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Talk Performance: Extemporaneous Speech, Artistic Discipline, and Media in the Post-1960s American Avant-garde

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation narrates the circulation and institutionalization of an emergent category of *talk performance* within the late-twentieth century US avant-garde through the career trajectories of three artists from disparate disciplinary backgrounds working in and around the 1970s: theatrical monologist Spalding Gray, poet David Antin, and dance artist and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer. All established themselves through more obviously discipline-coherent work before turning to extemporaneous *talk* as a performance strategy within the shifting critical and cultural environments of post-1960s avant-gardes. Undertaking a comparative study collecting these practices under the label *talk performance*, this project uncovers the processes by which these artists both resisted and relied upon disciplinary structures, and the media technologies and formats that attend those structures, to configure their work within particular arts discourses. Talk performance becomes a provocative site for understanding how minimalist interventions into formal disciplinary categories helped define the reapportionment of the overall art situation in the aftermath of the 1960s along lines of rhetorical and institutional distinction that still persist.

Employing newly available multimedia archives and a historiographic approach to the various narrow disciplinary accounts of the late-twentieth-century American avant-garde that have become standard, this project recuperates traces of an unacknowledged, interdisciplinary set of talk performance practices. Premised on their status as ephemeral, embodied, and collectively negotiated, the practices of these three artists actually prove to be deeply entwined with forms of media other than live performance, as found material on which extemporaneous performance is

scaffolded, as means to represent and circulate extemporaneous talk, or as an editorial model for the role that talk plays in realizing a performance. In each case, the aesthetic and procedural tendencies these artists established went on to circulate in or be adapted to secondary media formats that drew on traditional models of authorship to establish their reputations. Paradoxically, these works then tend to circulate more widely and even enter the mainstream based on the authenticating power of their embedded extemporaneity and the status bestowed by their apparent disciplinary resistance. *Talk Performance* articulates a performance history that understands arts disciplines as contingent categories determined by historical situation, critical intervention, and material possibility, upon which the creative and intellectual exigencies of performance practice, scholarship, and criticism are nonetheless built.

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This dissertation has benefitted immeasurably from the support, advice, and feedback of so many. Thanks to the relationship of my research to my artistic practice, that group encompasses many inside the academy and a number outside of it as well, who may not have even known they were contributing to my project. It would be difficult to express my gratitude to every person or institution that has made this project possible, but I mean to try. I am extremely fortunate to have had a supportive and collegial dissertation committee. My dissertation chair, Susan Manning, is an extraordinary mentor, her counsel and pedagogy were instrumental in shaping what was a very big and amorphous idea – to write about talking – into a researchable and executable project. She has been a critical guiding force at every stage of this project, providing guidance and feedback, while allowing me the space to forge my own way through the process. Her ever-present confidence that I would successfully complete my dissertation carried me through more often than I care to admit – "Susan seems to think I can do it, so I've decided to trust her" was my frequent refrain – and she has been a great person to celebrate successes with along the way as well, both big and small.

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David Antin chapter benefitted from the workshop with the Futures of Poetics Working Group sponsored by the Poetry and Poetics Colloquium at Northwestern in 2014. The Yvonne Rainer chapter was developed in the Dance and Theatre Studies working group that I assisted Susan Manning and Nadine George-Graves in convening at the American Society for Theatre Research conference in Baltimore in 2015. And aspects of the Spalding Gray chapter were presented at many conferences, and particularly benefited from the panel I organized at the 2016 Modern Language Association Convention in Austin on scholarly, editorial, and creative uses of Gray's multimedia archive with Christopher Grobe, James Sitar, and Lian Amaris.

