

Abandon and Artifice:
Re-Disorienting Pleasure in Dance Performance

by

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When an apple fell on his head, Isaac Newton was inspired to describe his three laws of motion. These became the foundation of our ideas about physics. Being essentially objective, Newton ignored what it feels like to be the apple.

(Steve Paxton, 1987)

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Prologue

The word *abandon* suggests removal, negation, or destruction. Yet, my experience *in abandon* begs for a more indulgent definition. The particular experience of *abandon* that I refer to as an entry point into this project is the experience of being lifted. When I am moved away from the ground, I know that rationally, gravity will return me to its security, where I will regain my sense of orientation and self-support. But for a fleeting moment, I live without being my own center of control. My lifter is my driving force, freeing me from responsibility. I feel that delicious turn in my stomach, which reminds me of playing on swings as a child. The factor of the unknown amplifies the sensation: I experience this centerlessness in the fleeting present, without predicting whether I'll land standing up or upside-down.

I am accustomed to viewing *care* as the central sentiment and purpose of the lift, envisioning a man caring for a woman, or a mother caring for a child. This care involves possession and protection of a precious solid entity. What if instead, the holding mother is constantly in a process of letting go, *abandoning* the child? This re-orientation suggests an inability to contain, for the child ultimately leaves the mother's womb and arms. It involves risk, instability, fear, and lack of clarity. Instead of centering the lifter's *care* for the lifted, in this project I emphasize *abandon*, a seeming opposite of care, in order to imagine the pleasures that could be centered in dance performance.

My fascination with the pleasures of being lifted emerged out of my choreographic research process leading up to Fall Senior Thesis Dance.¹ As I began to choreograph, I questioned the act of lifting as I had usually observed it in contemporary

¹ *Fall Senior Thesis Dance Concert*. Chor. Emily Butcher, Sonya Levine, Rick Hong

dance performance: a man lifting a woman as she gracefully extends her feet into the air. I became increasingly frustrated by this choreographic trope, since in my mind, it perpetuated the sexist notion that women are objects to be handled by men. My dance practice at Wesleyan had taught me that as a woman, I had the strength to lift anyone, with a proper understanding of the physics in the interaction. So, I determined to refuse these gender roles in my choreography. This determination led me to choreograph only female dancers in the fall. I would prove to myself and others that—despite the accepted roles of lifting active male subject and lifted passive female object—women could lift one another, perfectly capable without men to support them.

However, as I navigated this normative gender relationship in relation to various feminist theories, new questions emerged that complicated my initial ideas about gendered power. Am I privileging masculine control by having a woman take on the role as lifter? Why not obliterate the lift altogether, if it involves the unequal power relation of one person dominating another? Why should I choreograph a piece to be performed by women at all, if the male gaze will inevitably objectify them? I found myself problematizing the entire premise of the performance more and more, as I became tangled and confined by these questions. I began to doubt whether this subject-object relationship would suffice for describing the complexity of the lifting experience, especially since the female dancers seemed to *want* to be lifted.

At the beginning of one rehearsal, I turned to the six dancers for help, asking them for words and phrases to describe their experiences of being lifted, and their responses significantly shifted the trajectory of my research. I expected them to reaffirm what I had already thought to be true, to express how being lifted involved undesirable passivity and lack of control. Instead, the experiences they described related to freedom,

the ability to sense gravity, suspension, and pleasurable touch. These ideas rang true to me, as I reflected on my own experiences of being lifted, and helped me to re-orient the lift as a source of pleasure and freedom.

This conversation led me from a simplistic framework for looking at the lift, to a series of multifaceted questions about pleasure. What kind of pleasure does the moment of being out-of-control offer? What progressive-minded anxieties police pleasure in this moment? And how might we re-orient staged moments of abandon as pleasure for a more queer conversation about freedom in dance performance? In order to answer this set of questions, I compare contested meanings of freedom and examine how these meanings tie into pleasure in the work of three prominent choreographers of the late twentieth century: Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and Pina Bausch. In order to approach these meanings, I layer descriptions of their choreographic practices and works, interpretations by their critics, and feminist/queer theories. Throughout these three chapters, I surface deeply embedded anxieties about unequal power distribution—grounded in anti-totalitarian motives on the political Left—that influence policing discourse in postmodern dance performance.

In Chapter 1, I place Yvonne Rainer in the context of American postmodern dance by describing the anti-totalitarian move toward objectivist art on the American Left. In order to identify her objectivist anxieties, I refer to Katja Kolcio's history of American dance organizing during the Cold War, and Laura Mulvey's canonical feminist film theory. I also refer to queer critiques of leftist anxieties by Stephen Bottoms and Greg Goldberg. I use this history and theory as a basis for examining austere and puritanical policing of pleasure through discourse that influenced Rainer's choreography, and her eventual refusal of the dancing body.

In Chapter 2, I transition to a discussion of contact improvisation, a dance practice that takes root in similar political contexts and anxieties. I critique Cynthia Novack's acclaimed text on contact improvisation, as well as other contemporary sources on the practice, in order to claim that the privileging of supposedly objective science shapes, and at times confines, freedom in the practice. I also compare these secondary sources with accounts by the practice's founder, Steve Paxton. Here, I examine his commentators' need to rationalize his descriptions of pleasure using policing values of utilitarian responsibility and egalitarian community.

In Chapter 3, I jump across the Atlantic to German choreographer Pina Bausch, whose critics link her to the anxieties of Rainer and Paxton, but whose work also offers a particular embrace of pleasure through abandon. I first describe policing interpretations of her work, and then suggest an interpretation with more pleasurable possibility. This interpretation pulls from ideas about destabilizing repetition from Judith Butler, self-shattering of the sovereign subject from Leo Bersani, and fluid and uncontrollable notions of the female body from Elizabeth Grosz.

I frame each chapter with anecdotes from my fall and spring choreographic processes, which reveal my own similar anxieties and fears about power, complicating my relationship to pleasure in dance performance. In the fall, I choreographed a work titled *Be Hold Me* with six cisgender women, and I did not dance in my own piece. This choreographic process provided an opportunity for embodied research, which both clarified and complicated the focus of this project. "Be Hold Me" emerged out of physical experimentation with various approaches to lifting and falling, as I explored their meanings for dancers and spectators alike. In the spring, I decided to dance in my own piece. My reluctance to dance in the fall contributed to this decision, as I realized

that this reluctance had stemmed from my own anxiety about narcissism, as well as my attachment to self-sovereign control. Additionally, I felt eager to experience the abandon of lifting and falling first-hand. In the piece, titled “starry-eyed lizard duets,” I danced with four other dancers, two cisgender women, one cisgender man, and one non-gender-identifying dancer. I set out to embrace the pleasurable aspects of excessive spectacle and frivolous artifice, disavowed by many of the artists and critics in my research. I also choreographed this piece with the intention to intertwine sections of it with sections of Rick’s piece, “GET OFF.” The culminating piece, titled “GET OFF/starry-eyed lizard duets,” presented a bridging of very different queer worlds, which both centered pleasure and spectacle.

Throughout this choreographic process, I was surprised by the difficulty of embracing the excessiveness that I had set out to embrace. In *Antisocial Media* (2017), sociologist Greg Goldberg comments that the political Left, “cannot seem to shake a subdued but intractable antipathy to forms of queer culture that take pleasure in the superficial, the excessive, the frivolous, and the decadent.”² The leftist aversion to decadence described by Goldberg continues to shape my preferences and fears surrounding dance performance. Throughout these chapters, I revisit this aversion in many of its forms—from a post-World War II U.S. to my own experienced postmodern dance context—to reflect on how leftist anxieties serve to confine the destabilizing pleasure of abandon in dance practice and performance.

² Goldberg Greg. “Policing the Solitary Pervert.” *Antisocial Media: Anxious Labor in the Digital Economy*. New York: NYU, Forthcoming. Print.

Chapter 1:

Yvonne Rainer's "No to Being Moved"

The hopeless case of the male gaze weighed down on me throughout my fall choreographic process. To resist my notions of voyeuristic oppression, I had honed in on the pleasure of the dancers, attempting to value their experiences more than audience approval. The phrase, "decenter the male gaze" can be found handwritten in various forms throughout my thesis notes from October. As I retrospectively flip through these pages of my journal, counting my schemes to "decenter the male gaze," I notice a blatant *centering* of the male gaze.

My plan for feminist resistance was equivalent to covering my eyes and shouting to the audience, "if you can't see me, then I can't see you!" About a week before the Fall Senior Thesis Dance performance, I asked my dancers to embody my own anxiety by instructing them not to look directly at the audience at any point during the piece. They could look at one another, their own bodies, or other places on stage, but never out into the house of the theater. I thought that if the dancers stayed focused on each other, the dance would be *truly about the experience*, rather than about the spectator. The spectators could take pleasure, or not, but in my mind, the dancers' pleasure would be the same with or without audience pleasure.

While I expected that this decision to turn heads away from the audience would provide the magic key to obliterating the male gaze from my world, my insistence on rejecting spectatorship served to heighten my anxiety about voyeurism. After the performance, I asked the dancers to reflect on their experienced relationship to the

audience throughout the performances.³ From their feedback, they seemed to enjoy refusing to look at the audience, but in ways that revealed my lack of clarity about my own intentions. One dancer's experience seemed to fit neatly into my intentions at the time: "I think we were all able to be present in the moment and dance comfortably and confidently. I think this came across clearly to the audience." This response reflects my intentions of inviting the audience into an experience that's *for* the dancers, as well as a care and responsibility for audience understanding.

Others interpreted my instruction as an outright refusal of the inevitably voyeuristic audience. One dancer wrote, "I appreciated how the piece fought against the mentality that we as women are objects to be seen. I loved the feeling of willfully ignoring the audience, because it allowed us as dancers to focus inwards." In a different part of her feedback, the same dancer expressed that while looking away from the audience was an interesting practice, she enjoyed knowing that the audience was watching her while she refused to return the same attention: "I had a lot of fun knowing that someone was watching me and I wasn't giving them any of my attention whatsoever." In other words, the inward-focus allowed the dancers to resist objectification. At the same time, this dancer enjoyed knowing that the audience was watching her, which led me to question whether looking away actually served to center the audience as a source of pleasure.

My instruction to the dancers had made way for new questions and contradictions. Am I centering the audience if I care enough about them to instruct the dancers to look away? If I don't care about the audience, then why do I desire to have

³ Donovan, Luisa, Arden Feil, Ilana Newman, Amira Ottley, Medha Swaminathan, and Colleen Winslow. "Reflections on Fall Thesis Dance." E-mail interview. 6 Dec. 2016.

this piece *performed* in the first place? When the dancers enjoy performing, are they finding pleasure in the voyeuristic male gaze? If voyeurism is evil, which I assumed it to be, I was not quite ready to let go of its sinful pleasure. I *desired* the pleasure of using twenty lighting cues to make the spectacle flow seamlessly, and the pleasure of knowing that I was witnessing my choreography in a sold out house. People had posted on Facebook begging for unused tickets to see *my work*, and it felt great. Was it possible, and did I even desire, to “decenter the male gaze” without embracing such narcissistic pleasure? These questions from the fall process provide an entry point analyzing the works and politics of Yvonne Rainer. I will refer to these anxieties about voyeurism and narcissism in order to highlight similar anxieties underlying Rainer’s refusals.

* * * * *

Rainer’s “No” Manifesto

No to spectacle
No to virtuosity
No to transformations and magic and make believe
No to the glamour and transcendency of the star image
No to the heroic
No to the anti-heroic
No to trash imagery
No to involvement of performer or spectator
No to style
No to camp
No to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer
No to eccentricity
No to moving or being moved
(Rainer 1966)⁴

⁴ Rainer, Yvonne. *Work, 1961-1973*. Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974. Print.

Yvonne Rainer's "No" manifesto is a poetic series of statements that refuse what she sees as the extraneous elements of dance performance. Upon first read, this manifesto appeared to fit into my imagination of the rebellious fervor in the 1960s, a U.S. era I've always imagined to be overflowing with radical feminist counterculture, and heated with rejection to tradition and oppressive gender norms. Rainer's tone feels unapologetic and consistent. She follows through with her *no's*, rejecting extraneous elements of dance performance all the way until seemingly rejecting dance itself, if we consider "moving or being moved" to be defining elements of dance. She leaves little room for question.

When I take a closer read, I notice that many of the elements she rejects (at least until "No to moving or being moved") could be interpreted as *for show*: related to spectacle, illusion, and entertainment. We will consider Rainer's "No" manifesto, as well as her influential piece *Trio A*, in order to delve into her concerns about spectacle, illusion, and entertainment. By layering Rainer's creative work with the discourse that surrounds it, this chapter will uncover anxieties surrounding theatricality, voyeurism, and narcissism in the political moment, which feed into the policing of potentially pleasurable and queer aspects of dance performance.

Anti-Totalitarianism and Objectivist Art

What is left of dance if we remove everything from spectacle, to virtuosity, to style, to being moved? In the context of 1966 United States, the answer to this question seems clear: the objective, neutral, and *real* physical body. Rainer's most widely recognized years of choreography occurred in the early 1960s through the early 1970s, a time when American art was influenced by discourse in the post-World War II context

of Cold War America. In her book, *Movable Pillars: Organizing Dance 1956-1978* (2010), dance scholar Katja Kolcio compiles histories of dance organization and education, which parallel most of Rainer's dance career.⁵ When the U.S. sought to prove "global dominance in contrast to the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union," federal funding went into dance programs in higher education, but this federal involvement "had to be tempered to avoid any implication of ideological totalitarianism. It became important to frame intellectual and cultural production as being ideologically objective." In order to prove ideological objectivity, the arts borrowed research methods from natural sciences, applying these methods "to prove that they could provide neutral research findings."⁶

This push toward ideological objectivity, in attempt to steer clear of similarities with the Soviet Union, was reflected in decisions at the federal level related to arts funding. The anti-communist sentiment in the U.S. during the Cold War led to government funding of *free* art without political messaging in the late 1950s and 1960s. In *Dance for Export*, arts educator Naima Prevots discusses the relationship between the Cold War and the emergence of new government funds to support dance.⁷ In 1954, President Eisenhower created his Emergency Fund to send dance companies abroad in effort to practice "cultural diplomacy," using the arts—rather than bullets, occupying armies, or A-bombs—to win friends and influence policy."⁸ Prevots expresses unwavering support of this Emergency Fund, claiming that Eisenhower's move set a positive example for peaceful international exchange. She also speaks reverently about

⁵ Kolcio, Katja Pylyshenko. *Movable Pillars: Organizing Dance, 1956-1978*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010. Print.

⁶ Kolcio, *Movable Pillars* 30.

⁷ Prevots, Naima. *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998. Print.

⁸ Prevots, *Dance for Export* 8.

the American National Theater and Academy (ANTA) agency that was developed by the State Department soon after. The ANTA included a dance panel comprised of highly acclaimed American ballet and modern choreographers who decided which artists received funding to take their work abroad.

In her review of Prevot's book, performance scholar Mary Louise Hill critiques the extent to which Prevot chooses *not* to emphasize the history's connections to anti-communist anxieties, and instead to emphasize the excellence of choreographers and companies chosen to perform abroad.⁹ Hill points out the questions used by the dance panel to evaluate this choreographic excellence, which are interesting in relation to the postmodern urge toward neutrality. These questions include references to the subtlety that the ANTA favored, such as, "which pieces best characterize dance art in America without being 'decadent.'"¹⁰ Hill adds that each of Prevot's stories end with "resounding success and a documented critique by the target culture expressing how America is far more refined than expected."¹¹ Prevot's rejection of decadence and embrace of refinement suggest that the U.S. strived to communicate American art as cultured and smart, as opposed to cheap and excessive, even when it chose to send avant-garde dance companies abroad. Thus, the U.S. government supported anti-Communist art that could not be interpreted as sleazy propaganda, and this support aligned with the objective motives of postmodern dance at the time. Rainer and her contemporaries, who claimed to focus on natural physicality over psychological intention, made political statements

⁹ Hill, Mary Louise. Rev. of *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* by Naima Prevot. *Theatre Journal* 55.3 (2003): 555-56. Web.

¹⁰ Hill, Rev. of *Dance for Export* 555.

¹¹ Hill, Rev. of *Dance for Export* 556.

that converged with the U.S. government's intentions, both of which were motivated by anxieties about being perceived as free.

Merce Cunningham, an influence of Rainer and many of her collaborators, contributed to this push toward objectivist art.^{12,13} Cunningham sought to eliminate the non-essential expression of subjective ideas from his works, expression embraced by earlier modern choreographers such as Martha Graham, whose company he danced for prior to forming his own in 1953.¹⁴ In order to avoid extraneous expression of the subject, he employed scientific method-based chance procedures. Kolcio explains how Cunningham used “objectivist and rational strategies” in order to “highlight the moving body itself and minimize the influence of preconceived ideas.”¹⁵ With the right method, one hoped that the body could stand alone, neutral and free from the confines of totalitarianism. These objectivist strategies point to a widespread privileging of natural sciences, which Cunningham and other choreographers revered as capable of freeing dance practice from expression.

In addition to striving for objective political neutrality, art was shaped by productive and utilitarian goals at this time, results that could not be met through subjective self-expression. In a *Dancescope* magazine issue of 1965, Esther M. Jackson comments on the condition of American arts education after World War II.¹⁶ She advocates for dance that results in social improvement, specifically in “rescuing American youth” from poverty. This is a purpose that “supersedes the romantic

¹² Banes, Sally, and Robert Alexander. *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-modern Dance*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980. Print.

¹³ Rainer and many of her collaborators in Grand Union had previously studied with Cunningham. See Banes 203.

¹⁴ “Merce Cunningham.” *Merce Cunningham Trust*. 2017. Web.

¹⁵ Kolcio, *Movable Pillars* 33.

¹⁶ Jackson, Esther M. “Dance and National Needs.” *DanceScope* 2.1 (1965): 7-14. Print.

imperative of self expression” by focusing on the social need for collective art that “could produce an even higher level of achievement and satisfaction for the individual artist than that which has been possible so far in America.” Jackson reveals an underlying leftist aversion to narcissistic modes of expressive art, as well as an obsession with utilitarian productivity and “achievement.” She also views much of the art that children are exposed to in popular media as “meretricious,” and falsifying “pseudo-art,” revealing distrust of artifice in popular art. Additionally, Jackson’s references to race—depicting youth in the “ravages of poverty, crime, discrimination and emotional disease” in the “angry ghettos of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles”—point to the article’s Civil Rights Movement context. This context suggests Jackson’s intention for dance education in the U.S. to embark on the socially productive-minded project of “rescuing” black communities, using egalitarian and “collective” arts education techniques.¹⁷ While I will not delve into Rainer’s direct relationship to the Civil Rights Movement, I will examine how her concerns arose out of its political context, so it is important to note that the general striving toward egalitarian art on the Left took place within this movement to end racial segregation and discrimination.

