



Carrie Lambert

## Other Solutions

*How to use the performer as a medium rather than persona? Is a "ballet mécanique" [sic] the only solution?¹*  
– Yvonne Rainer

**Source:** Video Data Bank's *A Woman Who...: Selected Works of Yvonne Rainer, 2005*

As a choreographer, Yvonne Rainer was interested in the objective nature of the human body, its status as a physical thing. Witness the artist's desire to get "away from the personal psychological confrontation with the performer";<sup>2</sup> her concern to "weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the super-stylization of the dancer"<sup>3</sup>; the recurrence, in her famous dance, *Trio A*, of moments in which "one part of the body becomes an object for another part of the body to lift";<sup>4</sup> her acknowledgement that in her work "people may become object-like in the way they are manipulated"<sup>5</sup>; her contrast between the "imperial balletic body" of conventional theatrical dance and the way "the body is an object" in her dance of the 1960s<sup>6</sup>; or her request to be treated like a thing herself when, lying down across the laps of several audience members, she asked them to "please pass me along the row."<sup>7</sup> Or consider her entreaty to one of her dancers, circa 1966: "think of yourself as a barrel."<sup>8</sup>

Rainer's interest in the human body as an object took form in the famously deadpan and pared-down works of this period, now considered master-pieces of postmodern dance. In pieces like *Parts of Some Sextets* (1965) and *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966-68), unadorned athleticism replaced both emotional expression and technical virtuosity. Her performers jogged, rolled, and stood. They hauled large, awkward objects—mattresses, or one another. The

concern this work evinced with physicality over personality paralleled that among the visual artists in Rainer's New York milieu who were then becoming labeled minimalists—artists like Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Robert Morris—with an art so specific and physical that it would preclude metaphorical, metaphysical, or psychological interpretation. Artworks became "specific objects" to shake off the high-art connotations of sculpture and painting; in dance, bodies were made object-like for similar reasons. Both minimalism and postmodern choreography participated in a period attempt to counter the assumptions that Rainer's generation often labeled "humanist" and associated with the New York School in painting and Martha Graham's expressionism in dance: expectations that art reveal the subjectivity of its creator; that it express universal values or the essential nature of the human condition; that even in abstraction it transcend the merely material. Frank Stella complained about "the humanistic values" old-fashioned viewers insisted on finding in art, "asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object."<sup>9</sup> And Mel Bochner explained two years later that the new art was "dumb in the sense that it does not 'speak to you,' yet subversive in that it points to the probable end of all Renaissance values."<sup>10</sup> Shared across the arts and among various movements of this time, but exemplified

most obviously in minimalism, in its various versions this orientation manifested as phenomenological anti-idealism, ethical anti-anthropocentricism, or aesthetic anti-expressionism.

From a historical standpoint, though, it was the registration in practice of the social condition of art in the postwar period: of the fact that humanist principles had lost validity for art in a late-capitalist United States where individualism and freedom were cards to be played in the cold war's ideological contest, and where humanist themes were deployed and dissolved in the consumer-culture stream of images and information; where, as Herbert Marcuse wrote in 1964, "the music of the soul is also the music of salesmanship."<sup>11</sup> Under these conditions it would have been meaningless for the avant-garde to counter alienation with a celebration of subjectivity, and in her verbal statements Rainer sounds like the very voice of the post-humanist aesthetic that acknowledged this reality. But because people were her material, rather than paint or steel, the choreographer's words also suggest most clearly the risk this aesthetic ran of confusion with the coldest technocratic worldview, as she advocates the use of the human body in its literal, neutral, and physical dimension alone: people as things.