The questions and interests that animate this project started with my own creative and pedagogical practice, and I am grateful to all the teachers, friends, collaborators, and presenters who have been a part of my experiments with and exploration of talk performance. Seth Bockley gave me the opportunity (thanks to Jessica Hudson's recommendation) to perform an autobiographical monologue as part of Walkabout Theater's *Impossible Cities: A Utopian Experiment* in 2007, which set me on this path. I was able to explore my thoughts about talking and writing while an MFA student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) as a guest lecturer in a writing course taught by Ruth Leitman, and then through my own course, as well as in a summer sound course at Ox-Bow School of the Arts with Mark Booth and Lou Malozzi, and in a workshop on autobiographical performance with Holly Hughes at Links Hall. Other performance opportunities have come by way of Dan Godston and Borderbend Arts Collective, Aurora Tabar, Adam Jameson, MCA Chicago (for a collaboration with Jen Karmin), the Festival of Poet's Theatre curated by Devin King and Patrick Durgin, King and Caroline Picard at Sector 2337, Curious Theater Branch's Rhinoceros Theater Festival, the Block Museum of Art, the 2nd

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Spalding Gray's *Monster in a Box* at the Music Box Theater in Chicago when I was 16,

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appreciation of sitting at a table and talking. Matthew Goulish first told me about David Antin

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inspiration I needed to finish, among many other things. I can no longer imagine life without

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and patient ally through all of this. Our relationship has existed almost entirely alongside my

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beneficence. It can be hard to be married to a doctoral student, especially an anxious and disorganized one, but she has remained my fiercest advocate, most insightful counselor, and source of constant support. Her efforts can only be called heroic, especially considering that the same period included her own advanced degree, many career and creative opportunities and changes, and the birth of our son. That she also served as the official transcriptionist for this project is both another monumental addition, and but a footnote, to all she has done. Don't worry, Emmy, it's almost all over.

PREFACE

It is the summer of 1992, I am 16, when Aaron Kahn and I go to the Music Box Theater to see the film adaptation of Spalding Gray's monologue *Monster in a Box*, 90 minutes of one man talking about writing a book I had never read. Like most people, I had first heard of Spalding Gray five years earlier, with the release of the film adaptation of his earlier monologue *Swimming to Cambodia*, 85 minutes of the same man talking about making a movie I had not seen. I didn't see *Swimming to Cambodia* then, but somehow I knew it was a film based on a small part Gray had played in another film, *The Killing Fields*, an idea I found both interesting and embarrassing, and very strange. I did not yet have the term avant-garde, but I suppose it was a kind of contact with the strangeness of the avant-garde. I had seen Gray once before Aaron and I saw *Monster in a Box*, though, two years earlier at a rally against NEA censorship in Chicago's Daley Plaza that my entire arts high school went to my freshman year. Writers and performers read passages from frequently banned books. Gray read the "A Squeeze of the Hand" chapter from *Moby Dick*, while AIDS activists from Queer Nation walked in front of the stage wearing phallic "Dickhead" hats with Senator Jesse Helms's face on them.

That is what I know about Spalding Gray when Aaron and I go to the Music Box in the summer of 1992. After that, though, things changed. I did see *Swimming to Cambodia*, and then the single-conversation film *My Dinner with Andre* with Wallace Shawn and Andre Gregory, both on video, soon after. A new genre of all-talking drama began to concretize in my mind, which I found tantalizing even as I suspected it was not very serious, neither dramatically interesting nor literarily valid. For a long time, all-talking plays and films were a sort of guilty

pleasure that I sought out and, at the same time, tried to train myself out of liking. I toyed with some Gray-style monologues in Shira Piven's performance creation class as a senior in high school, and relished the opportunity to include "talky" moments in performances I was part of making over the years, but I didn't really see an avenue forward for talk as a genre. As a playwriting major in college I kept writing in all-monologues, which made me think I wasn't cut out for playwriting and should be writing prose fiction, even though I had always worked in theater. Still later, I experimented with performance poetries of different sorts and enrolled in MFA program in Writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC).