Rainer’s refusal of extraneous theatricality was part of this broader refusal on the Left of “meretricious” expression in dance. In her New York-based artistic sphere, the Judson Church Dance Theater and later the Grand Union both emerged out of this rejection of artifice. Both collectives, influenced by anti-fascist discourse at the time, engaged in the search for objective, neutral, and therefore democratic dance. The PBS event *Beyond the Mainstream: Post Modern Dancers* (1980), which discusses the works of prominent postmodern dancers including Rainer and Paxton, introduces Rainer by

¹⁷ Jackson, “Dance and National Needs” 12.

describing the role of Judson Church in New York arts culture in the early 1960s. “The sanctuary of Judson Church on Washington Square...became the seminal piece of a whole generation of counterculture,” states narrator Alan Titus.¹⁸ This church provided a performance space for Judson Church Dance Theatre, a collective of avant-garde postmodern dancers in the early 1960s. Performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan explains how Rainer and other dancers at Judson Church engaged in choreographic processes that used “ordinary movement” from real life (which was supposedly authentic) as opposed to “dancer movement” from virtuosic training (which was supposedly artificial), in order to embody democracy.¹⁹ Phelan writes: “Thoroughly in keeping with the larger ideological project of democratizing power in the sixties, the new dance was also a movement against the elitism of classical dance’s aestheticism.”²⁰ These artists resisted classical dance vocabulary in attempt to blur the line between real life and performative artifice, proving dance’s objectivity and in following, its benevolent resistance to totalitarianism.²¹

The Grand Union collective, comprised of dancers who knew one another from performing in Judson Church years earlier, performed and toured their experimental improvised work from 1970 to 1976. Dance historian Sally notes in her book on

¹⁸ Bowers, Faubion. “Beyond the Mainstream: Post Modern Dancers.” *Dance in America Series*. Prod. Merril Brockway and Carl Charlson. Narr. Alan Titus. PBS. New York, New York, 1980. DVD.

¹⁹ Phelan, Peggy. “Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film.” *A Woman Who...Essays, Interviews, Scripts*. By Yvonne Rainer. Baltimore. Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 3-17. Print.

²⁰ Phelan, “Dance to Film” 5.

²¹ It is worth noting that this anti-totalitarian striving for democracy intertwined with the concurrent Civil Rights Movement, and many of the dancers in the Judson Church group would have supported fight for civil rights. However, “Black Dance” did not necessarily strive for objectivism in choreography. For further reading on Black Dance at the time, see Williams 54.

American postmodern dance, *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1980), that while the collective was not alone in its organizational structure, it was unconventional because of its “aspirations to collectivity, equality, and spontaneity.”²² In *Beyond the Mainstream*, Titus adds that Grand Union’s repertoire was “irreverent” and “as disposable as tissues,” and that while the collective made very little effort to please audiences on its tours, its performances were popular nonetheless.²³ Rainer began as the leader of the collective, but throughout her work with its improvisational piece *Continuous Project—Altered Daily (CP-AD)*, she began to loosen control in favor of an egalitarian structure, giving more power to her collaborators.²⁴ She soon stepped down from leadership and eventually stopped making dance altogether to pursue film, a decision this chapter will examine further in relation to anti-fascist anxieties about artifice.

Theatrical Artifice

Returning to the “No” manifesto with this background in mind, Rainer appears to privilege neutrality and objectivity, characteristics that were unthreatening to leftist anti-totalitarianism. Rainer rejects subjective expression by rejecting contributors to the illusion of performance. From the start, “No to spectacle” arguably diminishes half of what makes a dance performance a performance: spectatorship (the other half being the dancers). She disposes of that which makes a spectacle, or that which attracts the spectator, such as “magic” and the illusion of “transcendency.”²⁵ These spectacular

²² Banes, *Terpsichore* 208.

²³ Bowers, “Beyond the Mainstream.”

²⁴ Banes, *Terpsichore* 206.

²⁵ Revealing “magic” was Rainer’s tactic for eliminating it: “Theatrical magic was not the goal of Grand Union. Rather, they aimed at displaying the social and psychological conditions that make the ‘magic’ of performance possible.” See Banes 216.

elements are extraneous and *fake*—“make believe,” “trash imagery,” and “camp”—masking objective and *real* physical body. While Rainer may intend to resist right-wing fascist policing of the natural body, the elements of dance she chooses to disavow bring a more leftist policing to surface. By refusing what she sees as not real, Rainer reconstitutes politicized categories of realness and fakeness, and in turn, shuts down possibilities for freedom within fakeness.

Rainer’s urge to disavow theatrical artifice demonstrates an anxiety in the 1960s surrounding superfluous art, art that entertains but doesn’t *do* anything. Theater scholar Stephen Bottoms examines this anxiety by analyzing the push to replace the frivolous and outdated discipline of “Theater Studies” with the more purposeful and cutting-edge discipline of “Performance Studies.”²⁶ Bottoms connects anti-theater and anti-gay discourse in the mid-twentieth century, pointing out how artificial theater has been historically associated with “unnatural” homosexuality. Here, he highlights the historical categorization of effeminate men as fake and masculine men as real. According to Bottoms, in the paranoid 1960s U.S.—a period of winding down investigations into “communists, homosexuals, and ‘other sex perverts’ within the government”—prejudiced and homophobic rhetoric suggested, “to be gay...is to be theatrical—and presumably vice versa.”²⁷ According to proponents of replacing Theatre Studies with Performance Studies,

The desire to play a part, to pretend to be someone other than oneself, and to win the applause of audiences for doing so, is a sign of fundamental deviance in the actor’s personality...given this inherent perversity and deceptiveness, the

²⁶ Bottoms, Stephen J. “The Efficacy/Effeminacy Braid: Unpacking the Performance Studies/Theatre Studies Dichotomy.” *Theatre Topics* 13.2 (2003): 173-87. *Project MUSE [Johns Hopkins University Press]*. Web.

²⁷ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy” 176.

theatre was necessarily impotent: it could have no redeeming social function, no transformative potential, no efficacy.²⁸

In other words, theatre was widely disavowed because of its associations with femininity and gayness. Unlike Theatre Studies, artists and academics came to trust Performance Studies—also sometimes called “queer theatre” in opposition to “faggot theatre”—because of its authenticity and transformative potential. These attributes became equated to straight masculinity in the 1960s, at the same time as Performance Studies developed as theater “has balls.”²⁹

Thus, anti-theatrical rhetoric easily slipped into disavowals of attributes connected to homosexual culture, such as artifice and decadence. Bottoms describes how Performance Studies advocates explained the prevalence of gay men in theater: “if actors are characterized by retarded emotional development as much as homosexuals, then this helps to explain why homosexuals find homes so easily in the theater.”³⁰ Rainer’s statement “No to camp” fits into this historical trend of implied sentiment against effeminate gay men. By pairing this refusal in relation to activist Susan Sontag’s notorious essay “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964), we may align Rainer’s disavowal of camp with a prevailing disavowal of artifice, which was embraced by gay culture at the time.³¹ Sontag walks readers through elements of “Camp,” a taste or sensibility with its own logic, largely embraced and driven by homosexual culture. To her, artifice defines camp: “It is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not...to perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the furthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.” Throughout the text,

²⁸ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy” 178.

²⁹ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy” 183.

³⁰ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy” 178.

³¹ Sontag, Susan. “Notes On ‘Camp’.” 1964. Web.

she points out a number of plays, operas, ballets, and aesthetic styles that carry characteristics of this kind of artifice. At one point, she describes the relationship between camp and homosexuality as overlapping with the relationship between theater and homosexuality. She writes that in addition to the homosexual embrace of Camp, “Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste...its metaphor of life as theater is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals.”³²

Sontag clarifies that camp is not self-conscious imitation of an authentic original; it takes uncontrolled and passionate pleasure in its artifice:

What is extravagant in an inconsistent or unpassionate way is not Camp. Neither can anything be Camp that does not spring from an irrepressible, a virtually uncontrolled sensibility...Camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as ‘a camp,’ they’re enjoying it. Camp is a *tender* feeling.

We can infer that Rainer’s refusal of camp feeds into an intention to eliminate the artificial and extraneous elements from dance, therefore finding an objective body free from fascist control. In turn, she refuses a sensibility that allows for pleasure and freedom in gay culture.

The following section, will explore how Rainer’s anxieties police various pleasures at anti-social margins, in an arts context that emphasized egalitarianism and democracy as resistance to totalitarian control. Phelan comments on Rainer’s specific concerns related to theatricality in dance performance: “Rainer found herself continually duped by the psychological positioning of performing in itself,” a relationship between performer and spectator that left her “believing that dance left her only one stance, the

³² Sontag “Notes on ‘Camp.’”

narcissistic one, and the spectator another, the voyeuristic one.”³³ Phelan speculates here that Rainer’s aversion to theatrical representation in dance stems from her struggle with the inevitably voyeuristic and narcissistic relationship between spectator and performer.

The Voyeur/Narcissist Trap

A year after writing her “No” manifesto, Rainer attempted to embody her refusals by choreographing *Trio A*, a piece that could be performed by varying numbers of bodies, and supposedly, by any-body.³⁴ The dance begins with Rainer facing diagonally away from the audience. We see the profile of her face, her shoulder-length hair clipped out of the way but hanging freely. She wears a t-shirt, long pants, and shoes, all black, subtly recognizable as women’s clothing, neither loose nor tight. At the very start of the piece, she bends her knees and looks away from the camera, audience facial presentation to her audience. She holds onto impeccable posture as her arms swing around her waste a few times, and then cut through the air with sleek linearity, leading the rest of her body into a walk to a different facing. She wavers over one foot, balancing for a moment, before switching directions with another walk, and pausing in a new facing. This time she observes the momentum of her leg swinging front and back, before bending to a low crouch, springing back up to standing, and returning to the walk.

Throughout the piece, Rainer willfully interrupts segments of seamless phrase work with ordinary walks and switches. As she does so, she explores the mechanical possibilities of her arms, her feet, and her head. She never magnifies this exploration to include movement that could be interpreted as impressive or virtuosic, nor does she try

³³ Phelan, “Dance to Film” 5.

³⁴ Banes, *Terpsichore* 53.

to conceal moments of effort and exertion, however subtle. She plays with various rhythms and shapes, but confines this play to a steady tempo and a medium range of motion. Never does she dramatically build in energy, speed, or size from how she began. Her face looks austere for the most part, sometimes loosening into a curious expression, but never visibly displaying emotion. She keeps her gaze focused on her own limbs, the floor, or the space that directly surrounds her, and never does she look toward the camera.³⁵ We can notice Rainer's attempts to steer clear of the spectacular elements she rejects in her "No" manifesto, suggesting that *Trio A* captures many prevailing concerns about artifice that influenced objectivist art at the time. For instance, she remains in energetic and aesthetic states of neutrality, from tempo to costume to face expression, avoiding any extraneous developments that could be perceived as subjective or expressive.

Rainer's concerns about voyeurism, mentioned above by Phelan, surface in these attempts to remain objective and neutral. If we consider white and leftist feminist theory emerging out of the 1960s and '70s U.S., we can connect this fear of sexual objectification to the leftist anxiety about artifice and illusion discussed by Bottoms. Phelan credits Rainer's choreography of *Trio A* for contributing to the foundation of Laura Mulvey's canonical film theory, claiming that the dance "anticipates feminist film theory's attention to the structure of the gaze in terms that are resonant with Laura Mulvey's celebrated 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.'"³⁶ This text, published about a decade after Rainer choreographed *Trio A*, critiques fabricated illusion in mainstream film, which supposedly heightens the problem of female sexualization by

³⁵ "Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle, Part 1)." Online Video Clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 24 June 2016. Web.

³⁶ Phelan, "Dance to Film" 8.

voyeuristic spectators.³⁷ We can place Rainer's objectivist statement in *Trio A* within Mulvey's feminist theory, which also rejects pleasure from artifice.

Mulvey rejects the pleasure of mainstream narrative film, claiming that the ease of its spectatorship originates in and perpetuates the voyeuristic male subject's domination over passive female objects:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote the *to-be-looked-at-ness*.³⁸

To Mulvey, this two-sided and oppressive relationality between genders is solidified by the illusion made possible by the theater environment. Film portrays a closed-off world that "unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic separation." Here she describes this magical unwinding, claiming that the dark theater serves to isolate spectators from one another, allowing them to individually invade the private world within the film.³⁹ These spectators are male and active because films tend to be structured around male protagonists with whom male spectators can identify, thereby placing the male voyeur in a position of control over the narrative structure of the film.⁴⁰ Therefore, the artificial construction of magic and illusion is at fault for the inevitably voyeuristic relationship between male subjects and female objects on film. Mulvey's suggested solution to this

³⁷ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (1999): 833-44. Print.

³⁸ Mulvey, "Narrative Cinema" 836.

³⁹ Mulvey, "Narrative Cinema" 836.

⁴⁰ Mulvey, "Narrative Cinema" 838.

problem involves entirely shattering the illusion of narrative film, thereby obliterating the pleasures of easy spectatorship and ridding the cinema of voyeurism.⁴¹

While Mulvey's critique focuses on film, her claims also fit into the context of dance performance, if like Rainer, we choose to see the dancing woman as an inevitable sexual object of male desire due to the fabricated illusion of performance. To apply Mulvey's theory to *Trio A*, Rainer distances herself from theatrical elements in order to avoid the perverse effects of easy spectatorship, because the inevitable voyeuristic pleasure from easy spectatorship would perpetuate fascist modes of performance. To replace this fascist voyeuristic relationship with a more democratic and objective one, she intentionally disregards facial presentation, elaborate costuming, suspenseful energy variation, and other elements of illusion that often serve to entertain audiences. In striving for a more democratic relationship with her audiences, free of voyeurism, Rainer decides to turn her gaze away from the audience, hoping to minimize voyeurism by distancing herself from the voyeur. She comments, "My head had to be turned profile or engaged in its own movement so the gaze, the contact with the audience, the face, is constantly minimized."⁴² Yet, according to Mulvey, distance from the performer is exactly what makes the voyeur a voyeur. Rainer's choice of focus arguably contributes to the problem of voyeurism she seeks to avoid, if we interpret the voyeur's role as one of watching someone who does not watch back.⁴³

⁴¹ Mulvey, "Narrative Cinema" 843.

⁴² Bowers, "Beyond the Mainstream."

⁴³ Ann Cooper Albright describes the positioning of the live dancer facing the audience as potentially disruptive to the voyeuristic gaze: "The physical presence of the dancer—the aliveness of her body—radically challenges the implicit power dynamic of any gaze, for there is always the very real possibility that she will look back." See Albright, "Mining the Dancefield" 15.

Rainer becomes tangled in contradictions: by facing the audience, she succumbs to artificial presentation, but by looking away, she heightens the voyeuristic nature of the interaction. Which is worse? Or, perhaps we should be asking: why is voyeurism so much of a threat that she must confine herself to this either/or predicament? Rainer and Mulvey both frame voyeurism as unquestionably bad, and perpetuating the heterosexist oppression of passive women. However, if voyeurism stems from illusion and artifice as Mulvey suggests, Rainer may be neglecting a certain pleasure in the spectator-performer relationship, a pleasure we may not be ready to obliterate from dance performance. Bottoms describes eroticism as one of the pleasurable elements of theatricality that proponents of Performance Studies seek to abolish. He points out that the non-utilitarian entertainment of theater is “inextricably bound up with theatre’s erotics—with the often indefinable, frequently promiscuous pleasures that it offers to both participants and observers.” Here, he connects disavowals of voyeurism with the “near-puritanical” distinction between utilitarian, masculine efficacy and frivolous, effeminate entertainment.⁴⁴ Rainer and Mulvey’s disavowals of voyeurism unintentionally play into this policing distinction, which privileges masculinity and straightness. If by obliterating voyeurism in the name of freedom, Rainer and Mulvey wind up policing the erotic and promiscuous pleasure of theatrical illusion, I question the basis for obliterating artifice from the picture. Sontag’s description of camp, a sensibility she describes as a “metaphor for life as theater,”⁴⁵ points us to a particular pleasure from artifice, pleasure from the illusion of being on display. For this person on display, the performer of artifice, pleasure may stem from exactly the feminine passivity and eroticism that Mulvey rejects.

⁴⁴ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy” 184.

⁴⁵ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp.’”

Considering pleasure, the obliteration of all voyeurism seems counterproductive to the anti-fascist ambition of allowing for freedom in performance.

In addition to voyeurism, *Trio A* demonstrates Rainer's anxiety about narcissism, which also connects to a prevailing fear of artifice at the time. While voyeurism taints the position of the audience, Phelan frames narcissism as tainting the performer side of the audience/performer duality.⁴⁶ Rainer reveals this anxiety about narcissism through her aversion to self-indulgence in both her choreography and her political stance. In *Beyond the Mainstream*, Titus describes how Rainer had received unexpected positive attention from her "No" manifesto: "Yvonne had been flattered and pampered by the Village Press. She found herself willy-nilly a guilty high priestess...and she said 'no' to that, too." Rainer explains, "So much dancing had to do with a kind of narcissism. And I was very aware of my own narcissistic pleasure in revealing myself and being exposed before the adoring, loving gaze of the audience. I did not accept this part of myself."⁴⁷ In other words, after receiving flattering adoration, Rainer's anxiety about narcissism led her to austere resist self-indulgence by responding to adoration with self-conscious guilt. In part, Rainer's decision to never face her audience in *Trio A* stemmed from this aversion to narcissism. While she intended to avoid pleasing the inevitably voyeuristic gaze of the audience, she seemed anxious about the possibility of enjoying the audience's enjoyment. Rainer's diligent resistance to accepting audience adoration suggests her acknowledgement, and obsession with, a near-sinful pleasure from being looked at and admired. By resisting this pleasure, Rainer reveals the *possibility of this pleasure*, a scary possibility in a political context where narcissism represents totalitarian control.

⁴⁶ Phelan, "Dance to Film" 5.

⁴⁷ Bowers, "Beyond the Mainstream."

This anxiety about narcissism carried over to Rainer's politics outside of her own performance, as revealed by her reluctance to display ego as a choreographer. Rainer describes how people told her "she walks as though she's in the street." This ordinariness shaped how she conceptualized herself as a dancer and choreographer, leading her to resist her urges to indulge in recognition for her choreographic virtuosity and success: "If you walked as a 'dancer,' you walked as though you were a queen, an aristocrat, a character, or someone who was more than ordinary, more than human."⁴⁸ She again rejects narcissism as artifice and illusion, associating it with disguise of the true self, as an extra-ordinary character. This fear of playing into artifice fed into Rainer's attempts to democratize her choreography process, which involved distancing personal signature from her works. In the case of *Trio A*, she allowed anyone who knew the dance to perform it, resisting the fascist norm of taking sole credit for one's own work. For Rainer, this dispersal of ownership became somewhat of a religious mission. Banes quotes Rainer, who describes this distancing in "populist" terms:

When I first began teaching *Trio A* to anyone who wanted to learn it—skilled, unskilled, professional, fat, old, sick, amateur—and gave tacit permission to anyone who wanted to teach it to teach it, I envisioned myself as a post-modern dance evangelist bringing movement to the masses, watching...the slow, inevitable evisceration of my elitist creation.⁴⁹

This mission to "bring movement to the masses" suggests the selfless sacrifice of her "elitist creation." While we could interpret this as a move of liberating the dance from fascist control of a single choreographer, Rainer's overt moralism in this quote suggests a more controlled and confining logic behind her choreographic politics.