This essay, however, is about how Rainer refused to let things be. Her refusal is

*Hand Movie, 1966*

nowhere more evident than in five short films she made between 1966 and '69. These were experiments predating Rainer's transformation from choreographer to feature-length, narrative filmmaker in the 1970s, screened for artist friends such as Deborah and Alex Hay and Richard Serra, and used as elements in multi-media performance pieces. Linewas shown to art and film audiences when Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow selected it for a program at the Paula Cooper Gallery in 1969, but the films then went almost unseen until 2003, when they were shown on video at Rainer's retrospective at the Rosenwald-Wolf Gallery of the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.<sup>12</sup>

Happily, they are now more much accessible, with their release on a DVD produced and distributed by the Video Data Bank in Chicago.<sup>13</sup>

Rainer gave the films on this disk the collective title *Five Easy Pieces*, a borrowing that befits her claim that they were not quite full-blown art works, but "exercises." The silent, 8- or 16mm films of this celluloid sketch-book are indeed modest, but also complex and telling. Each equates bodies and things; each approaches the condition of ballet mécanique that Rainer mused about in the line from her notebook that is the epigraph of this essay. But each ultimately refuses this condition, and the films' resulting ambiguities constitute a historically important critique of the anti-humanist aesthetic from within. What Rainer called her "short boring

films" are in fact extraordinary exposures of contradictions within the cool, objective model of 60s art—and clues that these tensions are what made it significant in the first place.

Against a pale gray ground, the back of a hand. Its fingertips graze the top of the frame, its wrist-bone the bottom edge. For the next five minutes it is hand and nothing but hand for the viewer of Rainer's first film: hand moving, hand turning, hand filling the field of vision. The first two knuckles of the middle finger bend and straighten. The fingertip bobs between unmoving mates, and a tendon pops in and out of relief, demonstrating the hand's mechanics. The fingers rub against one another, bend forward, lean apart. The hand rotates on its vertical axis to show its palm. The fingers keep up their exploratory wiggling, each discovering how far it can reach and in what directions it can move, each discerning the shape and feel of the others. *Hand Movie* is a dance performed by fingers, tendons, palm, wrist, and thumb.

The black-and-white 8-mm film, the low level of contrast, and the even lighting combine with the visual isolation of the hand—from its body, from its mate—to create a vaguely clinical mood (as opposed, for instance, to that which might surround the animated but disembodied hand's horror-film kin). This mode of studied neutrality, so typical of the artistic moment, comes in large part from the anonymity of the appendage onscreen. The hand belongs to someone, and we presume it

to be Rainer's. But its attachment to a person seems beside the point. The hand is neither an old hand nor a child's; it is not immediately identifiable as either male or female; it bears no identifying—signifying—markers (no nail polish, wristwatch, rings).<sup>14</sup> The neutral mode of the film is also a function of its avoidance of all other kinds of signification: none of the hand's gestures, even in passing, resemble conventional signs (no spreading of index and middle finger to signal victory or peace, no a-ok circle of index finger and thumb). The hand is at once articulate and dumb. This is all the more notable since, culturally, the human hand holds together the two things that artists in Rainer's milieu were most eager to drop from art circa 1966: individual personality and interpretable signification. Think of the "artist's hand," classic metaphor for the inherence of individual personality in the art object; or of the long history of attempts to link the seeming arbitrariness of linguistic signs to the supposedly natural language of gesture; or think of the hands' ability in sign language to convey both linguistic meaning and emotional inflection. It is in a virtuoso demonstration of minimalist restraint that *Hand Movie* pries gesture from metaphor, hand from human self.

And yet, if it is a carefully cultureless hand, the very fact that the viewer recognizes it as such calls attention to the process that the film carefully stymies. That is, the film enacts—or it causes us to enact—our inability not to inventory and decode the cultural and biological data of a hand offered to our

view. And while the hand may not convey information—it does not sign—the way we use our hands as information gatherers is everywhere implied by the exploratory movements of the fingers. That it is self-exploration, vaguely onanistic, only adds to the possibility for strangely psychological drama and comedy that undercuts the neutrality of the film—whose title Rainer admits was a partial pun on “hand job.” The hand’s very verticality in the image gives it a humanoid presence, and as the fingers move they become ersatz figures as well. They even acquire personalities (isn’t that middle finger the most adventurous and witty, the thumb a slightly dull hanger-on?) and have little digital dramas (isn’t there something less than wholesome about the way the index finger gropes for the ring finger’s fleshy pad?).