I finally began to articulate the importance of talk for myself when Jessica Hudson, who I'd met in a performance workshop, recommended to Seth Bockley that he include me in *Impossible Cities: A Utopian Experiment*, an evening of short performances he was organizing with Walkabout Theatre, to tell stories about my years living at the experimental urban design project Arcosanti. I ended up performing an autobiographical monologue in the style of Spalding Gray and confided to my friend and colleague Amira Hanafi that all-talking performances like that one had always secretly been my favorite form. Her response – "Why isn't that all you do then?" – set me on a new path. My advisor at the time, Matthew Goulish, told me about the poet David Antin, and Amira gave me an old copy she had of his book *Talking*. During a sound course I took at the Ox-Bow School of Arts in Michigan with Mark Booth and Lou Malozzi, I started working with performing transcribed speech, and through a series of workshops and performance experiments I also started using very ordinary, often conversational, extemporaneous talk as a key feature of my work. These two strategies – re-performed

transcription and conversational extemporaneity – would become the chief performance materials of my creative practice.

I felt I had hit on a way of working that made sense to me, but I found it very difficult to talk about. I did not yet have the language to describe it, and the examples I drew on didn't narrow things down; they came from experimental theatre, dramatic literature, poetry, performance art, comedy, broadcasting, politics, testimony, and pedagogy. What I would eventually come to call "talk performance" seemed like it was everywhere and nowhere, like it was very easy to understand and very difficult to describe. I didn't know where it belonged or what to call it. As my MFA ended, I started to think that a doctoral program could be a place where I could work out and develop a framework for understanding talk as a distinct genre of performance across arts disciplines and even, perhaps, in the public sphere as a whole. I was drawn to the symbiotic relationship I had observed between my advisor Matthew Goulish's company, Goat Island Performance Group, and the many scholars who wrote about their work. Suddenly performance scholarship seemed a viable way to contextualize the work that had compelled and confounded me as an artist and audience member.

Once on that path, an interdisciplinary study grounded in the historically situated practices of specific artists was of utmost importance to me in order to understand how performance works within actual disciplinary contexts at a specific moment in time. Since a central issue raised by my inquiry is about the relationship between talking and writing, or between talk and text, beginning with a performing artist coming form a theatre background and a writer seemed most logical and relevant, and including a dance artist helped nudge the conversation into a more expansive understanding of what talk can do. I had long been engaged

with Spalding Gray's work via the film adaptations of his later monologues, and when I learned

about David Antin's talk poetry I became interested in bringing their formally very similar

practices, which are nonetheless coded quite differently according to their disciplinary identities,

into dialogue with one another. I also wanted to complicate the career of talk as a performance

strategy beyond a long-standing binary between literary text and dramatic performance;

specifically I wanted to understand and articulate talk as embodied action. As I learned about

Yvonne Rainer, I came to see how talk worked not only as part of a kinesthetic whole in her

dance work, but that talk often served as a mechanism to negotiate control over the composition

of her works in the moment. One of the things that became most appealing about this was the

ways in which the talk in Rainer's work did not, and indeed could not, resolve itself in the kind

of easy media adaptation available to both Gray and Antin, yet her performances remained

bound up with media formats and possibilities nonetheless. In fact, I argue that in her case the

introduction of fixed media technology came to supplant, rather than preserve, the role of talk

itself.

I was able to make these connections chiefly through archival research, which either

uncovered evidence or insight not previously noted in the extant scholarship, or allowed me to

focus on aspects of the three artists' practices that, while known, had not been closely attended to

or integrated with other scholarly accounts of their careers. In all three cases I was able to make

use of multimedia collections that were relatively newly available, and which gave me the

opportunity to encounter material not previously available to researchers. Often my requests

facilitated digitization of recorded material, usually from volatile formats like magnetic tape,

which could later be made available to other researchers and even the public.