⁴⁸ Bowers, "Beyond the Mainstream."

⁴⁹ Banes, *Terpsichore* 53.

Years later, a similar withdrawal from personal ownership occurred in Rainer's work with Grand Union. Initially, she had led the collective, guiding the development of the improvisational piece, *Continuous Project—Altered Daily (CP-AD)*. Throughout her time with *CP-AD*, “Rainer struggled with her ambivalence about hierarchy and democracy, freedom and limits, her role as ‘boss-lady’ (as she put it) and her desire for cooperative work.” As the piece developed, she handed more power to her collaborators, designing a democratic structure in which any individual choice could be vetoed. Eventually, she further increased constraints on individual choreographic voices, establishing equal limits for self-centered solo dancing, or “‘doing your own thing,’” during performances.⁵⁰ In her attempt to dismantle fascist power and democratize the dance, Rainer's fear of embodying narcissism led her to enforce a strict relationality of equal communalism.

In “Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies” (2017), Greg Goldberg examines the term “narcissistic” as a disparagement, commonly found in leftist critiques of supposedly self-absorbed people and phenomena.⁵¹ He links the term to homophobia, highlighting how the separate “pathologization” of self-interest and homosexuality similarly signified a failure to develop care for the other, based on the psychoanalytical theory that homosexual men can only love themselves.⁵² Goldberg speculates that exaggerated self-focus only becomes a threat to the Left when it is seen as “distracting from particular kinds of valued relations with others—what we might simply call ‘the social’—built around care, concern, responsibility, accountability, and sacrifice,

⁵⁰ Banes, *Terpsichore* 206.

⁵¹ Goldberg, Greg. “Through the Looking Glass: The Queer Narcissism of Selfies.” *Social Media Society* 3.1 (2017). 1-11. Print.

⁵² Goldberg, “Queer Narcissism” 8.

and constructed as the antithesis of narcissism.”⁵³ On the Left, narcissism often describes lack of interest on the part of marginalized people in assimilating into particular egalitarian modes of relationality, and “the refusal to enter these bonds raises the specter of pleasure, hedonism, and self-gratification.”⁵⁴ These attributes, historically used to pathologize homosexuality, are remnant of the attacks thrown at Theatre Studies by advocates of Performance Studies, according to Bottoms. In both cases, we can notice a policing of non-utilitarian pleasures that fail to fit particular egalitarian and collective modes of relationality. Despite Rainer’s promotion of democratic freedom, her concern about narcissism leads her to reject self-gratifying pleasure, a mode of relationality with freeing potential. Ironically, Rainer’s austere self-consciousness about sinful self-indulgence may have negated her efforts toward selflessness.

In her attempt to eliminate the voyeuristic and narcissistic aspects of dance performance, the mere existence of spectators and performers entrapped her in a predicament: how could she participate in performance at all? In the early 1970s, Rainer stepped down from her leadership of Grand Union, and soon after, she disavowed dance performance altogether as an inherently narcissistic practice. She decided to instead pursue film, which seemed to “promise a way out of a certain trap she had felt was endemic to modern dance.” According to Phelan, Rainer did actually desire emotional connection with her audiences, but her objectivist dance practice could not support this desire. Throughout Rainer’s dance career, she had been disavowing everything that might relate to this ‘narcissistic-voyeuristic duality of doer and looker,’” and eventually, she came to disavow dance completely as a self-centered and therefore

⁵³ Goldberg, “Queer Narcissism” 2.

⁵⁴ Goldberg, “Queer Narcissism” 6.

fascist art form.⁵⁵ Her switch from dance to film emerged out of hopelessness about the dancer's ability to emotionally connect to an audience in a way that did not involve narcissism and voyeurism. I will refer to feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) in order to argue that Rainer compensates for these anxieties by distancing herself from feminized aspects of performance.

Mindful Body Over Fluid Matter

Grosz analyzes social conceptions of sexed bodies in order to investigate how bodies become coded with meaning.⁵⁶ Specifically, she describes fluidity and womanhood in metaphysical resistance to solidity and manhood. To Grosz, the female body is coded by conceptions of menstruation, birth, and emotion, which lead the woman to be associated with fluidity, multiplicity, and uncontrollability. The woman's irreducibility, or refusal to be reduced, contends with the singularity of solidness and manhood (the male body's seminal ejaculation is seen as potent and purposeful, unlike the excessiveness of fluid release from the female body).⁵⁷ At one point in her argument, she describes the construction of the overflowing female body as a thing lacking containment, "a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order."⁵⁸ Here, she poses the female body as a *threat*, in all of its excessive emotion and out-of-control fluidity. Opposite of this formless body is a more masculine body, solid and contained, the product of the "inert dead matter of the Cartesian world view."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Phelan, "Dance to Film" 5.

⁵⁶ Grosz, Elizabeth A. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana U, 1994. Print.

⁵⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 199.

⁵⁸ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 203.

⁵⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 204.

Grosz's discussion of sexed bodies opens up potentially freeing metaphysical possibilities for the dancing female body. Based on Grosz's text, the feminine body's overflowing fleshiness is *threatening* to controlled order, a threat that one could imagine being adopted in resistance to fascist control. However, the Cartesian take on the body, more objective and less expressive, fits much more neatly into anti-fascist the move toward objectivism in the 1960s. Based on Banes' description of the body in Rainer's choreography, Rainer seems to distance herself from the uncontrollable body in order to portray this more objective body in *Trio A*, a portrayal that carries into her early work in film. Banes writes, "*Trio A* sets up a world of thoughtful activity that sets forth the earthy intelligent body."⁶⁰ If we examine Rainer's dance-to-film trajectory, we can see how she pulls away from the uncontrollable sexed body described by Grosz, and gravitates towards emotional expression only when the live body is no longer present.

Before Rainer moves away from dance, she trains her body into intelligence, using supposedly objective methods emerging out of anti-totalitarian government efforts. For instance, Rainer describes how she sets herself rules and constraints in her choreography, such as limiting repetitions and variations of movements.⁶¹ Dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright's analysis of Rainer provides more evidence of Rainer's scientific approach to choreography. Albright comments that Rainer's "No" manifesto emerged out of a "period of intensive physical research."⁶² Here she quotes Rainer's journal at the time of this research, which reads, "Basically, I wanted it to remain undynamic movement, no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just *do* it, with the

⁶⁰ Banes, *Terpsichore* 54.

⁶¹ Bowers, "Beyond the Mainstream."

⁶² Albright, Ann Cooper. "Mining the Dancefield." *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997. 1-27. Print.

coordination of a pro and the non-definition of an amateur.”⁶³ To Grosz, such a “period of intensive physical research” leading to “coordination of a pro” would suggest a move toward masculine objectivity and scientific method, values threatened by out-of-control expression. One could imagine how the threat of the engulfing female body would provoke anxiety for Rainer, a female artist taking part in a political move toward objectivity. Pressure to privilege the mindful side of the Cartesian mind/body split may have influenced Rainer to represent the body as intelligent throughout her choreographic career and early work in film.

Revisiting Emotion and Remaining Critical

Before Rainer becomes drawn to emotional expression in film, her film projects convey the body as mechanical and scientific, so much that they begin to shift away from human bodies completely. Rainer began to dip her toes in film while she was still immersed in the world of avant-garde dance making. When Rainer was hospitalized in 1966, she created her first well-known film, *Hand Movie*, which was shot while she was confined to a hospital bed.⁶⁴ The black-and-white film is around six minutes long and consists only of Rainer’s hand, upright most of the time, framed as an impersonal and mechanical moving object with only a blank wall for a backdrop. The hand moves in minimalist and insignificant gestures, testing options for how each finger can flinch, circle, and bend. Often, only one finger moves at a time. At times, fingers touch and overlap with larger size, yet no movements are expansive enough to noticeably ripple through the wrist or forearm. The facing of the hand changes multiple times throughout

⁶³ Albright, “Mining the Dancefield” 19.

⁶⁴ Rainer, Yvonne. *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*. Cambridge: MIT, 2006. Print.

the film, so that viewers are only watching the palm, metacarpals, or side of the hand at any given point. Perhaps the most remarkable moment of the film occurs when the fist clenches for a brief moment.⁶⁵ As with *Trio A*, the dance rarely develops in tempo, spatial layout, or energy. However, while gradually Rainer depersonalized *Trio A* by giving ownership to other bodies, *Hand Movie* is de-personalized from its creation. Never intended for a live audience, this dance frames her hand as an intelligent machine, disconnected from any kind of expressive human body.

Rainer proceeded to direct more films featuring moving objects, and eventually stopped requiring bodies to do so. Phelan describes how she began making films that featured inanimate objects rather than people, and how filming these objects helped her to accomplish her goals for dance: underlining the “‘objectness’ of the physicality of dancing” while leaving the “‘subjectivity’ of the dancer herself out of the performance—and thus not subject to the spectator’s subjectification.”⁶⁶ Thus, once Rainer concluded that no matter how mechanical and unspectacular she made her choreography, the moving body was inevitably narcissistic and the audience watching it was inevitably voyeuristic, Rainer found more luck refusing narcissism and voyeurism through choreographing lifeless objects. This makes sense, considering that by the end of the “No” manifesto, she ultimately refuses “moving or being moved.”

However, Rainer later began to use film to embrace some of the expressive elements that she refused in dance. In a 2014 lecture at MIT, she retrospectively discusses her film career, and explains how she wanted to make art that enacted political change, a constructive purpose that she found easier to enact through film than through

⁶⁵ Moreno, Alejandro F. “Hand Movie 1966 Yvonne Rainer.” Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 31 Dec. 2015. Web.

⁶⁶ Phelan, “Dance to Film” 7.

dance. She reflects, “A lot of people do get politics into their dance...but I didn’t know how—it wasn’t for me—I had to bring in text, bring in language...the specifics of political issues for me are always best represented in language.” In this lecture, Rainer described how her early influences such as John Cage (the avant-garde musician who worked with Cunningham to create objectivist “chance dances”), had embraced “a refusal of narrative, and a deep distrust of the telling and shaping strategies of fiction,” which led her to intentionally avoid any sort of dramatic climax or fall in choreography. However, she found herself drawn to the pleasure of narrative in the 1970s:

The language of specific emotional experience, already familiar outside of the avant-garde art world, in dramas, novels, cinema, comic books, and soap opera, promised all of the ambivalent pleasures and terrors of the experiences themselves: seduction, passion, rage, betrayal, grief, and joy.⁶⁷

After fully rejecting these emotionally charged experiences in dance, she revisited them once they were removed from the fleshy body performing live. Yet, Rainer still treated the handling of emotion as a kind of sinful indulgence, in need of forgiveness by intellectual critique and theory. In her lecture, she describes this need when she first decided to strive for a deeper emotional connection with her audience through film, “I had to find justification in literary criticism for what felt like clichéd and stereotyped expression.”⁶⁸ As she explores emotional expression in film, Rainer seeks to justify her experiences of “ambivalent pleasures and terrors” by tying them to intellectual critique. Thus, she substantiates her privileging of intellectual control, using intellectual critique to legitimize being drawn toward emotional engagement. Despite her draw toward the pleasure of emotional expression, she remains tied to her need to selflessly reconstruct

⁶⁷ Rainer, Yvonne. “Yvonne Rainer, Where’s the Passion? Where’s the Politics?” MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology. Cambridge, MA. *YouTube*. Web.

⁶⁸ Rainer, “Where’s the Passion.”

society, a priority intertwined with the privileging of masculine utilitarianism and intellect, as well as objectivist trends.

In line with masculinizing the body as a mindful entity in her choreography and early film work, Rainer masculinizes emotion in her film by emphasizing “emotional intelligence.” Phelan recounts Rainer’s emphasis on “emotional intelligence” as a useful and efficacious quality that must be practiced with rigor:

Rainer reminds us that emotional intelligence is a hungry muscle much in need of exercise. In her journey from dance to film, Rainer has found a way to make her initial renunciatory ‘no’ in to a richly achieved ‘yes.’⁶⁹

Thus, after declaring “no” to moving or being moved, Rainer geared her work *toward* the exploration of being moved, and did so by turning empathy into an intellectual and efficacious project, something that could be *achieved*. Phelan adds another solute to Rainer’s social productivity: “a well-toned empathy increases our capacity to respond to the compelling possibilities of moving and being moved and remains our best hope for remaking ourselves and our worlds.”⁷⁰ So, Rainer explores emotional empathy, less for the purpose of submitting control to the feelings of others, and more for the purpose of utilitarian social improvement.

Rainer’s drive to produce efficacious art is highlighted by her emphasis on inspiring critique among audience members. In *The Guardian*’s 2010 “guide” to Yvonne Rainer, in which journalist Sanjoy Roy comments on Rainer’s goal of alienating her audience out of the passive pleasures of easy spectatorship. He writes that her spectators were often “baffled, maddened or bored, but Rainer was not interested in gratifying her

⁶⁹ Phelan, “Dance to Film” 16.

⁷⁰ Phelan, “Dance to Film” 16.

audience.”⁷¹ Rainer agrees with this interpretation of her intentions. In her MIT lecture, Rainer claims to echo Brecht in her work, a twentieth century theater philosopher who advocates for performance that invokes audience discomfort, alienation, and critique.⁷² In particular, Rainer describes her experimentation with narrative in film as fulfilling her intention to invoke “analysis and commentary” on the part of her audience.⁷³ Rainer intends for her audience to experience alienation and distance, which theoretically leads the audience to wake up out of the performance. This wide-awake spectator is self-conscious and ready to perform intellectual, productive, and socially conscious analysis. This kind of socially-conscious analysis, she hopes, will assist her goal of creating a democratic spectator-performer relationship.

This Brechtian understanding, that performance should invoke intellectual critique, serves to substantiate the Cartesian idea that feminized emotions and bodies are lesser without masculinized control and intellect. Later in his article, Roy directly correlates Rainer’s strategies of audience alienation and her resistance to girlish femininity: “Just as she had refused to ‘bedeck’ herself for social occasions as a girl, so her choreography insisted that the audience see plainly what is there instead of buying into some comfy illusion.”⁷⁴ Here, Roy pairs Rainer’s childhood refusal to dress up in a feminine fashion with her artistic refusal to create a “comfy illusion” for the voyeur. Both of these refusals, to him, ultimately serve the purpose of making men uncomfortable, thereby destabilizing the voyeuristic gaze. Roy’s comparison suggests

⁷¹ Roy, Sanjoy. “Step-by-step Guide to Dance: Yvonne Rainer.” *The Guardian*. 24 Dec. 2010. Web.

⁷² Brecht will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3, using Brecht-influenced analyses of Pina Bausch’s choreography. See Price, “Politics of the Body” 324-326.

⁷³ Rainer, “Where’s the Passion.”

⁷⁴ Roy, “Step-by-step.”

that Rainer rejected audience-pleasing theatricality in order to reject frivolous and oppressive femininity, thereby achieving a more essential and potent objectivism.

Removing the Body from Dance: What's at Stake?

Let us return to Merce Cunningham, one of Rainer's choreographic influences, who I will revisit in the following chapter. Aligning with the widespread American move toward objectivist art, Cunningham viewed his own subjectivity as limiting to choreographic possibility. Instead of trusting his inevitably subjective decisions, he used a series of procedures that left choreographic decisions up to chance, such as rolling dice or blindly pairing his dances with Cage's music. By the late 1980s, he had lost all faith in the ability of humans to produce any sort of objectivity or spontaneity, so he began to employ computerized algorithms for choreography. Stanford University art librarian Vanessa Kam describes this computerization as "liberating movement from a dancer's body."⁷⁵ She then quotes Cunningham, who describes the computerized possibilities for movement, which had previously been limited by subjectivity: "I've always felt that there is a limit to the structural activity of the human body: once we stood up on two legs, we were caught and have to work that way. But there is always some other way to do it."⁷⁶

This transition toward computerized dance, hardly separate from Rainer's transition toward choreographing inanimate objects on film, stems from the move to eliminate the artificial from dance, to say "no" to choreography influenced by subjective emotions. In striving for the intellectual and mind-controlled Cartesian body, these choreographers disavowed the subjective fleshy and uncontrollable body, until they

⁷⁵ Kam, Vanessa. "Merce Cunningham." *Presidential Lectures in the Humanities and Arts*. Stanford University, 2005. Web.

⁷⁶ Kam, "Merce Cunningham."

realized that they did not need bodies at all. This possibility of eliminating the body from dance begs the question: what is at stake in losing the subjective and uncontrolled aspects of dance performance?

By privileging Cartesian intellect and holding on to self-sovereign control over the body, we lose the potential for a kind of pleasure and freedom from carelessly falling into artifice and illusion. Should we eliminate these pleasures from performance, however artificial, and however much they link to, perhaps even arise from, voyeurism and narcissism? Likely unaware of how her refusals link to the pathologization of homosexuality, Rainer disavows the flashy, theatrical, and seductive—elements of performance that often draw spectators into pleasure—in hopes of reaching a perceived objectivity that improves society. In Rainer’s ideal world, free of perverted voyeurs and narcissistic dictator-choreographers, both performer and spectator remain awake, in a state of self-conscious critique. This means that neither performer nor spectator gets to dissolve into a certain fluid state of suspended belief.

This is not to say that no true pleasure can come from intellect and self-control, but rather, to question *true* as the culminating goal. What if we reframe artifice as desirable *because* of its non-utilitarian pleasure, embracing the enjoyment that Sontag claims can stem from “relishing” rather than “judging” artifice, in the case of camp?⁷⁷ Rainer’s refusals unveil such judgment of artifice, which polices potentially freeing pleasures in a time when many artists endeavored for freedom from totalitarian control.

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⁷⁷ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp.’”

As I investigated Rainer's anxieties about narcissism from quotes, performances, and critics' commentaries, I lost sight of my own ingrained aversion to narcissism that significantly affected the trajectory of my spring choreography process. It was not until the week of the performance, when it came time to decide whether we would bow at the end of the piece, that I located these anxieties in my collaborating dancers and myself. Several days before opening night, I texted the other choreographers to ask them whether they planned to have bows at the end of their pieces (included in the discussion was Rick, whose piece would share a bow with mine). One or two of the choreographers decidedly wanted a bow at the end of their pieces, Rick expressed a preference against bowing, and the others (myself included) expressed no preference either way. Although we reached a consensus that some dances could bow while others did not, there was concern that this inconsistency would disrupt the flow of the performance. By the end of the conversation, all of the choreographers decided to include bows except for Rick and I, who remained undecided.

Since Rick and the other dancers in my piece had expressed dislike, if not detestation of bows, I raised the question of bowing in my rehearsal that evening. At this point, I did not want to draw attention to our combined piece as the only one with no bow, but I also did not want to force Rick to bow on account of me and my preferences (looking back, I notice how my preferences reflect a proclivity toward an outwardly egalitarian concert structure). After Rick, Colleen, Luisa, and Thomas all voted against it, I made an undoubtedly dictatorial and unpopular decision that we would bow at the end, forcing my egalitarian preferences upon the group. I justified this fascist move by explaining that decision to bow—or otherwise be the only piece without a bow—is

political, and I did not want to draw attention to my piece as making a political statement that I did not feel ready to claim. The dancers, including Rick, agreed to bow.