Now, it might be objected that to find such images in the film is to depart from a properly minimalist appreciation for the literal, physical thing—in this case, for the strictly physiognomic intelligence of the moving hand. But the encounter with minimalism was never so pure, as no one noted better than Rainer herself. In a 1967 essay in *Arts Magazine*, the artist described Morris’s minimalist sculpture in terms of what was elsewhere referred to as its objecthood or literalism—his works were “stolid, intrepid entities that keep the floor down,” she wrote—and linked it to the explicitly anti-human-but the world does not look back.”<sup>15</sup> But Rainer also acknowledged the impossibility of experiencing the minimalist objects only as such, and on this point turned again to the French author: “one is drawn into a situation of ‘complicity’ with the object, to borrow a term from Robbe-Grillet. Its flatness and grayness are transposed anthropomorphically into inertness and retreat. Its simplicity becomes ‘noncommunicative,’ or ‘noncommittal.’”<sup>16</sup> In his use of the term, Robbe-Grillet was lambasting the humanist tendency to anthropomorphize the physical world and then to hold it as a “crime against humanity” when contemporary artists like himself acknowledged instead the alien quality, the utter indifference, of inanimate matter. Rainer, rather, accepts the tendency toward complicity as basic to perception. The interest in psychology, even character that would surface in Rainer’s feature films is apparent

as early as 1966: *Hand Movie* demonstrates the impossibility of maintaining Robbe-Grillet’s stance, especially when the object at hand is the human body, in whole or in part.

The central issue of *Hand Movie*, then, is the inextricability of supposedly second-order processes such as meaning, personality, and projection from the first-order thingness of body and world. This investigation emerges directly from Rainer’s choreographic concerns with the body as object, but had special resonance at the time *Hand Movie* was produced. For Rainer began her experiment with the medium of film under extraordinary circumstances: *Hand Movie* was made in the hospital while she recovered from a life-threatening illness and major surgery in 1966. Her friend, dancer William Davis, brought a super-8 camera to the hospital, and filmed Rainer moving her hand as a way to dance when her body couldn’t: “I was very ill, but I could move my hand.”<sup>17</sup> *Hand Movie* thus participates in the testing by Rainer’s generation of the necessity of the link between dance and the ideal of a body beautiful, youthful, and well; an investigation Rainer would continue not long afterward, when, following another bout of illness, she performed a shaky, weakened version of her dance *Trio A* under the title *Convalescent Dance*. But beyond testing dance conventions, Rainer’s work with dance and illness addressed fundamental questions about the status of the human body. For a hospital bed gives special vantage on the degree to which the body is a thing, the degree to which the body is a self, and the validity of that distinction. From this, then, Rainer’s first film: on the one hand, a lesson in physiological mechanics; on the other, in imagination.

The meeting of mechanics and imagination also defines Rainer’s next filmic venture. *Volleyball* (1967) is a series of shots, each a variation on the same basic scenario. The knee-level camera (operated by Bud Wirtschafter) is aimed down toward a wood-beam floor and into a corner. A ball rolls slowly into the frame, its impetus unseen. The camera moves slightly to track it. The ball bumps into one of the walls. Someone—of whom we can only see smooth, bare calves, white bobby socks, and a worn pair of Keds—

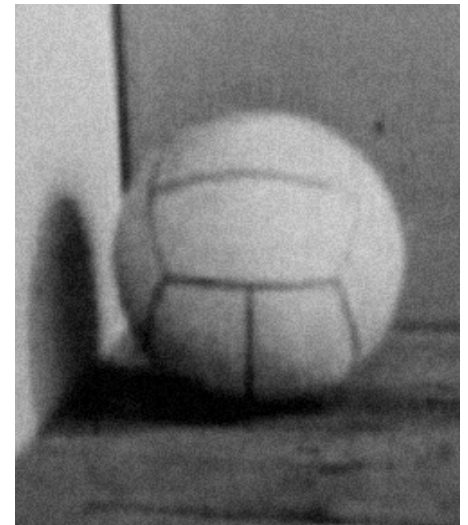
walks toward the ball, slowly but purposefully. The feet meet the ball, touch it, or wait for it to touch them. When the ball settles into place, so does the camera. Cut. Repeat.

