journal 41*, 2: 12-18.

Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

Rosen, Philip. "Border Times and Geopolitical Frames: The Martin Walsh Memorial Lecture 2006." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 15:2 (Fall 2006): 2-19.

Ross, Christine. *The Aesthetics of Disengagement: Contemporary Art and Depression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Salter, Chris. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010.

Schneider, Rebecca. "Patricidal Memory and the Passerby." *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 2:1 (Summer 2003): <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/schneide.htm>

Siegel, Marcia B.. 2001. "Reclaiming the Ordinary: Mikhail Baryshnikov and White Oak." *The Phoenix*, May 24-31, 2001.

Siegmund, Gerald, editor. *William Forsythe: Denken in Bewegung*. Berlin: Henschel Verlag, 2004.

Siegmund, Gerald. *Abwesenheit:Eine Performative Ästhetik des Tanzes*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006.

Silverman, Kaja. "Dis-embodying the Female Voice." In *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, eds. Mary Anne Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Threshold of the Visible World*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Solway, Diane. "Is It Dance? Maybe. Political? Sure." *New York Times*, February 18, 2007, Arts Section.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966.

Spaas, Lieve. "Chantal Akerman: A Struggle with Exile." In *Cultures of Exile: Images of Displacement*, eds. Wendy Everett and Peter Wagstaff, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004.

Turim, Maureen. "Personal pronouncements in I...you... he...she and Portrait of a young girl at the end of the 1960s in Brussels." In *Identity and Memory: The Films of Chantal Akerman*, ed. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster. Trowbridge, England: Flicks Books, 1999.

Truchot, Damien. "Vers l'intérieur: Les promenades en chambre de Chantal Akerman." In *Propos sur la flânerie*, ed. Suzanne Liandrat-Gigues, 167-190, Paris: L'Harmattan: 2009.

Vojkovic, Sasha. "On the Borders of Redemption: Recovering the Image of the Past." *Parallax*, 5:3 (July 1999): 90-101.

Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's -abilities*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Weber, Samuel. "Towards A Politics of Singularity." *Biopolitica* <*www.biopolitica.cl/docs/Comments_SamuelWeber_Politics_Protection.pdf* > accessed July 23, 2010.

Weber, Samuel. *Targets of Opportunity: On the Militarization of Thinking*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

Weber, Samuel. *Theatricality as Medium*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.

Weil, Simone. *Waiting For God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1951.

Wills, David. *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.