Reflecting on this final decision in relation to my research, I am glad to have included the bow. I see it as admittance to the artifice of performance, and better yet, an embrace of the frivolous and excessive elements of theatricality that Rainer rejects. Additionally, being the only dance refusing to bow would have felt like a move to confound and alienate the audience, which I did not intend to do. However, after the performances, I found myself wondering why the dancers did not want to bow, so I emailed them to ask. The first response surfaced a familiar fear of narcissism: “[Bowling] feels self-congratulatory in a way I don’t love, and I wish there were a way we could just say ‘thank you’ without having roses thrown at us.” This response conveys a reluctance to indulge in adoration that is similar to Rainer’s. Another response expressed similar concern, commenting,

They make me feel uncomfortable and I don’t know what to do with my face and I don’t want to see anyone in the audience so I sort of just let my eyes go out of focus. It feels like a break from the world we just created on stage—a world that I felt way more comfortable in than weird fake bow world.⁷⁸

This response—expressing a visceral discomfort from putting oneself face-to-face with the audience that I share—highlights overlap between anxieties about narcissism and artifice. These answers pointed me to a self-conscious fear of narcissism that prevails at Wesleyan, in and out of performance contexts. Reflecting on my own uneasiness surrounding bows, an uneasiness that surfaced each night of the performance, I wonder whether I could have released into a more pleasurable experience of audience support,

⁷⁸ Donovan, Luisa, Rick Manayan, Thomas Reid, and Colleen Winslow. “Reflections on Spring Thesis Dance.” E-mail interview. 7 Apr. 2017.

had I loosened control, had I let go of a kind of austere self-consciousness I feel whenever I refuse to accept a compliment.

Chapter 2:

Egalitarian Policing in Contact Improvisation

We sat in the car, me in the driver's seat, Luisa next to me, contemplative and overwhelmed, each mulling over what had just occurred. The roads were winding and snowy as we drove away from Earthdance, a contact improvisation center in the mountains of Western Massachusetts, where we had just attended a five-hour contact improvisation class and “jam.”⁷⁹ After a circuitous drive down the sloping mountain road, we began to debrief. We tossed around general observations: the fun, the awkward, and which exercises I might borrow for my rehearsals in the spring. Throughout this conversation something bugged me, a subsurface bubbling of guilt. I put a name to this lingering guilt, and eventually disclosed it to Luisa, despite reluctance and discomfort: “*that felt sexual.*” Luisa corrected me—“you mean *sensual.*” I replied *yes*, but also *no...maybe?* I really thought that it felt *sexual*, but maybe Luisa was right. Contact improvisation isn't *sexual*, so it must have been the *sensual* that I had experienced. I sensed other bodies, touched other bodies, other bodies sensed me, touched me. Touches shifted, decentering which body touched which body, spreading touch throughout the room, and touch is a *physical sense*. But why then, did my experienced sensation, based on my physical sense of touch, not seem to encompass everything that had just happened? My thoughts were spinning, trying to figure out a clear answer to whether anything *sexual* had occurred in that room. Then I realized, I did not even know what I meant by *sexual*. Certainly, the word doesn't just refer to the genitalia—that would barely scrape the surface of the moving layers that form a *sexual* experience.

⁷⁹ Brando, Aaron. “4th Sunday CI Class and Jam with Brando Brandes.” Sunday CI Jam and Class. Earthdance. 27 Nov. 2016. Class.

In my experiences with dance involving contact, I have been taught to steer clear of the term *sexual* a lesson that comes packaged with a reliable replacement word to use instead: *sensual*. Whether this rule of language is expressed directly or implicated within dance-class-discourse, whether enforced by faculty or by peers, I had never bothered to question “sensual” as the correct terminology until this moment in the car. Suddenly, I could no longer ignore what to me, seemed overtly sexual. Partners moved tenderly in and out of each other’s crevices and folds. They looked to be experiencing intense and intimate pleasure, and after dances they often laid side by side, breathing heavily, as though they had just had sex. At times they whispered intimately while leaning on one another. The pairs that stood out to me as most sexually intimate comprised of one man and one woman, an observation deeply tied to my own ingrained assumptions, but interesting nonetheless. As much as I had confounded myself as to what it means to have sexual feelings, I too felt as though I had just had sex after particularly pleasurable dances, especially after a dance with a man who had lifted me, turned me, and taken the weight of my falls. If anything, this environment was more sexual than sex itself, whatever that may be. The scene reminded me of the courtship that sometimes takes place at swing dancing events, or other venues for social dance, but turned upside-down (literally), and with as many body parts touching as possible.

For the next half hour or so, we sat in that car, trying to figure out which of the two elusive ideas—*sensuality* or *sexuality*—*had* been present in that dance studio. In an effort to solve this puzzle, we found ourselves desperately attempting to distinguish between the two, referencing attributes of each from our lives, our dance practices, and our imaginations. Later, I found myself grappling with an entangling set of questions: what two ideas am I trying to separate with a clear line? Is it possible that by drawing this

line, I am myself defining and dichotomizing the two ideas? Throughout this chapter I will examine how similar anxieties that led Yvonne Rainer to disavow artifice in the form of spectacle, also shaped the disavowal of artifice in the form of sexuality. These anxieties, related to social constructions of nature, worked to define pleasure and freedom in contact improvisation practice and its surrounding discourse.

* * * * *

Paxton's Contact Improvisation (CI)

A woman sprawls across the shoulders of her standing partner, her hips pressed against his neck as he spins around himself. Along for the twirling ride, she slides head first down the front of his ribcage. Before she hits the floor, he catches her thighs with one arm, her body now forming a diagonal across his torso, with her head toward the ground. Upside-down, she swings her legs up and over to his other side. Her head and torso rise, meeting her thighs, when suddenly he releases his grip. Her folded body free falls toward the ground, back first. As she falls, her arms extend behind her, the backs of her wrists absorbing the initial impact, followed by her spine. A plunge that seems to foretell an inevitable slam into the floor, it becomes an elastic melt as she releases every muscle into the hard surface, using the momentum of the fall to roll onto her side. As she rolls, he perches his shins onto her torso and allows her to carry his weight several feet over. This man is Steve Paxton, who founded the practice of contact improvisation (CI), and his partner is Nancy Stark Smith, one of Paxton's first students and primary collaborators. This dance is featured in *Fall After Newton*, a short documentary with CI video footage from 1972, the year of its foundation, to 1983, the height of its centralized

organization. As the footage progresses in time, Paxton's voice (taped in 1987, when the videos were compiled) narrates viewers through the development of CI through the lens of Stark Smith's practice.⁸⁰

The documentary is primarily comprised of duets between Paxton and Stark Smith, which take place in various performance and practice settings. The two improvisers touch and share weight throughout most of the footage, bouncing apart only to fuse back together. Much of this weight sharing involves Paxton taking Stark Smith's weight, lifting, dropping, and catching her. Along for the ride, she is moved in spirals around his body, shaping and re-shaping in according to ebbs and flows in timing and energy. Stark Smith also supports Paxton's weight at certain points in each clip, but these moments are typically brief. Throughout the documentary, Stark Smith's ride is the focal point. She is spun in midair, flung around, and occasionally dropped. As spectator, I imagine her abandoning thrill as she yields responsibility to Paxton, whose presence is for her. This supporting role of drawing focus onto Stark Smith is reaffirmed by Paxton's vocal narration, which describes the documentary as "a sweeping look at over eleven years of practice by Nancy Stark Smith." Despite Paxton's role as narrator, she is the star of the documentary, her story and practice merely supported by grounding remarks by Paxton. Even if Stark Smith supports Paxton's weight an equal amount in their practice outside of this footage, his choice to tell her story by visually centering her experience in flight demonstrates the centrality of the more passive role of abandon.

⁸⁰ *Fall After Newton*. Perf. Steve Paxton and Nancy Stark Smith. Narr. Steve Paxton. 1987. *Contact Improvisation Archive: Collected Edition 1972-1983*. Dir. Lisa Nelson. Videoda, 2014. DVD.

Fall After Newton begins with Paxton spinning Stark Smith in circles, as she spirals up and down his body, resting on his shoulders or finding perches on his chest and hips. The centrifugal force spins her arms, torso, and long braid outward, trailing her around the rotating axis. After she changes positions several times, he takes full control, flinging her over his shoulder from her thighs so she hangs upside down, her head and arms hanging loose to the floor for the ride. The dancers switch roles briefly, Stark Smith spinning Paxton with his legs hugging her neck and his torso flying behind her head. Paxton continues, “Beyond Newton’s third law, we discover that for every action, several equal and opposite reactions are possible. Therein lies an opportunity for improvisation.” Throughout the documentary, we continue to hear direct references to Newton and physics, the narration frequently integrating terms such as momentum, mass, and force. From this we can infer that Paxton sees laws of physics as groundwork for his practice, to be built upon by improvisers who understand, sense, and play with physical laws. “In the play of moving and being moved, specific movements are unpredictable, but they occur within a knowable field of gravity, centrifugal force, support, and dependency.”⁸¹ Paxton seems to value sensation as an expansion upon Newtonian science, creating a fusion of experience and science, out of which freedom of play can emerge.

Contact Quarterly (CQ), which serves as an authoritative source of information for improvisers, provides definitions of CI. The first definition on the web page, written by CI founder Steve Paxton “and others,” was developed in the 1970s and published in a 1979 issue of *CQ*. The definition reads:

⁸¹ Paxton, *Fall After Newton*.

The improvised dance form is based on the communication between two moving bodies that are in physical contact and their combined relationship to the physical laws that govern their motion—gravity, momentum, inertia. The body...learns to release excess muscular tension and abandon a certain quality of willfulness to experience the natural flow of movement. Practice includes rolling, falling, being upside down, following a physical point of contact, supporting and giving weight to a partner. It is a free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement that leaves the participants informed, centered, and enlivened.⁸²

This definition reflects some of the philosophical values in of CI practice, such as its emphasis on physics, athleticism, and “natural” movement. The definition completes by claiming a connection to self-improvement, stating that the practice of self-correction provides truth and “leaves participants informed.”

A set of philosophical values feeds into this definition of the practice, including the described “natural” movement and sensing of physical laws, in addition to the value equality in organizational structure. While these philosophies seem relatively broad upfront, we may learn more about their significance and the fears that they reveal by looking at what they are *not*, according to influential CI sources. CI authorities such as founder Steve Paxton, *CQ*, and Cynthia Novack, encourage the *natural* by rejecting willful intent, *physical sensing* by rejecting psychological desire, and *equal democracy* by rejecting power differentials. Each of these oppositions masks an underlying fear of artifice, rooted in similar objectivist culture that shaped Rainer’s politics. By examining the origins, foundations, and development of CI practice, this chapter will explore the various disavowals that form CI philosophy. Throughout the rest of this chapter, I will pair CI’s prioritization of truth, science, and accomplishment with its historical context

⁸² “About Contact Improvisation (CI).” *Contact Quarterly*. 2014. Web.

and commentary, in order to locate objectivist anxieties about artifice, related to sexuality and psychological expression, within its discourse.

Novack's Ethnography

Since experiences of abandon, such as falling and being lifted, have provided entry points into my exploration of leftist anxieties in dance performance, CI stood out as an obvious research site. In my experience from dance at Wesleyan University, CI history and technique are commonly woven throughout curricula in various modern and improvisational technique classes. Cynthia Novack, author of the notorious CI ethnography, *Sharing the Dance*, was an improviser and associate dance professor at Wesleyan until her death in 1996. In order to examine the policing anxieties woven throughout CI philosophy, I will frequently return to *Sharing the Dance*, which was published in 1990, almost twenty years after the foundation of CI.⁸³

Over twenty-five years later, academics still reference it as a general guidebook to the practice's foundations and methods. According to *Dance Research Journal's* "In Memoriam" dedicated to Novack, *Sharing the Dance* set an ethnographic precedence: "Cynthia was the first to take a stance both from within the writer's own embodied experience to draw out the felt dimensions of movement and from an objective distance to understand movement analysis as concurrently as sociocultural analysis."⁸⁴ While Novack's text is understood here to be objective, I will approach it as a subjective artifact, a particular retrospective filter through which Novack describes CI, and a filter

⁸³ Novack, Cynthia Jean. *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Madison: U of Wisconsin. 1990. Print.

⁸⁴ Sklar, Deidre. "Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull A.k.a. Cynthia Novack (September 6, 1947-September 27, 1996)." *Dance Research Journal* 29.01 (1997): 111-115. Web.

that significantly influences contemporary CI practice and performance. Through its accounts of pioneering artists in the '70s and '80s, *Sharing the Dance* provides insight on some of the anxieties that determine, and at times police, pleasure in CI practice.⁸⁵

Novack outlines the trajectory of CI practice and organizational structure, recounting how it morphed from a technique practiced among small groups to a wider national network associated with its own lifestyle. She describes how Paxton joined Merce Cunningham's company in his early twenties, and later rejected his dictatorial, single-choreographer structure. In the 1960s, Paxton entered the New York City avant-garde arts sphere, becoming involved in Judson Church Dance Theatre and various collaborations with Yvonne Rainer. In 1972, during an artistic residency at Oberlin College, Paxton performed the "Magnesium," with a class of eleven men, marking the beginning of CI as a practice.⁸⁶ He continued to expand on techniques from "Magnesium," while traveling and performing with a close following of students and collaborators. CI continued to grow and disperse throughout the mid-1970s, when *CQ* magazine was formed in an attempt to keep it centralized. Throughout the 1980s, the practice gradually dispersed and disorganized, developing new generations of improvisers and in new locations practicing, all practicing differently. Today, CI is practiced in the U.S. and internationally, although its philosophies and practices vary by location. Paxton is still widely recognized as its founder.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Note: while most of Novack's words are taken from her final published text (*Sharing the Dance*), others have been pulled from her dissertation (*Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography*).

⁸⁶ "Magnesium." Chor. Steve Paxton. Oberlin College. Jan. 1972. *Contact Improvisation Archive: Collected Edition 1972-1983*. Dir. Lisa Nelson. Videoda, 2014. DVD.

⁸⁷ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 52-62.

CI's Influences: Ridding Dance of Intention

Novack describes how, like Rainer, Paxton was deeply influenced by the work and philosophies of Merce Cunningham, a prominent figure in U.S. postmodern and avant-garde dance. Cunningham, in contribution to a widespread objectivist art movement, aimed to portray pure physical body, free of intention, narrative, and thereby, free of artificiality. In order to reach such freedom from human subjectivity, Cunningham found ways to choreograph using chance. In his collaborations with avant-garde musician John Cage, Cunningham would choreograph a dance, Cage would compose a musical number, and they would not pair the two together until their performance. Novack writes that like Cunningham's "chance dances," CI "choreography happens to a greater degree by accident than as a result of human will."⁸⁸ Like Cunningham, Paxton aimed to rid dance of intention as a means of finding freedom in movement, but he embraced improvisation as a strategy for doing so.⁸⁹

Novack discusses this goal of freedom in movement, describing how for Cunningham and his contemporaries, rejecting intention served as a strategy for freeing dancers and spectators alike from the bounds of symbolic meaning. She writes,

These choreographers claimed to be making radical changes in modern dance, freeing it from the psychologism and social involvement of earlier dances and allowing the audience a greater freedom to interpret the dance.⁹⁰

Thus, "psychologism" and "social involvement" serve to constrain the audiences of early modern dance technique, such as Graham technique, which externalized thought

⁸⁸ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 28.

⁸⁹ While Cunningham explored chance to rid the choreographic process of intention, he rejected improvisation (See Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 27).

⁹⁰ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 25.

through bodily expression, influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis in the 1940s.⁹¹ In this quote, Novack suggests a belief that performances held totalitarian power over their audiences. To Rainer, the source of confinement in dance performance was the audience's voyeuristic power over performers, but to Cunningham and later Paxton, it was the psychological bounds of the performance that confined the free will of spectators. In both cases, the performance was inevitably undemocratic, and the rejection of intention in dance would allow for resistance to fascist hierarchy.⁹² Novack comments that this kind of expressive choreography was most common after World War I, and became less common after World War II, when Cunningham formed his company.⁹³ Thus, to Novack, Paxton's formation of CI arose out of an objectivist move to create neutral art, free of intention, and free of association with Soviet totalitarianism.

In "Beyond the Mainstream," Paxton emphasizes how freedom plays into his practice. "I like it when bodies are free; when bodies are free and the emotional state is open and accepting and sensitive; when the psychology isn't hassled or political or tied in knots. I like it when people do things that can surprise themselves."⁹⁴ To Paxton, this freedom emerges out of a rejection of psychological intent, which involves political neutrality. According to Novack, while Cunningham finds chance in music as a vehicle for freedom and neutrality, Paxton views chance as a kind of third subject, an "it" that emerges out of a dance between two subjects. Paxton's technique stresses the egalitarian

⁹¹ Bayles, Eleonore. *Psyche Embodied: An Exploration of Modern Dance through a Psychological Lens*. Thesis. Wesleyan University, 2014. *WesScholar*. Web.

⁹² In addition to resisting fascism by avoiding intention, Paxton resisted fascism by avoiding the hierarchical company structure of Graham, in which a company is named after a single choreographer, who places movement on trained dancers according to a singular aesthetic. Paxton sees this structure as a "dictatorship." (See Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 54).

⁹³ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 25.

⁹⁴ Bowers, "Beyond the Mainstream."

nature of this ‘it,’ which is connected to nature and physics: “the third force that becomes created by the cooperation and interaction between two people... derives from a belief in the rule of physical law and the connection of body to nature.”⁹⁵ Thus, while neither of the two subjects in a duet have any intention for the dance, intention that would undoubtedly stem from psychological desire, the “it” of the duet allows for freedom, justified by objective physics.

To ground CI’s value of the “natural” in postmodern dance lineage, Novack refers to postmodern choreographer Erick Hawkins as an important influence of Steve Paxton and CI, due to his ideology of “science and sensuality.”^{96,97} Like Cunningham, Hawkins danced with Graham and eventually left her company.^{98,99} Hawkins also distanced himself from expressionism after leaving her company, but unlike Cunningham who moved toward chance, Hawkins moved toward physics. He emphasized scientific principals of gravity and motion in order to teach dancers a kind of *scientific sensuality*. Novack describes, “his training emphasizes ‘kinesthetic awareness,’ the sensation of movement occurring in muscles and joints, so that the body might be used efficiently and without strain or stress.” Hawkins also urged dancers to “‘think-feel,’ Hawkins’ phrase for a state of ‘intellectual knowing with sensuous experiencing.’”¹⁰⁰ As we delve further into the various distinctions made between sexuality and sensuality in

⁹⁵ Novack, Cynthia Jean. *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography of Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Diss. Columbia U, 1986. Ann Arbor, MI: U Microfilms International, 1986. Print.