The ball’s travel is based on high-school physics—it is a body in motion; an equation of force, mass, and momentum. But here these factors are endlessly complicated by the incidentals no textbook asks a student to consider. The volleyball, which we think of as round, is of course far from it, its surface a pattern of deep grooves between strips of white leather. And this not-round body is put in contact with a floor that is as far from the physics books’ frictionless plane as can be—a collection of warped and uneven floorboards, all gaps and snags. The combination of these specific topographies is all it takes to produce motion in endless variation, eccentric paths in which the ball doubles back or stops before it seems it should, takes a sudden jog left or right, or gives an animated little wiggle as it settles into place. The first few times, it is just a ball, rolling, but the unexpected changes in momentum and motion grow increasingly engrossing, even endearing as the scenario is repeated. We anthropomorphize; we are made “complicit.” Meanwhile, the feet take their few steps again and again, and details like the style of the socks and the holes worn in the sneakers are duly noted. But there’s no doubt who the star of this movie is. By the end, the ball seems as lively as a rambunctious child, the legs as wooden as the floor.

The dynamics of *Volleyball* become clearest if we look at the film as Rainer’s corner piece, an answer to certain more canonical works of the 1960s. In one corner, picture the untitled 1964 piece by her then-companion Robert Morris: a giant plywood wedge wheeled into the corner of a gallery, altering the shape of the room. In another, imagine Joseph Beuys’s 1960 *Fat Corner*, filling the corner and thus the space with the German artist’s particular brand of physicality-as-meaning.<sup>18</sup> The slice that Morris’s piece takes out of the room calls attention to the literal physicality of the altered architectural container, and to that of the human viewer contained along with it.<sup>19</sup> In this it exemplifies the revision of art spectatorship accomplished by his minimalism—its emphasis on the



*Volleyball (Foot Film), 1967*



literal co-presence of thing and person, on the embodied situation in real space and experiential time. Beuys's corner piece does exactly the opposite: it saturates physicality with meaning. Built on the contrast of architectural structure and formless fat, depending on the organic material's evocative fleshiness and on its role in the artist's personal myth of death and rebirth, *Fat Corner* works by setting off a series of symbols: it is more literary than literal.

*Volleyball*, Rainer's corner piece, claims neither the neutral physicality of Morris' corner nor the mystical energy of Beuys'. Yet with its modest means it gives the viewer something of both. Like Morris' sculpture, the film insists on the relation between artwork and viewer. But where the minimalist wedge addresses us as physical entities whose primary determinants are spatial and kinetic, it is the psychological propensity for empathy and projection that Rainer's film causes us to acknowledge. The medium of film, its use of time and motion, allow Rainer to do what minimalism was supposed to avoid doing at all costs—to infuse the physical with something like personality—while her absurdly limited means and nakedly quotidian objects keep at bay any hint of metaphysics. The merely physical bodies and forces in combination with the irrepressible imagination of the viewer become wondrous enough—an alternative both to the demystifying recalcitrance of minimalist literalism and to Beuys' compensatory re-mystification of the physical world.

In the following year, Rainer would make two films that suggested, in very different ways, the beginning of the end of the neutral, object-like performer. The first of these, *Rhode Island Red*, creates as an alternative to the ballet mécanique a kind of ballet organique—animals rather than either human actors or inanimate objects. Shot by Roy Levin at a poultry farm where Rainer had stopped to buy eggs during a residency at Goddard College in 1968, it consists of two long shots—seven and five minutes long—of a barn full of chickens. Their hundreds of heads pop up and down, side to side. Occasionally, a bird fluffs feathers and wings in a short flight, before returning to the field of perpetual avian motion. In the first shot, light streams in from the side, washing out the back wall of the barn and making the size of the space impossible to gauge. In the second shot, the camera has been relocated, closer to the chickens and with the space behind them closed off by a row of their roosts.

The film is effective at closing off signification as well. None of the poultry-related metaphors (pecking order? henhouse?) give any entrée into the meaning of what is going on in this film, so seemingly distant from the urban lofts, basements, and gymnasiums that are normally the staging ground of Rainer's art. Nor is there any kind of commentary on farming practices or animal rights, though the hundreds, maybe thousands of chickens are packed together on the floor of the barn. Rather, *Rhode Island Red* is all but abstract;

a massive, moving, all-over painting on film. It might even seem aestheticizing, if its monotonous temporal extension, like one of Bruce Nauman's deadpan, repetitive films of the same period, weren't such a test of the viewer's attention, and if the total effect of the incessant motion of these living creatures were less like television static.