Through my research, my creative practice, and the advice and feedback of my mentors and colleagues, what began as a project amorphously concerned with talk as an under-researched performance medium has come to be a historically situated study of the entwined relationship between extemporaneity, discipline, and media technologies. Talk, while very important to my creative practice and still essential to the project, has become less the topic of my dissertation as it now stands than its occasion. As such, this project has given me the opportunity to think a great deal about the ways artists choose to negotiate the relationship between performance practice and an ostensible performance product, especially within experimental contexts in which as much emphasis is often placed on the former as on the latter. It has also helped me to articulate a complex relationship between fixed media and extemporaneous performance, at once mutually reliant and resistant, evident in these case studies, and indicative of their historical moment. This has become a key insight of my dissertation, which I hope might provide a framework through which it would be possible to more broadly understand the movement and reception of vanguard artists and aesthetics, self-consciously avant-garde or not, during the 1970s and 80s and beyond. Perhaps the most important contribution my dissertation hopes to make, though, is simply its cross-disciplinarity. By drawing together performances from diverse lineages under the label of "talk performance," I hope I have been able to articulate the force of disciplinary formations on the way performances circulate and are received.

Though I do not explicitly use my own practice as research, save for a brief section of the epilogue, this project has informed and been informed by my own creative practice as a self-identified talk performer. By presenting performance work deliberately in dialogue with my academic research in diverse disciplinary contexts – including literary readings, theatre festivals,

art galleries, and even a venue dedicated to sound experimentation – I have developed on-the-ground insight into the disciplinary logics I write about, while my research has provided an intellectual framework for the talk practices which brought me to this project in the first place. I came to talk performance as a topic of study after noting the absence of critical or creative rubrics by which it is possible to discuss creative practices based primarily in talk as an artist.

Discussions of talk performance are usually routed through particular types of talk performance, often a subset of an extant disciplinary category like autobiographical monologue or performance poetry. In absence of useful frameworks and terminology to discuss talk on its own terms, I sought to articulate a talk performance category that could be studied, evaluated, and deployed in terms of a lineage and ecology of such performances. I am not describing a naturally occurring orphan phenomenon that has already collected itself under no label or the wrong label, but making note of where certain tendencies toward talk structures turn up in diverse settings in order to speak more usefully and coherently about talk practice wherever it occurs. I mean to use these observations to evaluate the circumstances and conditions under which talk practices emerge, and to add to the discipline-specific conversations that already exist around talk formats a transdisciplinary lexicon for understanding, evaluating, and relating talk performances to one another and to experimental art categories in general.

This dissertation is dedicated to Emmy Bean

who survived its writing with grace, care, and good humor (most of the time) and who is very

relieved that it is done.

In memory of Spalding Gray (1941-2004) and David Antin (1932-2016)

without whom this project would literally not have been possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
SPALDING GRAY: INTERMEDIAL CONTINGENCY TO MEDIATED
EXTEMPORANEITY

CHAPTER 2
DAVID ANTIN: TALKING TEXT AND TEXTING TALK

CHAPTER 3
YVONNE RAINER: TALK STRUCTURES AND EDITORIAL NEGOTIATION

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCTION

This study intervenes in the recent history and categorization of performance across the disciplinary boundaries of theatre, poetry, dance, certain popular configurations of performance art, and film by articulating the conditions under which it was possible for extemporaneous speech to become performance material in the careers of three artists: theatrical monologist Spalding Gray, poet and critic David Antin, and the dance artist and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer. I have coined the term "talk performance" as a critical category that can be used to retrospectively group together those practices of these artists and others that involve placing extemporaneous, putatively ordinary speech before audiences in art-specific contexts. These practices emerged from disparate disciplinary lineages, often as a response to the orthodoxies those lineages imposed.

"Talk performance" as a heuristic serves to unite these artists' talk practices according to the ways they responded to disciplinary attitudes and other historical conditions within the overlapping artistic contexts that they shared: the historical moment (the 1970s-early 1980s), geography (downtown Manhattan and some relationship to the West Coast), and the milieu of the post-1960s, or what might also be called the post-modern avant-garde, with its avowed inter- and post-disciplinarity and entwinement with academic discourse. They are divided, on the other hand, primarily by their disciplinary identities and the forms of media capture, representation, and circulation that attend those identities.