⁹⁶ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 30.

⁹⁷ The ANTA dance panel funded Hawkins to share work in Southeast Asia. They described him neutral, refined, non-commercial, and “cultured,” attributes that they prioritized sharing abroad during the Cold War. (See Prevots, *Dance for Export* 64).

⁹⁸ Prevots, *Dance for Export* 63.

⁹⁹ Hawkins and Graham were lovers; they were married for two years, and Hawkins left her company after they separated.

¹⁰⁰ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 31.

CI and the anxieties they reveal, we may look to Novack's description of Hawkins for reference as to how she and others define "sensuality." On one hand, "sensuous experiencing" is placed opposite to "intellectual knowing" in the quote above, an opposition that aligns "sensual" with the feminine body as opposed to the masculine intellect. Here, we may view CI's embrace of "sensuality" as resistant to masculine prioritization of intellect. On the other hand, in her description of Hawkins and later in her description of Paxton, we could also interpret her use of "sensual" as aligning with scientific observation, a masculinized term placed opposite to the more feminine and psychologized "sexuality." In this sense, she uses "sensuality" to emphasize the masculine, scientific, and logical nature of the senses without more feminine emotional expression or desire.

Along with "sensuality," Novack begins to hint at the meaning of "sexuality" in CI, as she compares and contrasts social dance, or "rock dance," and experimental "theater dance," two prominent dance forms of the 1960s that influenced CI practice. To her, both of these forms attracted overlapping audiences comprised of young artists engaged in ideals of community, democracy, and equality. She writes, "Both contained an implicit message that what was being done had political meanings and was making a statement."¹⁰¹ In other words, they both represented the radical potential of dance as an art form that could *do something*, an art form that could result in social change. We can observe how Novack participates in the leftist rhetoric of social collectivity, portraying black and white dance cultures of the same time period as all striving for the same egalitarian ends. We can connect this rhetoric back to discussion of policing anti-social modes of relationality in the previous chapter. While Novack intends to retrospectively

¹⁰¹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 48.

unite black and white dance forms against the fascist top of the hierarchy, she risks policing black dance forms, which were typically marginalized, into the same relationality as white dance, which was scene as cultured and avant-garde.

At the same time, Novack presents the two dance forms as differing in their relationship to gender and sexuality, and although it's unclear, it seems as though contact improvisation tended toward the theater side of the spectrum. "Theater dance" treated the body as a "neutral enactor of movement rather than as an expressive, gendered personality."¹⁰² This dance form "was often 'undersexed' by public standards, androgynous, opposed to spectacular display of the body." She adds that although theater dance pieces might involve nudity, the nudity had more to do with "satiric commentary," or the movement capacities of the physical body, than with sexuality. Here, Novack refers to Rainer's style of dance and critique. On the other hand, "rock dance" was "'oversexed' by public standards, its exuberance tied to 'unnatural' sexual expression and its increasingly improvisational and individualistic structure tied to an attack on the proper partnership."¹⁰³ By linking "sexual expression" with "unnatural," and placing it in opposition to "neutral" and "androgynous," Novack helps us to define the meaning of sexuality in CI. When we claim that CI is "sensual" but not "sexual," we imply its natural and androgynous characteristics. Additionally, Novack links "exuberance," which I understand as relating to wildness, excitement, and abundance, to "unnatural sexual expression," implying that the "natural" she uses to describe CI is more emotionally controlled and comprised of only what's essential.

¹⁰² Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 43.

¹⁰³ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 49.

To conclude her discussion of the social dance and theater dance origins of CI, Novack notes that CI,

combined the sensuality of social dance with an objective stance towards the physical capacities of the body, an idea developed by experimental theater dance...the qualities of free-flowing movement and focus on the inner experience of moving, so characteristic of social dance, were joined with interest in ‘natural’ movement training.¹⁰⁴

In other words, from social dance, CI adopted “sensuality” (rather than the exuberant “sexuality” that had been mentioned earlier), free-flowing movement, and focus on inner experience (“described above as individualistic”). Meanwhile from theater dance, CI adopted “natural” movement and objectivity. These contradicting foundational philosophies of CI lay the groundwork for the overt disavowal of sexuality in CI practice, which reveals a more covert rhetorical policing of pleasure.

Saying “No” to the Sexual

CI’s adoption of these supposedly neutral and unsexed attributes from theater dance begs the question: does the practice live up to its claims of neutrality? Perhaps more importantly, why is it anxious about *not* living up to these claims? In a section dedicated to “sensuousness and sexuality,” Novack includes various disavowals of sexuality from Paxton and others, which we may employ for defining sexuality, and surfacing entrenched anxieties within CI practice. Based on Novack’s discussion of sexuality in CI, the “sexual” seems to convey the carnal desire of the individual psyche, tied to experiences and powers beyond the physics of the present moment, which CI seeks to avoid. Novack writes, “Paxton’s emphasis on touch being about biomechanics

¹⁰⁴ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 52.

and gravity freed the dance form from direct psychological and sexual encounter.”¹⁰⁵

This emphasis presents us with a spectrum, with “sensual” on one end and “sexual” on the other. The “sensual” end of the spectrum encompasses biomechanics, gravity, exterior focus, and relationality. The “sexual” end encompasses psychology and desire, attributes that might lead to a “gland-game,” which CI teachers warn against:

Teachers...cautioned students about becoming involved in the ‘gland game’ while trying to do contact improvisation. They warned that focus on sexual encounter and psychological interaction rather than on touch and weight as the impetus for generating movement could be physically dangerous for the partners, as well as stifling to the development of the dance¹⁰⁶

On the supposedly less-stiffing “sensual” end of the spectrum, Novack quotes Paxton as he explains how the attention to physics and *sensing* lead to a sort of perfect neutrality. He claims that in CI practice, *intent* (which I take to mean psychological desire) should be minimal while the *sensing of intent* (which I take to mean real observation), which should be maximal. By enacting psychology less and observing sensations more, practitioners can find collective and egalitarian relationality: “cooperation becomes the subject—an ‘it’ defined by the balancing of inertias, momentums, psychologies, spirits of the partners.”¹⁰⁷ By sticking to the “sensual” end of the spectrum, correlating with the objective observation, contact improvisation claims to reach true neutrality, a balanced third subject that transcends individual urges and makes for egalitarian relationality.

Novack incorporates accounts from improvisers that reveal the perceived threats of falling into sexual experiences in CI, risks of failing to find this true scientific neutrality. Some of these accounts justify the freedom she claims can stem from neutrality, communicating relief due to the prospect of sexuality *not* being a part of the

¹⁰⁵ Novack, *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography* 211.

¹⁰⁶ Novack, *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography* 211.

¹⁰⁷ Novack, *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography* 189.

practice. Novack summarizes this relief, claiming that the circumstances of the form

allow for partners to engage in what may look like a sexual encounter without necessarily experiencing sexual feelings...many dancers also experience a sensuality in doing contact improvisation which is particularly enjoyable because it is *not* explicitly sexual and therefore does not present sexual problems”¹⁰⁸

It seems reasonable that CI should not *have* to be sexual for participants who do not want it to be, although this quote does not define what the frightening sexual experience might entail, in contrast to a sensual experience without sexuality. Furthermore, she throws in that sexual experiences present “sexual problems,” but does not further define or discuss these “problems.”

Meanwhile, other accounts suggest that contact improvisation should dismiss any urges toward sexualization, implying that these urges will inevitably arise, and that they should be shut down whether or not participants experience relief from their absence. Novack quotes a contact artist who warns about sexuality, predicting the potential and dangerous convolution of the “sensual” and the “sexual,” or the slippage of the “sensual” into the “sexual.” She writes: “this sensory factor is so strong that beginners have to be reminded to keep their eyes open and ‘avoid what Steve Paxton calls the ‘orgy of sensation,’ to remain alert and present in the moment.”¹⁰⁹ Whether the disavowal of the sexual in contact improvisation comes as a relief or requires explicit training and practice, these accounts suggest that one should embrace the “sensual,” but only with care not to slip into the “sexual,” which would somehow cross a line, from neutral scientific observation into unnatural psychologism. CI can practice its politics of egalitarian collectivity through sense and touch, but bringing sex into the picture would be an excessive step, threatening a practice that claims neutrality.

¹⁰⁸ Novack, *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography* 208.

¹⁰⁹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography* 206.

Attempting to Equalize

As I read through these accounts, I became more and more entangled in the various definitions and disavowals of sexuality within CI practice. This takes us back to Earthdance, where Luisa and I had just taken attended class and “jam” when we grappled with our own definitions in the car ride back to Wesleyan. The Earthdance website describes the organization as “an artist-run workshop, residency, and retreat center...We provide a dynamic mix of dance, somatic, and interdisciplinary arts training, with a focus on sustainable living, social justice, and community.” Included in the organization’s list of “Core Values,” is the value of “Intelligence of the Body.” The web page describes this value of bodily intelligence:

We think with more than our minds! Connectivity to physicality is useful not only for one’s growth, but also for making dances, constructing buildings, having empathy, and inspiring new thinking in most realms of human activity.

The list also includes “Community,” which is described as collective negotiation and collaboration that lead to practices that “model and serve our society’s development.”¹¹⁰ These values reflect the anti-fascist push and arguably masculine push on the left described by Bottoms in the previous chapter, for art to be efficacious and utilitarian, selflessly serving the world outside of its own indulgent practice.

Among the events listed on the Earthdance website (as of March 2017) was an annual workshop titled “CI Ground Research.” The “research” would focus on “Gender, Philosophy, and CI,” and how gender enacts itself in CI discourse. Participants would reflect “more broadly on domination issues in the teaching and practice of Contact.” This description entangles gender in CI, which strives for androgynous

¹¹⁰ *Earthdance*. 2011. Web.

neutrality, with “domination issues.” Since “domination” is an “issue,” I presume that the workshop problematizes men dominating women, in physical practice as well as conversation. The description continues:

Contact promotes an equality in gender uncommon in dance and sports: women lifting men, relatively gender-neutral clothing, an absence of proscribed gender-roles...But even if we usually practice egalitarian “speaking circles,” even if non-violent approaches to exchanges remain common (“yes and...” instead of “no” or “yes but...,” speaking from one’s point of view, listening and not reacting) gendered power dynamics surface when we come back to talking and/or organize around CI. Do those raised as “men” take up more space in conversation circles than those raised as “women”? Who feels comfortable speaking up quickly or interrupting? Do gendered styles of speaking lead us to take some ideas more seriously than others? Do we divide the labor of producing CI events by gender roles?¹¹¹

One could imagine how such a determined refusal of power differentials and male sexuality increases their presence. This description overtly communicates that CI intends to erase power and domination, an expected cause for a practice rooted in anti-fascist neutrality. Additionally, it reveals that Earthdance thinks that the CI practice has already successfully equalized the genders in practice, and how it must continue working to obliterate gendered power more fully by equalizing gender in the discourse surrounding CI.

This workshop description highlights CI’s value of equalizing gender and power, which it has held onto since Paxton’s rejection of gender distinctions made in works by Graham and other more traditional modern choreographers.¹¹² However, if we return to the footage in *Fall After Newton*, in which Stark Smith (the focal point of the story-telling)

¹¹¹ *Earthdance*. 2011. Web.

¹¹² Novack mentions Rainer’s admiration for Paxton’s politics of gender equality in his choreography. Specifically, she admired his practice of men and women both lifting climbing on one another. (See Novack *Sharing the Dance* 55).

takes the more traditional role of being lifted by Paxton, much more than she lifts him.¹¹³ Assuming that she has choice in the situation—that her role of being lifted does not reveal some sort of internalized gender oppression—the gendered power dynamics in CI practice appear to be more complex than this singular notion of pure gender equality, involving the obliteration of gendered power.

By examining the retrospective viewpoints of Novack (from the late 1980s) and Earthdance (from the present), we can observe a nostalgic idealization of pastoral gender equality that did not appear to exist, at least in the *Fall After Newton* footage. Novack claims that in the early 1970s, the CI community was “like a family” in that “people recruited close friends and lovers to the dance form, so that dancing kinship was mixed with ‘real-life’ kinship and friendship” By 1976, this “family” had expanded to include hundreds more teachers and their students.¹¹⁴ Novack’s distinction between dance kinship and “real-life” kinship, which depicts the expansion of the practice as a threat to a pastoral egalitarian community, undoes some of her previous messaging about the authenticity of relationships in CI as a dance practice. Throughout her text, Novack works to demonstrate the authenticity of CI, by linking it to political neutrality and objective physics. Dancers exhibit “signs of naturalness” by coughing and adjusting their clothes. They laugh and walk with “anti-elitism,” just like ordinary people in “real” life.¹¹⁵ In her discussion of sexuality, she had described how relationships in CI practice are authentic *because* there they are without psychological themes of expression (which include sexuality and, I assume, love). Yet, in this excerpt, she flips her logic, implying that CI performance is not actually “real” but is closer to “real” when people take along

¹¹³ Paxton, *Fall After Newton*.

¹¹⁴ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 87.

¹¹⁵ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 136.

their “real-life” friends and “real-life” lovers. This undoing of previous claims seems to suggest Novack’s nostalgia for an imagined time with perfect egalitarian “community” in CI, and her anxieties about losing these particular ideals of power distribution, more than her belief that the practice is less real.

This anxiety about threats to egalitarian community surfaces and leads to further contradictions when Novack includes a quote by Stark Smith, reflecting on her experiences of community in CI. Stark Smith claims that people increasingly talk about community the more CI decentralizes and disperses throughout the country. She observes,

When there *was* a community, nobody talked about it at all. It’s like when you live in a family, you don’t have to talk to your brother about your family all the time. But as the family starts breaking up, you get nostalgic and you say, ‘Oh, we were such a great family; everyone was so close,’ which, of course, is usually not quite true either.¹¹⁶

Stark Smith’s words, counteracting Novack’s image of an authentic “family” structure, point to nostalgia revealing an underlying fear of shifting power. The more out-of-control CI became, the more people strived for an ideal of equality and community, an ideal that may never have existed. Novack’s earlier historical claims actually support Stark Smith’s speculation that this ideal never existed: it seems that in the early years she reminisces about, Paxton and his collaborators aimed to spread CI practice through touring and teaching, rather than desiring to hold on to a tightly-knit “family” structure.

Dancing Outside the Egalitarian Box: Abandon and Presentism

If a perfectly gender-neutral and egalitarian community never existed within CI, then Novack’s attempt to force the practice into this form suggests a fear of unequal

¹¹⁶ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 113.

power distribution, left over from anti-totalitarian anxieties. We can unveil some of these anxieties by delving into experiences of freedom and abandon within CI practice, and comparing Novack and Paxton's takes on these experiences. As Novack describes Paxton's relationship to falling as physics-based and athletic, emerging out of structured martial arts training, she includes a quote from Paxton that suggests a less rational and controlled experience. In relation to working with "extreme imbalance," Paxton recalled, "I wanted to launch myself off the planet and see what happened without having to worry about the re-entry a few seconds later."¹¹⁷ This desire for an out-of-this-world experience leads into Paxton's practice of recklessness and abandonment in the early years of CI, observable qualities in the 1972 performance of "Magnesium."¹¹⁸

Novack continues to describe the presence of uncontrolled abandon in early CI work, which seems to necessitate the yielding of power to other bodies:

Lack of control characterizes most movement as the body weight is pulled or thrown off balance, and the dancers passively fall against each other or to the floor. The falls look sudden and wild.¹¹⁹

This description of wildness overlaps with Paxton's words about desiring to "launch off the planet," implying that CI practice values the pleasure of passive recklessness and abandonment. The passive language she uses implies that in order for such wildness to occur, one must *be pulled* or *be thrown* off balance by another, suggesting a need to give into the power of another for certain pleasurable experiences. Thus, the pleasure of abandoning self-sovereign control, of experiencing moments of recklessness, wildness, and irresponsibility, comes from yielding self-control, allowing oneself to be powerless in the hands of another, who holds power and responsibility in that moment. It suggests

¹¹⁷ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 60.

¹¹⁸ Paxton, "Magnesium."

¹¹⁹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 61.

Bersani's notions of "self-shattering," or the destruction of self-sovereign ideals, which will be discussed further in the following chapter.¹²⁰ This desirable experience of self-shattering passivity, however, does not fit into the CI ideals of community, equality, and democracy described by the Earthdance website, in which no power differentials should exist. This egalitarian rejection, corresponding with the rejection of fascist psychological intention behind sexuality, arises out of a need to control and stabilize. In this version of CI "community," practice must remain in the confines of unemotional and scientific container, equalizing everyone involved. This kind of confining discourse that we can observe in the words of Novack and Earthdance, seems to have been layered onto Paxton's less responsible rejection of intention.

Novack also reveals this added layer of control through her justification of pleasure with safety. This valuing of safety shifts attention from uncontrolled *abandonment* to pastoral *care*, as well as efficacious accomplishment. For instance, after describing the wildness of the scene above, she emphasizes the mats that improvisers used in the early years of CI, as well as the fact that there is *some* active control after dancers fall that keeps them safe.¹²¹ In her section about experiencing the body in CI practice, Novack discusses disorientation, but emphasizes the importance of safety within such disorientation, which is trained, perhaps rehearsed. She writes that CI students "must accept disorientation and learn to be turned upside down or sideways" adding that students "have needed to learn techniques of falling so that they can respond quickly and appropriately to surprising events and avoid injury."¹²² This quick clarification reveals her

¹²⁰ Bersani, "Rectum a Grave"

¹²¹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 61.

¹²² Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 151.

prioritization of responsible care over irresponsible abandon. She then nearly permits lack of control to be desirable to CI participants, only to justify pleasure once again: “The edge of physical danger in contact improvisation has always been appealing and exciting to some people. Like many athletic activities, contact improvisation can offer the exhilaration of safely accomplishing dangerous feats.”¹²³ Here, she admits to the possibility that abandon and wildness might be “appealing” and “exciting,” perhaps even “exhilarating.” Then she clarifies that the appeal comes from the responsible safety upon return, rather than the irresponsibility itself. Furthermore, her use of the word “accomplishment” justifies the disorienting experience with implications of self-sovereignty and social diligence.

Yet, if we look at Paxton’s quote on launching off the planet, he emphasizes the moment of abandon itself rather than the safety upon return, or the diligent “sense of accomplishment” upon the safety. At least in the early development of CI, Paxton desires to be disoriented “without having to worry about re-entry” into the planet, or we could say, into the realm of “real-life” and control. Paxton’s narrations in “Chute” and *Fall After Newton* complicate Novack’s version of the CI’s relationship to risk. In “Chute,” a 1979 narration and compilation of rehearsal footage from 1972, CI students practice tossing their bodies onto another, as well as catching others who toss themselves.¹²⁴ These improvisers practice on wrestling mats, charging at one another from a distance and leaping as high as possible towards their catchers. The video curates clips of these tosses, one after another. At times, the catcher falls to the floor upon the

¹²³ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 151.