The kind of movement with which Rainer fills the screen in *Rhode Island Red* is distinctly inhuman; no human dancer could re-create the stuttering precision with which the pecking birds jerk from position to position. With this dancerless field of motion, the third short film comes closest to ballet mécanique, and you can see why Rainer would describe it as both funny and bitter.<sup>20</sup> But this is also the film that pulls back most sharply from performance voided of human subjectivity—at least for a moment. For there is incident in the film after all: the cut from the first shot to the second, certainly, but also the entrance halfway through the first shot of a distant human figure at the far end of the coop, methodically gathering eggs. A small, faint silhouette almost lost in the bright light and nearly hidden behind a support beam, visible only for a few minutes if he is noticed at all, this wraithlike figure changes everything. The film becomes, not a purposefully boring temporal exercise, nor a wry statement about the possibilities for postmodern dance, but a hesitant dialectic of the mundane and the transcendent; one that begins to reframe the kind of dance Rainer was known for inventing. The choreographer





Rhode Island Red, 1968

wrote in 1966 that what she was aiming for in her dances was a quality of movement resembling the way “one would get out of a chair, reach for a high shelf, or walk down stairs.”<sup>21</sup>

It was this prosaic quality that characterized the “movement-as-task or movement-as-object” with which her work of the minimalist moment brought the dancing body back to literal, physical, fact. In the chicken coop, Rainer discovered a found-object version of this kind of activity in the literally quotidian task of the egg-gatherer. But now, in 1968, contrasted with the inhuman movement of the chickens and wrapped in radiance, this task-like motion becomes, against all expectations, lyrical. It is the music of the soul—albeit for a world that may not have one. The man performs his workaday human movement: plain, uneventful, and unaccountably touching. And then Rainer cuts to another shot of chickens in the coop.

The second film of 1968 takes place in a space as unlike the chicken farm as can be imagined—a white-on-white, fashionably minimalist living room—and finds its way out of a strict objectivism not through transcendence, but through humor. Shot by Phill Niblock and featuring Steve Paxton, Becky Arnold, and an enormous white balloon, *Trio Film* is the first of these works to include human figures who are both whole and fully visible. The performers’ behavior includes chatting calmly (but inaudibly) on a

couch and performing back somersaults over it, passing the balloon back and forth and seating it next to them, tossing it between them and walking with it pressed between their bodies. The camera plays along, sometimes tracking the travel of the balloon, sometimes that of a person, sometimes lingering on an empty seat cushion until the balloon is placed there. Rainer called the carriage of the performers in *Trio Film* “decorous,” and indeed all is done with a calm detachment, all the more notable because both performers are entirely nude. Rainer has referred to *Trio Film* as her *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, and it is comparable to Manet’s painting in the conjunction of civilized, social behavior and matter-of-fact nakedness.<sup>22</sup>

The conceit of the film is the likeness of the three entities within it. At two-and-a-half feet in diameter, the white balloon has a certain bulk. It is near-weightless, of course, but like Claes Oldenburg’s outsized, soft typewriters or toothpaste tubes, the balloon has body-like qualities. These are not the fleshiness or weight of the human figure, however. The balloon is a body in the way a planet is a celestial body: the concept *body* separated from *human* or *animal*. At the same time, like the volleyball in Rainer’s earlier film or the hand in her first, it is an object that attracts projection—as it bounces into the scene or takes a seat beside the dancers, it becomes a performer in its own right. Whether to recognize this is to anthropomorphize the balloon or to de-personify the performers

is undecidable, however: either the balloon has as much personality as the affectless dancers, or they have as little as it does. And of course, Rainer’s title doesn’t distinguish between human and nonhuman members of the trio.