I argue that the extemporaneous performances of these artists, often deliberately contingent on fixed media components and self-aware disciplinary tropes, were pushing back on

settled aesthetic categories and the march toward commodified circulation (as was much of the art of that era, from body art to earth works to conceptualism.) Their work advanced a presentist art sphere more concerned with the shared processes of artist and audience than with either prescient authorial mastery or the retrospective valuation, or evaluation, of the resulting products. But as professional exigencies and institutional logics of the time, exerted their pull and pressure, the very elements that distinguished talk performance from other performance categories were subsumed into more discipline-coherent and reproducible mediated representations of talk performance via film, video, audio tape, and print. These media formats, which both reified and erased talk, depending on the disciplinary context, could then endure, be revised, and circulate far beyond the initial occasion of performance.

By tracing the career arc of each artist over a similar period, including the early development of their talk performance strategies, I find the media effects and disciplinary logics that would ultimately shape their talk performances for broader circulation exerting influence even very early on, when the performances were still ostensibly resisting those forces. And at the same time, even fully mediated versions of these performance still continue to benefit from the aesthetic authenticity offered by extemporaneous contingency, whatever the on-the-ground reality of their creative practices actually turned out to be. Tracking talk across large swaths of the careers of three artists operating in parallel provides insight into the conditions under which the use of extemporaneous talk emerged and the pressures and possibilities applied to that use over time, especially as those pressures differed across disciplinary contexts and intermingled with different media possibilities.

This work has only been possible thanks to deep dives into multimedia archives for each artist, where I unearthed documents of periods and practices from their career not widely known or understood. In the case of Spalding Gray, I focus on performances and versions of performances that have not circulated widely, in print or otherwise, in order to offer an account of the development of Gray's signature autobiographical monologues that turn out to be quite different from the standard understanding. I find that several early Gray performances were developed in relation to fixed media objects, both text and recorded audio, in response to which Gray extemporized, keeping his performances always contingent upon the performance occasion and demonstrably different from the media objects to which he related. As media adaptations of Gray's monologues, especially his most well-known work *Swimming to Cambodia*, began circulating widely I find that his apparent extemporaneous virtuosity as a storyteller took precedence over the intermedial contingency of his earlier work, and enabled his work to enter the mainstream and establish a far-reaching genre of autobiographical solo performance.[1] In the epilogue, I deal with this posthumous circulation through cross-media adaptations, including theatrical, publishing, and film projects overseen by his estate, and a unique informal archive I compiled myself of derivative works inspired by or about Gray, made since his death in 2004.

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[1] My use of "intermedia" here and throughout the dissertation is based on Dick Higgins 1965 coinage of the term as a way to speak productively about work that belongs to no one established art category, but emerges out of the overlapping of two or more art forms. As opposed to a term like "mixed media" he proposes that intermedia does not just mean more than one media was used, but a new category has emerged between existing categories, with its own set of rules. Higgins says it is not enough to merely remove a disciplinary element that appears particularly stultifying, like a play's script, because the unscripted play will merely imitate a scripted one. Another element must be introduced to keep the intermedial object or event in-between. In this regard, the phrase I use throughout this dissertation, "intermedial contingency" refers to the temporal meeting of extemporaneous performance with another, fixed, media source as a means of determining the outcome of that event in the moment. The essay was reprinted with a further commentary from 1981 and an appendix by Hannah Higgins in 2001. Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins, "Intermedia," *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (February 1, 2001): 49–54.

Though David Antin's talk poems, which each began as extemporaneous performances and circulate as texts derived from transcriptions of those events, are well-known in experimental poetry circles, their developmental process has for the most part been inferred. At the time that I was initially conducting my research on Antin, who passed away in 2016 while I was writing this dissertation, very few people would have had access to the recordings of Antin's performances, or seen the original transcripts. The opportunity the archive afforded to directly compare the recordings to their initial transcripts and then to Antin's edited manuscripts enabled my discovery of the extent to which Antin edited, and often re-wrote, his originally extemporaneous talk poems for publication, a discovery which has clarified Antin's process and complicated his legacy. I use this research, along with several accounts of a talk he gave in 1978 which was interrupted by other poets in attendance, in order to shift focus back to Antin's talks as performance events in themselves, which are nonetheless predicated on their transcribablity. Since my time conducting research there in 2013, the Getty Research Institute has made the files they digitized at my request, among others, available online. In the epilogue I consider how that development has significantly shifted the ways in which it is now possible to encounter Antin's work. And, using my own experiences, I consider re-performance as another possibility for that encounter besides archival tape.