¹²⁴ “Chute.” Narr. Steve Paxton. 1979. *Contact Improvisation Archive: Collected Edition 1972-1983*. Dir. Lisa Nelson. Videoda, 2014. DVD.

impact of the body. At other moments, the catcher steps aside and lets the tossed partner roll to the floor on their own, figuring out how to fall to the floor without the support of another body.¹²⁵ Rather than emphasizing safety as a concern, Paxton's narration emphasizes "survival" (the goal of "survival" allows for more risk than "safety.") He presents this "survival" as a means to freedom from abandon, in contrast to how Novack depicts abandon as a means to safety. In one segment, Paxton emphasizes the subconscious understanding of survival as an enabler of freedom: "Within the brief freedom of the fall, my body can convert a sudden accident into a controlled descent."¹²⁶ Here, the subconscious body allows for survival, which seems to free the conscious self from responsible control over safety. For Paxton, the freedom in the fall rests in the ability to experience abandon without the responsibility of thinking about self-control and safety. In other words, the value in falling can be found in the experience of abandonment, rather in than the safety and "sense of accomplishment" at the end.

Whereas Novack's discussion of safety places the body in service of the sovereign and controlled mind, carrying out difficult feats in order to reach the responsible end goal of achievement, Paxton sees the mind working in service of the body. He describes the mind as taking a backseat as a non-regulatory spectator, comparing the role of the conscious mind in CI to its role in a basketball game:

What do you do with your mind when you're playing basketball and it's going well? You know the rules, you know the disciplines, you've played with the ball

¹²⁵ It is apparent that the catcher's more responsible role in this footage also works in service of abandon. Paxton discusses the importance that the catcher understands concepts of momentum, timing, distance, and gravity, placing the catcher in the intellectual driver's seat so that the partner in flight can go along for the ride, experiencing the same moment in a state of abandon.

¹²⁶ Paxton, "Chute."

so you know how it feels, you have all the kinetic material down, you know how your sneakers feel on the court, you know by touch where the basket is, and you know how to judge the distances as you throw from various points. What are you doing with your mind? I think the deeper parts of the mind take over at that moment, and the intellectual part watches you. The mind can ride along; it can't do the dancing.¹²⁷

Paxton's words depict the self-sovereign mind yielding control to become part of the audience, watching without regulating. When he mentions the "intellectual part" watching, he seems to refer to the sovereign-self with active control and responsibility for the future, as opposed to the "deeper parts." While he may be essentializing these "deeper parts" as natural, he privileges them as playing a less responsible and more passive role in the practice. Thus, in order for the improvisers to throw themselves into the responsibility of their partners, their sovereign selves must dissipate, abandoning into passivity. Toward the end of *Fall After Newton*, Paxton emphasizes that the controlled mind merely reacts to the central, pleasure-seeking body:

An important aspect of contact improvisation is the pleasure of moving, and the pleasure of dancing with somebody in a very spontaneous way. It happens in a framework, which considers the body, in all its variety, as the primary focus from which the mind can draw.¹²⁸

While in Novack's text, the mind plays the game to accomplish; Paxton's imagery emphasizes the dissipation of the intellectual, sovereign self into the game.

As we can see from Paxton's emphasis on the "brief moment of freedom" in the fleeting states of flying and falling, ephemerality and presentism play a central role in the experience of CI. Novack includes a comment by Nancy Stark Smith about her early years of practicing CI with Paxton: "We spent so much of the day rolling around and being disoriented and touching each other and giving weight...The fact that we weren't

¹²⁷ Bowers, *Beyond the Mainstream*.

¹²⁸ Paxton, *Fall After Newton*.

working towards anything, but just working, gave it a feeling of freedom.” Novack introduces this quote as Stark Smith’s interest in “replacing ‘goal-oriented’ dance with communal experimentation.”¹²⁹ Novack is right to say that these dancers were not goal oriented, but the Stark Smith’s words seem to reveal a freedom deeper than “communal experimentation.” Stark Smith conveys the pleasure and freedom of utter irresponsibility towards time. As these dancers tossed themselves on one another and into the floor, throwing, pulling, and plunging their weight, time would become warped. The freedom she describes comes out of a centering of the present moment and the pleasure it offers. Novack’s addition of “communal experimentation” seems like an enforcement of a specific kind of egalitarian relationality, upon a scene that centralizes particularly irresponsible relationality. The underlying pleasure described by Stark Smith stems from sinking into lack of control towards others and time. Stark Smith’s quote prioritizes a pleasure in the present moment that Novack misses by retrospectively enforcing communalism and responsibility onto the experience.

This present focus carries into CI performances. Novack notes that in the early years of CI, “dancing would be going on when the audience entered, so that the beginning of the performance was indefinite.”¹³⁰ While we could interpret this statement as a Brechtian rejection of artificial formalities in performance, a call to force audience members into self-consciousness upon entrance, it also points to a warping of temporality. A clip within *Fall After Newton* also suggests a kind of pleasure-in-the-moment that contradicts Novack and Earthdance’s prioritization of a stable, democratic, and equal community, void of power. It includes a minimal performance in which an

¹²⁹ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 64.

¹³⁰ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 122.

intimate audience gazes fixedly on Stark Smith and Paxton's duet. At one point in the dance, Stark Smith places a foot on Paxton's bent thigh, and the point of contact leverages Paxton to thrust Stark Smith's body up into the air with impressive height. He powerfully flings her over his shoulders, where she enjoys height for a moment before rolling down his torso. He catches her again, suspending her, and then releases her, allowing her to drop and roll into the floor. The moment Paxton thrusts Stark Smith into flight, we see and hear spectators release gasps and laughter.¹³¹ Swept in by the surprise, Stark Smith's release gives impetus for audience release—for a brief moment, these spectators abandon their more controlled and silent norm of viewership.

A quote by one of Paxton's close collaborators, Danny Lepkoff, also points to how CI performances allow spectators to become swept into this pleasure of the present moment. Lepkoff comments on the positive audience reactions to CI performances from an improviser's perspective, once again using the (seemingly applicable) metaphor of a basketball game.¹³² While Paxton used the basketball metaphor to describe how CI practice sweeps the intellect along for the ride, Lepkoff uses it to describe how CI performance sweeps the audience along for the ride:

The performances were so exciting, and it thrilled me to be in them...I always felt there was a gut-level response from the audience about what they were seeing...the response—the applause, the “oohs” and “aahs,” the laughter—was just a real physical response. It was almost like seeing a hot basketball game.¹³³

¹³¹ Paxton, *Fall After Newton*.

¹³² CI practice values its close ties to sports. Dance scholar Maura Keefe suggests that this value reveals “long held anxieties about dancing lacking masculinity” among male dancers in U.S. modern dance history. (See Keefe, Maura. “Is Dance a Man's Sport Too?” *When Men Dance: Choreographing Masculinities across Borders*. By Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. 102. Print.)

¹³³ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 72.

Perhaps Novack included this quote to demonstrate the “real physical response” to CI, as opposed to a theatrical, artificial response that comes from watching spectacle. If so, she imposes a fake/real dichotomy between performativity and presence in the moment, whereas Lepkoff seems to suggest that performativity is exactly what constitutes presence in the moment. Lepkoff’s words suggest that he takes pleasure in being part of a spectacle, from receiving audience support, and from knowing his audience is also wrapped up in the heat of the moment. Here, drama and spectacle actually heighten the “real physical response,” and the pleasure, experienced by his audience.

These depictions of pleasure relating to *abandon* and presentism in CI practice and performance do not fit into the responsible *care* of egalitarian community that Novack emphasizes throughout her ethnography. Of course, CI practice is not void of *care*—multiple accounts by improvisers, as well as my own experience at Earthdance, suggest an intimate care that can emerge out of practice. Novack quotes one improviser’s experience of CI as “a nurturing kind of dance” which put him “in touch with something experienced as a child with parents.”¹³⁴ Yet, Novack’s text seems to enforce this *care* onto experiences that seem more like *abandon*, conveying *care* as a responsible and productive attribute of a perfectly egalitarian community, which may never have existed within CI practice. This enforcement of egalitarian values, stemming from objectivist and anti-fascist push for freedom, serves to falsely limit the possibility of pleasure in discourse surrounding CI.

* * * * *

Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and many other artists associated with objectivist dance employed androgynous costuming as strategy for neutralizing gender, and in turn

¹³⁴ Novack, *Sharing the Dance* 170.

ridding dance of artifice. These artists typically wore rehearsal clothes for performance as a means of emphasizing physicality over performativity. However, this supposedly androgynous costuming generally described women wearing clothes that would also be socially acceptable for men to wear, and not the other way around. I set out to refuse this refusal of femininity in my fall choreography, and I travelled back in time to early U.S. modern dance history for influence. I came across photos of early twentieth century choreographer Isadora Duncan's costume choices. Duncan wore fabulous swirls of loose garments, allowing them to project and exaggerate her flowing and feminine movements, and in a particularly scandalous performance, bear her breast to her audience. Duncan's boldness with femininity inspired me to employ long and unrestricting fabric. While I did not consciously factor in *pleasure* when formulating this decision, the fabric turned out to invoke pleasurable experience for the dancers.

Some of the most interesting questions arose in the exploration of anxieties and pleasures stemming from long dresses. Throughout the dance, moments of inversion and control-loss caused the loose skirts to flip, revealing dancers' underwear. Toward the beginning of the piece, Colleen goes into a headstand multiple times, exposing her underwear as her black dress flips over her head, bare legs suspended in space. At another point, the dancers end a roll in unison on their backs, legs in the air, crotches facing the audience, and snapping their fingers to "Be My Baby" between their legs. I grappled with whether such exposure was *okay*, whether such skirt flipping would feel freeing or embarrassing, from the perspective dancers and spectators alike. After the performances, when I asked the dancers about their experiences with the costumes, I their responses suggested that dancing in the loose fabric was a freeing and pleasurable

experience.¹³⁵ One dancer referred to the showing of underwear as “wonderful and freeing.” She said that when she wears dresses, she’s always self-conscious about the possibility of a gust of wind exposing her underwear, and that it was pleasurable “to have a time in which no one was concerned about that.” The dancer that went into multiple headstands and exposed her underwear most overtly wrote, “I loved my costume—it definitely informed my movement and made me feel limitless and flowy.” These responses convey how the dancers experienced their costumes with pleasure, and felt generally open to the possibility of exposure, rather than confined to self-conscious embarrassment at the thought of revealing underwear.¹³⁶

While the underwear may have retrospectively felt like a freeing practice to the dancers, a their reactions to a pre-show announcement on Saturday, closing night of the performance, suggested that they held onto self-conscious anxiety about the dance being *sexual*. As usual, one of the house managers announced a series of safety procedures and warnings before the show. Included in the set was a warning against “sexual content.” We remain unsure as to whether he included this warning only on Saturday or on all three nights, but my dancers (backstage at the time) and I (in the audience) only noticed it on Saturday. We also aren’t sure whether the sexual content referred to my piece or

¹³⁵ “Reflections on Fall Dance Thesis.”

¹³⁶ For the spring choreography, I found myself eager to explore further this sensuous pleasure that the dancers seemed to experience from the texture and give of loose fabric. I held onto long skirts as costume pieces, but made them bolder and *red*. Since not all of the dancers identified as women, the decision would involve a cisgender man wearing a dress. For the purpose of warping usually masculine notions of androgynous attire, I resisted this temptation, handing him a flowing white dress to try on. As we warmed up for rehearsal in our costumes, testing how they felt to move in, he seemed to be enjoying the sensation of spinning in the long skirt. He later expressed that he wanted to always dance in a skirt.

one of the other three. While none of them seemed to me explicitly *sexual*—whatever that means—out of the four, it was between my piece and Rick’s. Whereas I quickly decided that it must have referred to Rick’s piece, which involved a video with brief nudity, the dancers were positive that it had referred to mine because of the underwear exposure. This caused them significant distress. One dancer expressed concern that was remnant of Rainer’s anxieties about being voyeuristically sexualized by spectators. She was upset “that the warning was phrased in terms of sex rather than simply ‘partial nudity,’ because it made our bodies seem like solely sexual objects.” Another wrote,

It was shocking to be reminded that showing underwear on stage would be considered sexual content...when dancing together this semester I never had a feeling of being sexualized but instead of being natural/comfortable.

This quote seems remnant of the disavowal of the sexual in Novack’s text, as both present *sexual* as an opposite of *natural*. I questioned their sudden concern after the announcement, which had so quickly counteracted their initial claims of comfort and pleasure. When I eventually tracked down the stage manager to ask why the announcement made, he pointed me to the Production Manager, who said that the announcement was related to Rick’s piece. She also claimed it had been made all three nights, not only on Saturday. The fact that the announcement had not actually referenced our piece further highlighted our ingrained self-conscious anxieties about the possibility of sexual pleasure, woven throughout CI discourse and still prevailing in my own dance setting.

Chapter 3:

The Extravagant Spirals of Pina Bausch

“You might expect to get crushed, or maybe torn to pieces. But the reality is stranger than that,” writes science journalist Amanda Gefter in her article, “The Strange Fate of a Person Falling into a Black Hole.” The article is accompanied by an image of a flat gridded plane, with a deep hole puncturing its center, interrupting its linearity. The grid curves into this hole, spiraling, until what were once perfectly straight lines become fluid and spout-like, pouring down below the plane’s center. An especially intense effect of gravity initiates this distortion, which causes free-fall, confuses time, and splits realities. “Einstein taught us that gravity warps space itself, causing it to curve. So given a dense enough object, space-time can become so warped that it twists in on itself, burrowing a hole through the very fabric of reality.”¹³⁷

I set out to choreograph a dance that begins with repeated straight lines and distorts them, in such a way that repeats and repeats and spirals out of control. Sometimes I had black holes in mind, other times, tornados. I desired to cause free-fall, confuse time, and split realities, whirling the audience into an extravagant dreamland.

* * * * *

One rehearsal in February, everyone entered the studio feeling sleep-deprived and loopy. What better day to incorporate spirals, to channel wonkiness into our choreography instead of attempting to leave it at the door? I decided that we would all spin as fast as possible without pause for one minute, or what felt like one. When I called time, ending the exercise, crazed laughter filled the studio. Three of us collapsed to the floor; the other two remained standing. I lay there, bursting, as the floor tilted upward around me. I hugged the floor, holding it for dear life, to resist dropping down further, or perhaps falling into the ceiling. One by one, we drifted back into orientation, recognizing our legs and the floor beneath them.

¹³⁷ Gefter, Amanda. “The Strange Fate of a Person Falling into a Black Hole.” *BBC News*. BBC, 25 May 2015. Web.

We did a free-writing exercise based on this experience, accumulating ideas that would inspire my Spring Thesis Dance choreography. Words from this exercise include:

“don’t get dizzy until you stop”

“the room isn’t a room anymore, voices disembodied, bits of me, swirling”

“anti-focus, I can stand to focus less, something sweet about a sensation that steals my thoughts from my head”

“sticky, pulsing, re-orient, repeat”

“undoing what I’ve learned for years, release, joy, sickening”

“unlike anything I’ve felt for so long. Where was I in the room in time in space?”

“stomach unsettled, actually getting dizzy is strange because when you’re the one causing your own delirium it gets kinda masochistic”¹³⁸

This list spatters our separate yet interrelated experiences of dizziness into an abstract composition. I kept this composition of experiences in mind as I choreographed and took increasing interest in spinning and dizziness. The disorientation and abandon from this dizziness arose out of repetition: the more turns, the more distorted the room becomes, especially when attempting to stop turning. I was inspired to employ repetition as a strategy for seeking dizzying moments abandon throughout the rest of the spring choreographic process. As we rehearsed and developed “starry-eyed lizard duets,” spinning in frenzy became one of our favorite means of locomotion. In case we gained orientation amidst all the chaos, we always had a way to re-disorient.

* * * * *

¹³⁸ Free-writing exercise from Spring Thesis Dance rehearsal, 12/15/17.

Pina Bausch's Dream Logic

A massive boulder, at least eight-feet-tall and resembling something that would float in outer space, rests upstage-left in the elaborate set of *Vollmond*.¹³⁹ The popular 2011 documentary *Pina* includes segments of this work, which sweep us into a whirling flight of imagination.¹⁴⁰ We see two men emerge from the shadow of the boulder stage left, wearing trousers and white button down shirts. They stroll in unison, unhurried, toward center stage. Their cheeks are puffed out and they look smug. They hold a secret from us, keeping us in suspense for spectacle. The men arrive downstage, and lay flat on their backs, arms folded behind heads, casual, as though settling onto a towel at the beach. One of the men slowly turns his head to face the other and pauses, before squirting a fountain of water from his mouth. The now wet recipient flinches and squints, before retaliating with a similar spit. The squirts continue, repeating ten or so times, with increasing playfulness and speed. Meanwhile, a woman follows their path onstage, wearing a flowing white gown and holding a wine glass full of water in her left hand. She pauses, slips the glass into the bottom of her dress and pulls it out the top with her right hand, the left hand waiting beneath the fabric, passionately stroking her breast. She tosses back a sip with undisguised pleasure, then another, and returns the glass down between the white fabric and the front of her body. She takes a few steps and then, with a playful hop, tosses the remaining water into the air above, flings her head back to experience the subsequent rain on her face, and continues off stage right. Meanwhile, the two men continue their water feud, framing her solo with a whimsical fountain. After she exits, they stand and part ways.

¹³⁹ *Vollmond* is a German title that translates to “full moon.”

¹⁴⁰ *Pina*. Dir. Wim Wenders. 2011. DVD.

The nonsensical and spectacular role of water escalates throughout the piece, which eventually spirals into soaking disarray. In a segment later in the documentary, the dancers scoop buckets of water from a wide and shallow pool, which rests beside the boulder, gradually coming into sight throughout the piece. The dancers toss this water onto the boulder, now glossed and slippery. The pouring and tossing escalates until all the dancers repeatedly throw buckets of water onto the boulder, one another, and themselves. They run around and between each other, soaking wet, their faces filled with madness and joy. The running and twirling dancers move puddles into waves on the stage. Long hair and colorful gowns whip water through the scene, which at this point resembles a summer rainstorm in outer space. A number of frantic solos and duets occur throughout this dreamy storm, slipping and spiraling, falling into water and rolling in it, partnering with it and making a spectacle of it.

Like Rainer and Paxton, German postmodern choreographer Pina Bausch resisted traditional gender dynamics as she made works on her company, Tanztheater Wuppertal, from the early 1970s until 2009, the year of her death. According to German dance historian Norbert Servos, who published a notorious text on Bausch and her Wuppertal Dance Theater in 1984, Bausch responds to similar concerns as Rainer and other postmodern dancers in the Judson Dance Group, who saw traditional dance techniques as “the domain of ‘attractive illusions,’ as a refuge for self-satisfied technique.”¹⁴¹ Whereas Rainer and Paxton lean toward objective and scientific physicality in order to resist such “self-satisfied technique,” distancing themselves from “attractive illusions,” and theatrical expression, Bausch presses closer into illusion and theatrical

¹⁴¹ Servos, Norbert. *Pina Bausch: Wuppertal Dance Theater or The Art of Training a Goldfish; Excursions into Dance*. Trans. Patricia Stadie. Ballett-Buhnen-Verlag. 1984. Print.

expression. Nonetheless, Servos attempts to fuse Bausch's spectacular dreamlike logic with Rainer's objectivist and Brechtian politics. His text, like much of the commendatory writing on Bausch, claims that her works "refer the onlooker back to reality,"¹⁴² alienating spectators into a state of critique. Yes, we could certainly locate moments of Brechtian influence in Bausch's work. At times, she undoubtedly pushes audiences into critical discomfort, employing strategies such as breaking the fourth wall between spectators and performers.¹⁴³ However, this normative leftist interpretation of Bausch enforces self-conscious and socially responsible understanding onto her work, often limiting its empathetic and pleasurable potential. By delving into the anxieties of Servos and other critics, this chapter will examine the anxieties behind this Brecht-influenced approach to interpreting Bausch. It will then explore how Bausch employs repetition and gendered cliché, not to critically alienate audiences from artificial social constructions, but to draw audiences into the chaotic pleasures of warping and destabilizing them.