Here, Rainer again exemplifies the vaunted neutrality of the 1960s avant-garde. Filmed in 1968, *Trio Film* was made at the height of minimalism’s ascendancy in the visual arts. By then, minimal art had become an-ism, had been featured in several major museum exhibitions, and was on tour in Europe as the latest officially-certified American contemporary art.<sup>23</sup> Rainer’s own theorization of minimal aesthetics in dance appeared in Gregory Battcock’s movement-defining anthology *Minimal Art* that same year. It happens that the apartment in which *Trio Film* was shot belonged to art dealer Virginia Dwan, who in the 1960s represented artists like Carl Andre and Sol LeWitt. But we wouldn’t need to know its owner to identify the sleek, low, white furniture against white walls and on white carpet as the latest in minimal chic; or to recognize the film as a gentle poke at the seriousness of minimalist art.

Imbued all along with something like what a viewer once astutely called Rainer’s “goofy glamour,” it is fitting that *Trio Film* ends in laughter.<sup>24</sup> Arnold tries and fails to keep a straight face, as Paxton, visible only from the waist down and holding the ball to his

*Line*, 1969

belly, jumps up and down on the cushion next to her, causing his penis and testicles and her breasts to bounce like so many white balloons. The film ends, in Rainer's words, when Arnold's "professional detachment" crumbles into "unabashed glee."<sup>25</sup> It is as if the whole exercise had been a test: how long can you keep pretending your nude body is neutral—that your physicality is the same as that of a white balloon, or that sexual difference can be stripped from human bodies as easily as clothes? *Trio Film* happily undercuts the physical neutrality it so carefully established.

After seeing *Trio Film* projected onstage opposite a pornographic film in her performance piece *Rose Fractions*, Carl Andre wrote an admiring letter to Rainer, musing that "making love looks like the blue movie but feels like the balloon movie."<sup>26</sup> What the juxtaposition helped Andre see was that the aesthetic of objectivity had been transformed by *Trio Film*—for him, into a visual metaphor of subjective experience itself. The film remains the document of a period attempt to think of the human body as part of the physical world, an object among objects. But its pleasures—for us and for the performers—turn on the disparity among objects inanimate and animate, male and female. The likeness of breasts, balls, and balloons is funny precisely because, in the world outside the white-on-white enclosure, they are so significantly different. *Trio Film* is unlike minimalist sculpture (more like Oldenburg's, perhaps, or Hesse's), in

registering the potential absurdity of its premise.

Like *Volleyball* and *Trio Film*, *Line* includes a round object whose source of movement is not known. Shot by Niblock in 1969, the last of the short films begins with a black ball emerging from the lower left corner of a blank, white frame, moving slowly on the diagonal toward the upper right. Unlike the volleyball that rolls and the balloon that floats into Rainer's images, the black circle moves at a constant, slow pace and is not subject to gravity or momentum. There is nothing in the image to give us a sense of scale—the ball could be large and distant or tiny and close to the camera, and the white space around or behind infinitely deep or minutely shallow—until a pair of legs, clad in white trousers, steps into the frame. The legs are followed by the rest of the body of a young woman with blonde hair and heavily made-up eyes, who lies down on her stomach, facing away from the viewer. This performer, Susan Marshall, holds a pen and seems to write on a vertical white surface before her. Although we can't see what she writes, the gesture causes this plane to "appear" in a space whose shape and size are now defined in relation to her body. This film centers on the three-way relation of object, human body, and space—which is to say, on the defining triad of minimalist art. But here, Rainer dissolves the literalness, the grounding in the physical world on which minimalist art, including her own, insisted, and undercuts the very understanding of the human body that

this art had put in place. First, *Line* reveals itself as an experiment in the camera's capacity to distort distance and scale. We are never quite sure of the size of the black bead or its location, even when the body of the woman gives us a clue to the spatial dimensions of the shot. In the encounter with minimalist objects the relationship grounds both artwork and viewer in an irreducible physicality. Rainer stages a similar encounter as a filmic trick, a special effect.<sup>27</sup> The viewer is now a spectator, outside the scene of the encounter, disembodied and ungrounded.

It seems no coincidence that it is with writing—code, language—that the woman shapes the space around her. For in this film, materiality gives way to a reality that is cultural rather than physical. As the ball continues to crawl on its diagonal path,<sup>28</sup> the blonde woman squirms around in the nowhere space. Sometimes she crouches, so that her bottom fills the frame. She periodically leans on her elbow and looks over her shoulder at the camera, speaks, though we can't hear her, bats her eyelashes, and flashes flirtatious grins. These smiles are a far cry from the irrepressible laughter of Becky Arnold in *Trio Film*, just as Marshall's behavior is the precise opposite of the task-like movement in the earlier film. Here, instead, is self-display filtered through millions of media images—indeed, Rainer described Marshall's expressions as "classic toothpaste-ad" smiles.<sup>29</sup> With this film, a line is crossed: the social meaning of the equation of human and thing has entered the picture.