While my Yvonne Rainer research did not uncover completely neglected or undiscovered materials as my work on Gray and Antin did, my focus on talk has centralized an often-neglected element of her career, which has been otherwise amply covered by dance and performance scholars, as well as by scholars of film. My account of talk as the organizing element of her collaged performance formats of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which she taught and

arranged her own choreographic repertoire onstage in negotiation with her dancers, builds on a survey of even earlier dance works which used rules-based systems of dialogic signaling and exchange between performers to organize choreographic material in the moment during performances. I call these systems "talk structures," even where the dialogic signaling did not involve verbal exchange, in order to highlight how they developed into the open verbal instructions and negotiations of Rainer's ever-changing collage performances, culminating in *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* (*CP-AD*). *CP-AD* then gave way again to the fixed editorial systems of filmmaking, which Rainer devoted herself to for the next 25 years, and to open improvisational methods developed independently by her dancers. The inclusion of Rainer's archive in my research expands what can be included in a discussion of talk performance to include the dialogic talk on which a performance relies and the resulting extemporaneous arrangement of pre-existing units, which interface with Rainer's impulses in the moment, much like Gray's early intermedial performances. The epilogue looks at Rainer's return to dance in the 1990s, and the ways that her second dance career has referenced the strategies and content of *CP-AD* while relying on the editorial fixity of her filmmaking career.

Through in-depth engagement with these multimedia archives, this dissertation articulates creative possibilities for extemporaneous speech as a performance material that can be shaped, critiqued, and evaluated on its own merits. In this respect, I propose talk performance as a heuristic through which it is possible to identify shared qualities and circumstances that lead to like outcomes, and to recognize the forces that differentiate one use of talk from another within the American avant-garde in the immediate aftermath of the 1960s. This is some of the same work that performance alone has been doing as a scholarly and creative category over this same

period, and like performance, talk performance threatens to become its own category, with its own orthodoxies and boundaries. Recognizing how that happens is both one of the aims of this dissertation, and one of the dangers in writing it.

Ultimately, this study documents and describes the under-considered role of artistic discipline as a structural limitation that maintains an outsize control over the historical understanding of performance and of artists' understanding of their own work, and it presents an alternative possibility for a more fluid consideration of the art situation writ large, which does not rely on disciplinary boundaries for coherence. In the process, this dissertation presents the loaded, complex, problematic, yet fundamentally productive relationships between extemporaneity and avenues of fixed media capture, reproduction, and circulation, occasioned by the technological environment of postwar America. This research provides an important window into the role of extemporaneity, discipline, and media in the shaping of performance, its reception, and its circulation during the period between the eruption of 1960s radicalism and the total absorption of post-1960s avant-garde aesthetics into mass media sometimes in the 1980s. Before considering my three case studies individually, this introduction illustrates the significance of each of the key terms in the title of this project and their relevance to the artists around which the project is built.

Talk Performance

I propose talk performance as a trans-disciplinary category that describes ways in which talk has been specifically distinguished and materialized in performance. The performances included in this study use extemporaneous speech as a means to tie the performance event to the relational

situation and institutional context within which it takes place. Though both 'talk' and 'performance' might be such expansive terms that they threaten the usefulness of the category, a definition of talk performance needs to be specific enough to clarify its limits, especially in terms of its mediated reproduction, without drawing arbitrary lines at aesthetic or procedural differences. My understanding of talk performance is instead dependent upon its resistance to concretization, mediated circulation, and monetization in a way that signals and tends to promise a resistance to the coercive forces of capitalism.