La Rocco's Review

New York Times dance journalist Claudia La Rocco critiques a 2010 performance of *Vollmond* (2006) in Brooklyn, NY.¹⁴⁴ While she is not quite enamored by the spectacle, she seems to understand the spectacular and dreamlike world that Bausch strives to actualize. In her article titled "Swimming Through Bausch's World," La Rocco recounts the "shadowy landscape dominated by a giant slab of rock," and the pool water on stage which, while shallow, fabricates an illusion of psychological depth: "there is a sense that

¹⁴² Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 21.

¹⁴³ Marianne Goldberg describes certain moments in which breaking the fourth wall. (See Goldberg, "Artifice and Authenticity" 106.

¹⁴⁴ La Rocco, Claudia. "Swimming Through Bausch's World." *The New York Times*. 30 Sept. 2010. Web.

the waters are an endless well, like some communal unconscious, or perhaps even what lives beneath the unconscious.” While the pool water expresses human psychology, the rainfall showers the audience in excess, falling “sometimes lightly, sometimes in an exhilarating downpour: pure spectacle.” To La Rocco, this combination of dreamy unconscious and spectacle produces a not-quite-sober experience, in fact she comments, “it is probably better to be drunk in ‘Vollmond.’” Underwhelmed, she wishes that Bausch had produced more inventive choreography that swept its audience further out of this world, claiming that Bausch’s work has hardened to “shtick.” She critiques the “limited movement palette” of the choreography, and states bluntly that the disjointed scenes “speak more to expensive production budgets than any dreamlike logic.”¹⁴⁵

Despite the harsh review, La Rocco understands that Bausch does not strive to wake up her audience into self-conscious critique: Bausch’s goal (which she apparently falls short of) is to create a dreamlike performance made possible through physical expression. La Rocco introduces the fantastical elements of the piece early on when describing the scenery as “alien” and “never fully resolved with the dramas that spin within it.” To La Rocco, Bausch’s should not have woken her audience from passive unconscious, and in order to not wake up her audience, she should have refrained from “shtick,” finding more inventive ways of constructing her fantasy. Watching *Vollmond* with La Rocco’s expectations in mind, it seems as though the dream emerges out of intermingling between familiar (“pedestrian”) and out-of-this-world (“alien”), a world where recognizable gestures and pleasures seem to belong perfectly in outer space. After examining La Rocco’s interpretation next to opposing sites of Brechtian critique, we will

¹⁴⁵ La Rocco, “Swimming Through.”

return to this idea of dreamlike logic, pairing it with queer theory to explore its pleasurable and freeing potential.

Varied Attempts to Fit Bausch into Rainer's Box

Much of the literature on Bausch differs from La Rocco's interpretation, taking a Brechtian approach to analysis. These critics claim that Bausch aims to wake her audiences up out of dreamland and into self-conscious critique. I will place Servos, and performance scholars Ciane Fernandes and David Price, in relation to Bausch works to demonstrate how Bausch becomes forced into an analysis that would more comfortably suit Rainer. In doing so, they reveal familiar leftist anxieties surrounding artifice and power differentials

Servos, who wrote his text about Bausch in 1984, states in his introduction that Bausch works "require an *active* onlooker" for their audience.¹⁴⁶ He directly applies Brecht to her work, claiming that Bausch creates this active audience through alienation, using movement motifs that are "borrowed from the world of everyday experience" and convey "'people as they really are,' as postulated by Brecht."¹⁴⁷ To Servos, Bausch's costumes exemplify this borrowing of "everyday experience," serving as instruments for audience alienation and critique:

Simple dresses and suits, high-heels and street shoes, or glittering, extravagant evening dress, are borrowed from reality...Instead of serving as mere decoration, they are questioned as to their function. They are the outer skin of a society trapped in rigid roles and frequently prove to be instruments of physical torture. Especially for women...clothes are, in line with the male ideals of beauty, tailor made in the form of constricting identities. They leave no doubt as to what the men and women are selling.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 20.

¹⁴⁷ Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 21.

¹⁴⁸ Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 24.

To Servos, Bausch uses costumes, particularly women's costumes, to comment on social norms that oppress women in "reality." Throughout this chapter, I will describe the elaborate costumes in Bausch's works in order to suggest the possibility that they may actually contribute to pleasurable spectacle in addition to simply confining women's bodies. However, to Servos, spectacle and entertainment come secondary to social critique. After describing a multitude of strategies that Bausch supposedly employs for such critique, he mentions entertainment as an afterthought. He writes that even with all of this efficacious intelligence, "the expeditions of the Wuppertal Dance Theater are enjoyable adventures. Their 'entertainment value' is provided by curiosity, by the hunger for experience."¹⁴⁹ In other words, Bausch's choreography entertains audiences, but by making them excited to intellectually question social norms rather than by spiraling them into the dreamland that La Rocco desires from *Vollmond*.

Interestingly, Servos's own interview with Bausch suggests that his Brechtian descriptions do not quite line up with her choreographic intentions. His text includes a 1978 interview, in which he asks Bausch, "You once said that basically you aren't interested in how people move, that you are more interested in what moves people. How does someone who holds that maxim come to be in dance theater?" Bausch answers:

"Why do we dance in the first place? There is a great danger in the way things are developing at the moment and have been developing in the last few years.

Everything has become routine...All that's left is just a strange sort of vanity

¹⁴⁹ Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 22.

which is becoming more and more removed...I believe that we ought to be getting closer to one another again.”¹⁵⁰

Here, Bausch sees dance as a means of “getting closer to one another again,” suggesting that she strives to draw spectators into physical experience more than she strives to alienate them.

Like Servos, performance scholar Ciane Fernandes takes a Brechtian perspective on Bausch, layering efficacious and utilitarian intentions upon her works. Fernandes, occasionally citing Servos, writes in 2001 about Bausch’s use of repetition to alienate audiences into critical and intellectual states.¹⁵¹ Fernandes claims that Bausch employs this repetition in order to reveal the artificiality of performance. This repetition exposes the trained nature of dance performance, and transforms the performance from a site of theatricality to a “scenario for experimentation, allowing the perception and critical evaluation of the underlying structure of dance performance.”¹⁵² Supposedly, by exposing the repetitive discipline of trained dancers, Bausch confounds her viewers out of the dreamlike world of spectacle and into the lecture hall.

Similar to Servos, Fernandes makes claims of detached dancer-audience relationships that contradict Bausch’s own words, which Fernandes had included to validate her claims. On one hand, she takes the Brechtian standpoint that the audience should be fully awake, detached, and self-conscious. She does so by pointing to the narcissism and voyeurism that taints most theater, and downplaying the role of the passive viewer who sits back and watches “intangible bodies” showing off. She proceeds

¹⁵⁰ Servos, *Training a Goldfish* 227.

¹⁵¹ Fernandes, Ciane. *Pina Bausch and the Wuppertal Dance Theater: The Aesthetics of Repetition and Transformation*. Vol. 34. New York: P. Lang, 2005. Print. New Studies in Aesthetics.

¹⁵² Fernandes, *Repetition and Transformation* 54.

to explain how Bausch works are less voyeuristic and narcissistic, because they evoke self-conscious questioning of the spectator's own role. She quotes Servos who once again, emphasizes active spectatorship: "the viewer is no longer the consumer of inconsequential pleasures, nor is he witness to an interpretation of reality. He is involved and included."¹⁵³ In other words, Bausch's spectators are not impotent witnesses, lazily enjoying artifice. Rather, they are efficacious, intelligent, and engaged in a consequential search for authenticity. Then, Fernandes negates her own argument by including a Bausch quote that she hopes will validate her Brecht-like claims. In this quote, Bausch says that she attaches little importance to objectivity and "how it really happened," and instead embraces emotional multiplicity and audience empathy in her work, which "transforms itself many and many times, into something that ends up belonging to all of us...we all know these feelings and have them together"¹⁵⁴ Fernandes places this quote directly following the Servos quote, implying equivalence between Bausch's description of transformation and emotional identification, and Servos's description of productivity and efficacy. Fernandes attempts to fit Bausch into a story of intellectual critique, a story that follows disavowals of theatricality described by Bottoms. This forced attempt reveals Fernandes's anxiety surrounding the unproductiveness of artificial illusion, and her anxious need to justify the audience as critical and efficacious.

Later on in the text, Fernandes describes the experience of temporality for Bausch spectators, which supports Bausch's description of audience identification and empathy more than the Brechtian analysis that precedes it. Fernandes implies that Bausch's work does not wake the audience into critical self-consciousness afterall, but

¹⁵³ Fernandes, *Repetition and Transformation* 34.

¹⁵⁴ Fernandes, *Repetition and Transformation* 34.

instead, spirals spectators deeper into dreamland. The lengthy temporality in the dances gives the audience “time to absorb the material presented on stage, to be taken by it, or even to get bored.”¹⁵⁵ Fernandes provides an account of her own experience of this temporality, an account that tells a different story from her earlier description of audience critique:

In the first hour of long performances, I am usually intellectually aware of the stage happenings. As time progresses, I start becoming tired, and my body relaxes into the seat. I become less judgmental and more open to surprising experiences at emotional and physical levels. The constant transformation of the repeated scenes provokes an interplay between old and new images/concepts within my own—now more susceptible—perceptions.¹⁵⁶

Fernandes’s experience of transformation, from a state of intellectual critique to one of emotional openness and empathy, counteracts her earlier claim that Bausch works expose artificiality to self-conscious and critically judgmental spectators. This contradiction points to an underlying anxiety about the artificiality of emotional and physical reactions without intellectual critique. Despite her viewing experiences, Fernandes asserts that Bausch’s intellectual motive to use repetition was a self-conscious and pedagogical mission to expose gendered discipline.

A duet within Bausch’s notorious work, *Café Müller* (1978), provides a site of clashing between these Brechtian analyses and contradicting evidence that Bausch had more spectacular intentions.¹⁵⁷ It begins as a woman with long, disheveled hair and a soft pink dress shuffles toward her disheveled male partner, her arms extended and limp, as though sleepwalking. She softly collides into him, leans her weight, and wraps her arms around his neck, her forehead on his shoulder. A different man dressed in a clean suit

¹⁵⁵ Fernandes, *Repetition and Transformation* 41.

¹⁵⁶ Fernandes, *Repetition and Transformation* 41.

¹⁵⁷ *Pina*.

approaches the pair and begins to carefully sculpt their bodies through a set quintessential and dramatic “couple” poses that look surrealistic and astray in the eerie space. He places their arms down by their sides and pushes their heads together into a kiss, before extending the man’s arms out and lifting the woman up into them. As he places her into her partner’s arms, her arms and head fall backward toward the ground, limp as a ragdoll. As the suited sculptor strides away, satisfied with the shape he’s created, we see her limp body suspend on his arms, before tipping over the edge of his hands, pouring toward the ground with heavy and fluid release. Without hesitating on the floor, she whips back up into verticality and throws her arms around the neck of her partner, returning to their original position. The suited sculptor returns, placing them into the kiss, then the lift. He leaves, she pours to the ground, and whips up into an embrace. This pattern repeats over and over, each time with increasing speed and recklessness. Eventually, the couple goes through each position and fall without the help of the third actor, until the movements, originally executed with thoughtful care, become reckless and uncontrollable. Originally mundane and gestural, the new dance of abandon, throwing, and falling, is outlandish and mesmerizing.

In a 1990 article, David W. Price describes the repetition in this *Café Müller* duet through the Brechtian lens of Fernandes, in which repetition is primarily a means of didactic social critique.¹⁵⁸ Using this piece, Price joins the attempt to squeeze Bausch into Rainer’s role of the choreographer who alienates her audience. In doing so, he projects familiar anxieties about theatricality. He begins his discussion of the duet by claiming

¹⁵⁸ Price, David W. “The Politics of the Body: Pina Bausch’s ‘Tanztheater?’” *Theatre Journal* 42.3 (1990): 322-31. *Performing Arts Periodicals Database*. Web.

that Bausch has pedagogical motives. To Price, Bausch aims to teach her audience about the unnaturalness, and therefore, the inevitable deficiency, of oppressive gender roles:

Even without guidance, the man and the woman cannot succeed in maintaining the correct position...these repeated movements signify that behavior between men and women is learned, culturally coded and determined, and just as inadequate as inept.¹⁵⁹

Price takes a literal approach to analyzing the duet, interpreting the suited man as a powerful figure who disciplines the other bodies. This simplistic analysis of guided discipline only scrapes the surface of a duet full of abandon, chaos, and passion. Even if this singular vision of discipline applies when the duet is slower, it seems like a stretch if we observe how the woman, once placed in her partner's arms, hangs her head back loosely, hardly succumbing to discipline. Such a pedagogical analysis applies less and less as the movements repeat and accelerate into muddled wildness. Here, Price ignores the near-erotic chaos of the scene, the thrill that the woman must feel from passive abandon each time she plunges to the floor with increasing recklessness, and the fervor with which she throws her arms around him. He ignores the dizzying, out-of-control fantasy into which the dance may spiral its audience. He excludes the possibility that perhaps Bausch did not intend to make intellectual sense out of their relationship, but instead, strove to exaggerate and warp its most nonsensical facets. He limits the pleasurable and erotic aspects of the duet by confining it to the productive and austere purpose of educating an audience about gender roles.

Price, like Fernandes and Servos, believes that Bausch disrupts a binary between realistic intellect and absurd spectacle, by incorporating productive and critical intellect into otherwise irrational spectacle. He analyzes Bausch's approach to gender by placing

¹⁵⁹ Price, *Politics of the Body* 329.

her at the theoretical “crossroads” of Brecht and Artaud, two prominent figures of twentieth century avant-garde theater in Europe. Price uses Artaud to describe dreamlike and absurd moments of Bausch works, and Brecht to describe critical moments that wake audience up to conscious reality, which to him are exemplified by the *Café Müller* duet. Price claims that while these two modern theories are often viewed on opposite sides of a binary, Bausch’s work allows us to see them as intertwining in a postmodern context. In effort combine the two theories, he describes some of Bausch’s work as fitting neatly into Brecht’s theories, and other works as fitting nearly into Artaud’s. Yet, this separation reinstates the binaries he claims to disrupt, neglecting multiplicity, murkiness, and queerness in the moments of repetition that he attempts to analyze. By neglecting this multiplicity, he misses the more queer possibility that in Bausch’s work, gender is simultaneously socially constructed, irreconcilable, unstable, and pleasurable exactly because of its instability.

Additionally, while Price rightfully observes that Bausch’s work does not fit neatly into an intellect/spectacle binary, he makes the impression that she gives equal weight to both sides. While we are not examining an exhaustive list of her works, if we look at Bausch from La Rocco’s perspective, Bausch does not intend to disrupt the intellect/spectacle binary so much as embrace the spectacular side of it. While Price and Bausch’s other critics claim to disrupt binaries by highlighting them, they actually tend to privilege the more masculine side of utilitarian intellectual critique and objectivity, over the often-effeminized side of frivolous entertainment and illusion.¹⁶⁰ Price, as well as Fernandes and Servos, apply theories to Bausch choreography that would better suit Rainer’s philosophy of critique, since Rainer exhibits similar anxieties about the

¹⁶⁰ Bottoms, “Efficacy/Effeminacy.”

unproductive nature of spectacle. In order to expand beyond the normative Brechtian analyses of Bausch choreography, in which repetition is purely pedagogical, we will pair her works with more queer takes on pleasure by Judith Butler, Leo Bersani, and Elizabeth Grosz. By layering their notions of pleasure onto Bausch's works, we may interpret her employment of repetition as a means of embracing spectacle rather than a strategy for critical alienation.

Repetition as Extravagant Excess

Writer and choreographer Marianne Goldberg discusses the repetition of cliché in Bausch's work.¹⁶¹ Specifically, she focuses on Bausch's engagement with clichés of romantic and intimate heterosexual interactions, which serve to disorient gendered social scripts. According to Goldberg, while Bausch took concern with oppressive gender norms, she did not, like Rainer, attempt to scrape off these norms in hopes of revealing some objective truth in the physical body. Rather, her work lays these norms on thick, practically screaming them, and in doing so, "distorts ordinary patterns of movement and speech and isolates events into bits that will not gel into conventional meanings."¹⁶² Unlike the Fernandes, who claims that repetition serves to distance spectators from meaning, Goldberg claims that it serves to draw in and distort this meaning, since movements "accumulate new meanings with each repetition."¹⁶³ This view on repetition provides a helpful entry point into watching and interpreting Bausch's work, since Goldberg points to accumulation and distortion of meaning rather than its detachment.

¹⁶¹ Goldberg, Marianne. "Artifice and Authenticity: Gender Scenarios in Pina Bausch's Dance Theatre." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 4.2 (1989): 104-17. Print.

¹⁶² Goldberg, "Artifice and Authenticity" 104.

¹⁶³ Goldberg, "Artifice and Authenticity" 105.

While Goldberg's interpretation begins to scrape the surface of the dreamlike chaos of Bausch's choreography, Goldberg claims that Bausch rejects these accumulated meanings instead of finding pleasure in destabilizing them. She writes that Bausch "presents the ungraceful body, making usually repressed physiological obscenities blatant—her performers spit, smoke, scream or squirt water from their mouths."¹⁶⁴ The second half of this sentence communicates the chaotic pleasure of uncontrollable, and literally overflowing bodies, which we see in *Vollmond* and other works. These uncontrollable bodies enjoy themselves and would take or leave "grace." However, by first claiming that this chaos was choreographed in effort to present the "ungraceful" body, Goldberg slides into the argument that Bausch desires to wake her audience up, to teach her audience about a more authentic "ungraceful" body that performs "usually repressed physiological obscenities" beneath the socially inscribed, oppressive, and "graceful" one. Here, Goldberg disavows grace as shallow and artificial, which sounds similar to Albright's description of Rainer, when she describes how Rainer reveals the authentic and objective physical body, highlighting "even its awkwardness."¹⁶⁵ To say that Bausch actively disavows grace once again places her in the same objectivist theoretical lineage as Rainer.