This 1969 film is important for marking the entrance of feminism into Rainer's artistic thought.<sup>30</sup> But, art-historically, it is also significant as an instance of the breakdown of minimalism's neutral mode of embodiment—its tendency “to position artist and viewer alike not only as historically innocent, but as sexually indifferent,” as Hal Foster has put it.<sup>31</sup> Foster credits the mid-70s feminist art of Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, and others with the critique of this aspect of minimalism, but Rainer's work is an important place to look for its earlier historical emergence. For it is here that the asexual, cultureless body of minimalism gradually becomes unsustainable, here that object becomes objectification.

“We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human beings to the status of things.”<sup>32</sup> In this simple sentence from the Port Huron Statement, the founders of Students for a Democratic Society articulated the model of subjectivity that backed the political and cultural revolution augured by their 1962 document—and the model was unapologetically humanist. Scholars have given us several ways to understand the seeming discrepancy between avant-garde and counterculture in the 1960s. One can, with some historians, see artists like Stella, Warhol or Judd—all considerably older than the “sixties generation”—to have been wrapped up in the technocratic project of mainstream society in the Cold War era. One can, with structuralist and poststructuralist critics, understand the artists to have gone much further philosophically than did the optimistic leaders of youth movements. Or, one can question whether the cool, objectivizing aesthetic of the avant-garde ever really was.

The play with objects and bodies in Rainer's *Five Easy Pieces* is tonic against any tendency to think of anti-humanism in 1960s art as fixed, accomplished, or achieved; as a position an artist could occupy, a characteristic she could have, or a philosophy to which she could subscribe. Instead, they imply it was something more like a process in which an artist might engage, something for which we might use all the bobbing and nodding and bouncing in the films as a metaphor: anti-humanism only, ever, in

motion. How to acknowledge dehumanizing conditions without becoming part of them? How to imagine a way out of those conditions without becoming their disguise? An answer to the double problem of art in late modernity is a lot to ask of a hand, a volleyball, and some chickens. But Rainer's five short films gave the only one there is: the solution to the problem is to keep posing it.

## Notes

While initially conceived for publication with this DVD, this essay appeared in a slightly different form in the Fall 2004 issue of *Art Journal* and is reproduced courtesy of the College Art Association.

**1** “Miscellaneous notes” on *The Mind is a Muscle*, in Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73* (Halifax and New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 1974), 106 (hereafter cited as *Work*). These were retrospective notes written sometime in the years 1969-71 (Rainer, e-mail to the author, May 9, 2003).

**2** *Work* 96.

**3** “Statement,” from program for *The Mind is a Muscle*, April, 1968, in *Work*, 71.

**4** Author's notes from “Out of a Corner of the Sixties,” lecture by Yvonne Rainer, Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, October 7, 1997.

**5** *Work*, 211.

**6** “Out of a Corner.”

**7** This took place in a performance of the improvisational dance troupe Grand Union in 1972.

**8** *Work*, 75. This instruction was Rainer's response when David Gordon told her that in doing a particular section of *Trio A* he was thinking of himself as a faun.

**9** Bruce Glaser, “Questions to Stella and Judd,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, 1968, 157-8.

**10** M. [Me] Bochner, “Primary Structures,” *Arts Magazine* vol. 40, no. 8 (June 1966), 34.

**11** Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial*

*Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 57.

**12** The artists Gregg Bordowitz and Mark Dion borrowed them from Rainer and screened them privately while participants in the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1985. Bordowitz, e-mail to author, September 15, 2003.

**13** TK: Released May, 2005.

**14** It is, however, a light-skinned hand. The lack of race consciousness by white artists during most of the 1960s, which would have allowed whiteness to go unmarked in cases like this, points to the blind spot of the 60s avant-garde focus on the body as a neutral, phenomenological entity rather than a socially-defined one. Rainer would explore the cultural coding of bodies in depth in her later career as a filmmaker, but I argue here that neutrality was already internally compromised in Rainer's work of the 1960s.