Bausch does not easily fit into this lineage, when we consider then pleasurable moments of uncontrolled abandon in her choreography. In one of Bausch's short duets featured in *Pina*, which I will call "Falling Duet,"¹⁶⁶ a couple strolls down a set of gray stone steps onto a grassy lawn. The man wears a gray suit and bowtie, and the woman wears a long and flowing strapless ball gown, black with a red floral pattern. The dress

¹⁶⁴ Goldberg, "Artifice and Authenticity" 105.

¹⁶⁵ Albright, "Mining the Dancefield" 20.

¹⁶⁶ I could not locate the year or title of this piece, only the segment included in *Pina*.

covers her feet, creating the illusion that she floats in the breeze, an illusion that contrasts to the man's stiff and angular suit. She wears her long hair like her dress, loose and to be moved. They step out onto the grass and pause to face each other, a few arms widths apart. As though tipped by a gust of wind, the woman suspends forward and falls, her body straight as a board. During this descent, her body remains flat and she does nothing to ensure herself a safe landing. The free-fall lasts longer than expected—he waits to catch her shoulders until her face is less than a foot from the ground. As she falls, I fall with her as witness, feeling her drop in my stomach. As she abandons into his support, her neck and head hang limp from her shoulders, a limpness that's highlighted by her uncontrolled hair. He takes three steps forward to boost her back into the vertical as she takes three steps backward, revealing her sophisticated black-heeled shoes.

The couple turns back to the steps, ascends several levels, pauses to face one another, and repeats the extravagantly perilous fall. This time as I watch, I flinch. The stakes have increased significantly, since now she risks face planting onto concrete rather than grass. He catches her, supports her back into vertical, and they proceed to climb a few more steps. My eyes are now drawn to industrial metal railings framing the steps, amplifying the hardness of the environment. This time, she stumbles forward a few steps before falling, suspending herself for longer on brink of the fall, and pulling the audience into this suspense with her. The man, also in suspense, shifts to stay ready to take her weight. His movement is as confined as her movement is free, since he must predict the timing and distance of her fall. Although these uncontrolled falls repeat three times, their repetition does not lessen their suspense or chaotic thrill, and it certainly does not distance me as a spectator. The freedom of the woman falling creates a spectacle of abandon, which is heightened with each repeat. As a viewer, I empathize with the

thrilling pleasure she must experience from allowing herself to abandon all control to release into another.

One could argue that there was critical and pedagogical motive behind the repetition in this duet, similar to how Price conceptualizes the repetition in *Café Müller*. This interpretation of Bausch's intentions would highlight the woman's socially inscribed and oppressed powerlessness to the sovereign control of her male partner. It would highlight how her pleasure depends on his support, and how women can only fall safely so long as men will catch them. It would critique a patriarchal society in striving for a more egalitarian world, perhaps a responsible one in which the safety at the end of the fall takes priority over the experience of the fall itself. But what if we reframed the duet as not about safety, or responsibility, or his control, or about him at all? In order to take a more queer and pleasure-focused approach to the duet, we will shift focus away from possible social critiques.

Instead we can reframe its dramatic spectacle, heightened by the repeated illusion of limitless abandon, as a source of destabilization. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Judith Butler re-orient's identity categories as sources of erotic pleasure, which are as necessary as they are troubling.¹⁶⁷ Butler claims that repetition allows for the instability and therefore pleasure of socially inscribed categories, stating, "if the category were to offer no trouble, it would cease to be interesting to me: it is precisely the *pleasure* produced by the instability of those categories which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge. 1993. 307-20. Print.

¹⁶⁸ Butler, "Imitation" 308.

Here, she explains her particular interest in her category of “lesbian” as stemming from pleasure: the category is contingent upon the repetition of erotic practices, and whenever there is repetition, there is also instability. This pleasure from the potential to destabilize may allow us to view repetition not necessarily as the reproduction of containment, but as an opportunity for re-orienting containing categories. By examining how Bausch uses repetition through Butler’s lens, we can complicate the imposed binary of real intellectual critique versus artificial spectacle, which limits the experiences of pleasure and abandon in Bausch’s choreography. By considering “imitation, drag, and other forms of sexual crossing,” Butler’s aim is “to turn the homophobic construction of the bad copy against the framework that privileges heterosexuality as origin.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, to Butler, repeated imitation has subversive power, not to point us toward what is objective, but to question our assumptions that there exists some sort of objective neutrality at all.

In this text, Butler refuses the idea that we contain an inner core awaiting liberatory expression. Therefore, we cannot escape from social inscription using Rainer’s strategy of disavowal, rejecting everything extraneous until we are left with only the authentic and objective. However, the psyche’s constant repetition of social scripts does come with subversive potential in that it “impels repetition and so reinstates the possibility of disruption.”¹⁷⁰ Butler explains how repetition in the form of heightened spectacle, such as drag and other kinds of imitation and parody, may be deployed to confuse social scripts of compulsive heterosexuality. While Price interprets repetition in *Café Müller* as Bausch’s didactic strategy for highlighting and obliterating socially constructed norms, Butler’s take on repetition complicates the value of repetition,

¹⁶⁹ Butler, “Imitation” 310.

¹⁷⁰ Butler, “Imitation” 318.

introducing the idea that repetition can highlight nonsensicalness and instability *within* socially constructed norms.

We can therefore disrupt norms embracing the artificiality of categories from the start, and performing this artificiality to reveal “every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effects of *drag*.”¹⁷¹ To Butler, since drag involves repeated and exaggerated imitation, it holds potential to distort these claims to truth, introducing possibilities for making gender “a site of insistent political play.”¹⁷² If we define categories of gender and sexuality by their instability, then performing them and taking pleasure in their destabilization and distortion might offer a more effective strategy for queering gendered constructs, as opposed to the strategy of attempting to eliminate them altogether in hopes of reaching some sort of objectivity. I speculate that many drag performances are pleasurable and entertaining for spectators and performers alike, and that they do not require audiences to detach from spectacle into a state of self-conscious critique. Therefore, Butler’s example of drag performance suggests that embrace of the spectacular and theatrical may allow such a destabilization to occur, perhaps more so than rejecting frivolous entertainment.

While Butler’s chapter does not touch upon the potential pleasures repetition that specifically stem from of uncontrolled abandon, we can add to her conversation by applying it to exaggerated and spectacular gender interactions in Bausch’s work, and layering these interactions with queer theory related to abandon. By emphasizing moments of chaos within these interactions, we can layer self-shattering pleasure onto exaggerated gender performance as we return to “Falling Duet,” *Café Müller*, and

¹⁷¹ Butler, “Imitation” 318.

¹⁷² Butler, “Imitation” 318.

Vollmond. The following section will re-orient Bausch's choreographed repetition as staged abandon, which holds potential to shatter the sovereign control of spectators, by spiraling them into emotional identification with the performers.

Self-Shattering and Overflowing

Butler's theory on imitation provides a useful framework for interpreting Bausch's embrace of spectacle and pleasure, yet it does not provide a way to capture how Bausch spirals her audiences into the dreamy worlds she creates. We could highlight another layer of pleasure from spectacle in Bausch's works by returning to empathy and emotional identification, a kind of melting away of the controlled and critical self, which her choreography may provoke. She accomplishes this in part by staging disorientation and loss of control through repetition, all while holding onto heightened drama and performativity. Returning to "Falling Duet," on the steps, the shattering of self-control is essential to the spectacle. The previous chapter discussed Paxton's "Chute," in which CI students practiced tossing their bodies onto one another, to be caught, or not, by their partners.¹⁷³ We can recall how this passivity required the intellectual mind taking a passive backseat role to the less controlled subconscious. In Bausch's duet, for the woman to experience the wild pleasure of her downward plunge, she must similarly abandon her self as a controlled and conscious sovereign, allowing this control to disintegrate into passive experience.

In "Is the Rectum a Grave?" Leo Bersani claims that the pleasure of being 'bottom' in sex stems from this kind of loss of control and self-abasement.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Paxton, "Chute."

¹⁷⁴ Bersani, Leo. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197-222. Print.

“Phallogentrism,” his term for the centering of the self-sovereign subject who penetrates and would seem to hold control, “doesn’t deny power to women who are ‘bottom,’ but denies the ‘value of powerlessness in both men and women...of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self.”¹⁷⁵ In other words, something is at stake in the image of the dominating, self-sovereign man, but not the desired self-sovereignty of the woman who he dominates. Instead, what is at stake here is the pleasure of losing control, and thereby losing self-sovereignty, which he calls “self-shattering.” In “Falling Duet,” we can interpret the woman’s opportunity to abandon control as an example of “value of powerlessness” described by Bersani. Watching this duet, spectators may also experience a visceral empathy from her experience of self-shattering, suggesting the possibility of a freeing “disintegration” of judgmental sovereign-subjecthood on the part of the audience, into empathy and pleasurable experience. We might observe a similar self-shattering in *Café Müller*, as the woman repeatedly allows herself to pour out of her partner’s arms and into the floor, increasing speed with each repetition. We will return to this duet in relation to notions of overflow surrounding the female body, in order to incorporate a kind of feminized chaos into our interpretation of this duet.

Elizabeth Grosz, who describes the fleshy female body—a “disorder that threatens all order”—that did not quite apply to Rainer’s objective portrayal of the body.¹⁷⁶ However, Grosz might more accurately describe the self-shattering body that Bausch portrays on stage. Grosz describes how Cartesian dualism has established a widely accepted metaphysics about solidity and subjecthood. She quotes political theorist Iris Young who writes in her essay called “The Breasted Experience,” about the

¹⁷⁵ Bersani, “Rectum a Grave” 217.

¹⁷⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 203.

possibility of a more fluid metaphysics if we look at women's out-of-control bodily experiences:

The breasted body becomes blurry, mushy, indefinite, multiple and without clear identity...A metaphysics generated from feminine desire...might conceptualize being as fluid rather than as solid substances, of things. Fluids, unlike objects, have no definite borders; they are unstable, which does not mean that they are without pattern. Fluids surge and move.¹⁷⁷

This theory of the fluid and surging female body adds complexity to the duet in the woman repeatedly pouring from her partner's arms and flinging her arms around him in *Café Müller*. By layering Grosz's more fluid metaphysics onto this spectacle of repeated self-shattering abandon, perhaps replacing *-shattering* with *-surging*, *-melting*, or *-overflowing*, observe empathetic loss of self making way for potential pleasure from the performed wild antagonism in this duet.

A particular moment in *Vollmond* also captures this uncontrolled and feminized chaos.¹⁷⁸ A woman in a pink ball gown charges through the rain toward the space between two men, whose hands are clasped. Their connected arms function as a rope, catching her, as her torso and head fling forward from whiplash. She tosses her head four times, her long hair flinging water into space. They toss her up into the air before sending her off walking, curving around to pause slightly upstage. Another man enters the scene, approaching her and pausing beside her. Slowly and deliberately, he leans his head into hers for a kiss, lingering inches from her mouth. Suddenly, she closes the gap by beginning to peck his lips uncontrollably, walking forward as he moves back. After thirty or so pecks, she has charged him off stage. As she kisses him, she seems to become hypnotized in the compulsive act. Rather than the repeated kisses becoming

¹⁷⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 204.

¹⁷⁸ BAMorg. "Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch: Vollmond at BAM." Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 20 Dec. 2011. Web.

meaningless to me as spectator, I find myself becoming hypnotized right along with her. I lose my sense of self-awareness, as I spiral into identification with her dreamlike experience. Grosz's depiction of the unstable, fluid, female body seems to fit into this hypnotizing experience provided by the dreamland of *Vollmond*. If we layer Butler's pleasure from spectacle, Bersani's shattered subject, and Grosz's fluid body, we have a dance that fits Bausch's spectacular illusions of pleasure much more accurately than the dance that her Brecht-influenced critics describe.

* * * * *

Surprising feedback after the fall performance of "Be Hold Me" led me to consider emotional identification as part of pleasure in dance performance, refining the focus of my choreographic process when it came time to rehearse for "starry-eyed lizard duets" in the spring. In the fall, I set out to create a Bersani- and Grosz-influenced world onstage, in which dancers released sovereign-control into one another, and in following, spiraled the audience into a pleasurable experience of abandon. This scattering of identification would hopefully disperse the sovereign, critical subject, making room for the audience to become swept into more passive and pleasurable experiences.

Based on audience feedback received by dancers and myself, spectators did seem to identify with experiences of pleasure occurring on stage, but with emotional empathy that I had not expected. One dancer described audience identification with the movement experiences, reflecting on comments that audience members walked away with "feelings of support" from witnessing a group of women "literally lifting each other up." While the spectators she describes held conscious knowledge as to why they

experienced their feelings of support, other audience reactions were unexplainably emotional. Some friends of another dancer reported that they had cried during the piece, “not from sadness but just from overwhelming emotion.” Two different spectators told another dancer they cried during the performance.¹⁷⁹ After hearing these reactions, the we found it difficult to know what triggered tears, since we were so close to the choreography process, which used task-based, unemotional strategies influenced by the work of Cunningham and Judson Church Dance Theatre.

My curiosity about the source of this emotional response contributed to my decision to dance in my own piece the following semester. Close to the fall performance, one of my dancers injured her back, so I quickly learned her part in case I would need to step in as an understudy. While these last-minute rehearsals were far from relaxing, they allowed me to step into her experiences of abandon within the piece. I felt the sensation of being lifted away from the reliable floor and into flight, exhaling a burst of laughter as I released weight and control into other bodies. Thankfully, the dancer recovered enough to perform, but I found myself wanting to continue to experience this pleasurable weightlessness in the spring, in order to explore the pleasure that invoked such strong empathy from spectators.

The Spring Thesis Dance concert welcomed related feedback. For my spring choreography, I set out to use repetition in order to exaggerate the nonsensical in human interactions, warping constructed logic. I hoped that this would create a world that spiraled spectators into empathy and pleasure. After the performances of “GET OFF/starry-eyed lizard duets,” I paid close attention to audience reactions to the combined spectacle that Rick and I had constructed. The reactions that stood out to me

¹⁷⁹ “Reflections on Fall Thesis Dance.”

related to experiences of chaotic emotional journeys and warped temporalities. Multiple spectators I talked to reflected that the dance held them at the brink of tears certain points, and caused them to burst with laughter at others. As with the emotional reactions to Fall Thesis Dance, they did not know exactly when or why they cried or laughed. Rather, these emotions developed during unexpected moments that were not overtly *sad* or *funny*. They described the experience of being swept into the worlds as passive, as they were carried through a range of emotions. Spectators also commented that they lost track of time, or that the piece felt absurdly short, even though the combined piece was actually the longest in the concert. One spectator expressed that she did not feel ready to return from the dreamlike temporality of the piece once it had ended.

Epilogue

Luciana Achugar reflects upon her motivation for moving away from her conservatory training in a conversation with dance critic Jennifer Krasinski:

“I started making work out of a kind of frustration with contemporary dance being so formal in a way that was not dealing with theater as a frame, not dealing with why we are dancing or what is dance – not asking any questions, but just continuing a legacy. Postmodern dance is a beautiful aesthetic, but...”¹⁸⁰

Originally from Uruguay, Achugar is now a New York City based choreographer and activist. As she is currently a weekly guest artist at Wesleyan, she presented some of her work to my modern dance class, describing to us her evolving choreographic practices and philosophies. When she first began choreographing, she saw herself less as a choreographer and more as an activist for social and economic justice. She viewed dance as a component of her activist work, as it provided an outlet for physical engagement with issues of social injustice stemming from capitalist exploitation. When she began to make dances in New York, Achugar refused dance performance as a bourgeois practice. She sought to resist the commodification of female bodies by triggering audience critique, causing spectators to become conscious of their role of objectifying voyeur.¹⁸¹ In one piece, she had her dancers stand in a line and stare straight at the audience, forcing spectators to question this position of power.

As Achugar’s work progressed, her intended relationship to her audience evolved. Around the time of Occupy Wall Street, she thought about moving away from dance to do non-dance social justice work. However, she decided to keep choreographing after reflecting on the importance of theater and dance, which to her,

¹⁸⁰ Krasinski, “Offerings on the Practice.”

¹⁸¹ Achugar described that she began working with only women, not because she had a feminist purpose in mind, but because many talented women wanted dance jobs and could not get them, while a few men seemed to get every job.

lies in the value of empathy. Eventually, she decided to make works that would encourage audience empathy and identification with physical experience, setting out to heal spectators of disconnection with their bodies. She told us that in some of her works, she strove to cast a spell on her audience, drawing them into the experience of fleshy and fluid pleasure. In one piece, she described how her dancers sang, spun, and “practiced being in pleasure” in order to let the audience lose track of time and forget about utilitarian motives. She described how this work served as a ritual of *becoming*; a ritual of empathizing with the *moving* and *pulsing* body.¹⁸²

On her website, Achugar presents a photograph of a handwritten manifesto. Whereas Rainer sought out freedom in equal democracy, Achugar seems to envision freedom as anarchy:

To grow ourselves a new body. To give our body their voice back, with a practice of pleasure; to practice growing a body as one would grow a plant; a utopian body; a sensational body; a connected body; an anarchic body...with a brain that melted down to the flesh, the blood, the bones, the guts, the skin...a body in pleasure with eyes that see without naming, they see without knowing...¹⁸³

While this manifesto exhibits much more *yes* than *no*, especially when it comes to pleasure, it seems to arise out of a similar strive toward freedom as Rainer’s “No” manifesto almost half a century earlier.

Although Achugar appears to have transitioned from a Brechtian stance to a politics more focused on chaotic pleasure and audience empathy, her words the following week surfaced how she clings onto anxieties about artifice, which prevail throughout the present U.S. postmodern dance culture. In class the week after her

¹⁸² All of my references to her presentation are from handwritten notes. Sentences may not be completely accurate, but she did use italicized words and quoted phrases in her presentation.

¹⁸³ lachugar.org

presentation, when prompted by my question about her relationship to spectator pleasure, she discussed her intention to create a world that may allow her audience to feel sensations through empathy with dancer experiences. This excited me, as I recalled the image of the spiraling black hole, which draws viewers in and warps experience. Then, she lapsed back to the politics of Rainer. In describing the performed physical experiences that might trigger audience empathy, she felt the need to add a disclaimer, stating these experiences are *not* “presentational” and *not* “masturbatory.” Instead, they are more “true.” She quickly backtracked on the last part (“well, I shouldn’t use the word *true*”), after reconsidering the weight of the word, suggesting that she understands and grapples with the complex tensions between true and false, real and fake.

Achugar’s slip, into a familiar disavowal of frivolous sexual pleasure, resurfaces tensions that continue to shape postmodern dance discourse. As I choreograph, I notice that I police my own practice, sometimes forcing egalitarian “community” where it does not belong, other times self-consciously staring down at my toes while receiving enthusiastic audience applause. These anxieties surrounding artificial and uncontrolled pleasures, anxieties that enforce objectivist reality and utilitarian self-control, draw distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable forms of pleasure. They police the unacceptable forms, and in turn, counteract leftist strives toward freedom. The disorientation from abandoning into a fall, or spinning until dizzy, might be frivolous and artificial. Yet this artifice may offer queer possibilities for pleasure, which destabilize normative forms of relationality. Thinking back to Butler, there might be pleasure in the very act of destabilizing.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Butler, “Imitation.”

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