**15** Yvonne Rainer, “Don't Give the Game Away,” *Arts Magazine* (April 1967), 44-7. Rainer's quotes come from Alain Robbe-Grillet's essay “Nature, Humanism, Tragedy,” in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965; reprinted by Northwestern University Press, 1989). For a New Novel was, in Rainer's words, “kind of a bible for me” in the 1960s (Rainer, interview by author, February 23, 2003). Rainer's 1967 essay deserves more recognition in the historical literature. Though it is not focused exclusively on minimalism, in it Rainer nails many of the attributes that have become central to historical analysis of this art: not only its anthropomorphism, but also its literalness (“It occupies space differently from other sculpture. One might say sculpture didn't take up room until this sculpture. It doesn't 'aspire'; it squats.”); its relation to the viewer (“It includes me in its space, but defies all attempts to know any more about

it than what a single glance can offer."); and its temporal and relational character ("Your sense of time is affected... Do it and I share the same time? Does it exist without my presence?").

**16** *Ibid.*, 47.

**17** Rainer, interview with the author, July 14, 1999.

**18** Rainer and Morris would have been familiar with works like this one, if not from international art magazines, then from a six-week residency in the fall of 1964 in Düsseldorf, where Beuys was Professor at the Kunstakademie; indeed, he acted as stage-manager for a performance there by the two Americans. See "Chronology," in *Yvonne Rainer: Radical Juxtapositions 1961-2002* (Philadelphia: University of the Arts, 2002), p.137.

**19** Annette Michelson wrote about this effect of *Untitled* (*Corner Piece*) in "Robert Morris: An Aesthetic of Transgression," in *Robert Morris* (Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969), 37-9.

**20** *Work*, 209.

**21** Yvonne Rainer, "A Quasi Survey of Some "Minimalist" Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of Trio A," in *Work*, 67.

**22** *Work*, 209.

**23** James Meyer's history of minimalism illuminates this aspect of its trajectory. See Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the 1960s*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

**24** *Work*, 46.

**25** *Work*, 210.

**26** Andre, letter to Rainer, February 13, 1969, reproduced in *Work*, 158.

**27** As such, it is a reminder that *Five Easy Pieces* is, among other things, a filmic sampler. Each piece works through a different aspect of the medium: *Hand Movie* and *Volleyball* explore the use and meaning of the frame; *Rhode Island Red*, film's fundamentally visual character, as we become aware, in their conspicuous absence, of the sound and odor of the coop. Each of them is in some way also filmic by opposition, in the sense that each produces effects impossible in live performance. For instance, while there are kinds of dance in which hand movement is far more articulated and important than in western dance—traditional Indian and Balinese styles are obvious examples—the dance of a hand alone and as such is something only camera and projector will allow. Likewise, *Rhode Island Red's* spatial dissolve is a matter of the light's effect on the lens and emulsion, on filmic chemistry and optics. Rainer specifically played with the contrast of film and performance when *Volleyball* was projected on a raised screen placed center stage during *The Mind is a Muscle* in 1967-68. When the choreography brought the dancers directly behind the screen the audience would only see their lower bodies, cropped like the legs in the film.

Rainer created a situation in which a film itself performed an act of framing on live, performing bodies.

**28** The ball was actually a bead on a string attached to a motor that slowly reeled it in.

**29** *Work*, 211.

**30** Although several authors have examined the feminist implications of her earlier work, Rainer dates her awakening to the political stakes of questions about women's lives to around 1970. See Rainer, "Skirting and Aging: An Aging Artist's Memoir," in *Radical Juxtapositions*, 89-90.

**31** Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Line raises the very questions of the displayed female body that femi-nist film theory, and Rainer's own work, would explore in such depth in the following decade This is an issue in many of Rainer's films, but is particularly stressed in *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985) in which the female protagonist is an off-camera voice who never appears on screen. For an in-depth discussion of this aspect of the film and of the implications of visibility and invisibility see the chapter on Rainer in Peggy Phalen's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

**32** *The Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society* (New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1962), 4.