These strategies mean that, at its most fundamental level, a talk performance can never be finished or replicated, even though that may not be clear to any given audience encountering a single coherent and possibly entertaining instance of performance. Yet talk performances, or representations of single iterations thereof, do tend, at a certain level of success and notoriety, to be captured or recreated in fixed media formats and to circulate according to attendant market logics. In fact, economic pressures and the horizons of possibility set by technologies, both old and new, for capture, representation, reproduction, and circulation have often not only dictated the ultimate fate of particular artists' talk performance practices, but have been demonstrably entwined with the conceptualization and development of talk as a performance strategy from early on in the career of each of these artists, long before the possibility of mediatization was raised.

In all three of the cases I consider here, talk was a way to introduce the apparently ordinary into performance, and to invite that which is normally kept deliberately offstage onto the stage, in order to expose both creative process and everyday life not only to the intellectual analysis of scholarly criticism, but to the spectatorial conditions of theatre itself. Talk

performance then, for my purposes, must be explicitly art performance, though it is by definition performance which pushes at the limits of what art can be by bringing either the processes of art making onto stage or by subjecting ostensibly non-art activity to the scrutiny of art. This is done always in direct dialogue with the disciplinary context the performer comes from, or the discipline associated with the institutional context in which the performance is being presented, which foreclose the contextual references and comparisons that can be applied. This means that talk performances need not be significantly materially different from one another in order to have monumentally different kinds of impact, make meaning in very different ways, and circulate under very different media conditions.

By minimizing aesthetic assertion within these talk performances themselves, the power of disciplinary assumptions makes itself powerfully known. Indeed, one of the things this study allows is an understanding of just how much of an art work's distinction, at least at this point in art history, can be found in its relationship to its discipline, and how little need be located within the work itself. The refusal involved in Gray making theatre without action, set, script, or character, Antin making poetry without writing, and Rainer making new dances without choreographing new movement in fact links each artist to the disciplinary conventions they are refusing as much as it frees them from them. By defining a meta-category of talk performance, the qualities and impulses in these artists' work that does not rely on disciplinary logics can come to the fore and articulate the potential for a strategically undisciplined performance vocabulary.

One of the key definitional elements of talk performance that unites the practices of these artists is an intention to collapse the distance between making and displaying a performance

work. Inevitably, this means some level of on-the-spot generation of the material that constitutes the performance, or of the composition of that material, or both. That depends on the pressured situation of live performance, including the presence of an audience and the time allotted for presentation under circumstances that require full audience attention, as well as any predetermined structures or rules to be followed or material to be incorporated. The process of extemporaneous generation and combination of performance elements must occur anew at each performance iteration, even if those performances build on and come to resemble one another, even becoming more predictable over time and across repetitions.

In this way, talk performance is reliant on the art situation not only for its display and dissemination, but for its existence. Talk performance is native to the art context, it is by and about art and depends on and responds to the circumstances that specify and designate it as art, in particular the relational performer-audience set-up of traditional live performance. It is the occasion of a performance event, as designated by environmental elements – the presence of an audience chief among them – that makes a talk performance possible. This also means that a talk performance always happens under non-fictional circumstances. That does not necessarily mean that everything that is said in a talk performance must be true or that the speaker must be who they claim to be, merely that the performance must be predicated on an acknowledgement that the performer is in the same space and time as the audience and that that space and time is not necessarily different from the one everyone else in the room is experiencing.

One thing that a talk performance does not have to be, however, is monologic. In fact, the conditions under which all three of the artists in this study made their work could be called dialogic. In the cases of Gray and Antin, their talks were built on an implied dialogic relationship

between performer and audience. Antin called this "tuning," the process by which he responded to the conditions and circumstances imposed by the particular audience in the particular institutional context where he was speaking in order to bring about his talk piece.[2] And in an early journal entry while still conceiving of his monologue project, Gray wrote about what he was then calling "speaking memory" as "a meditative non rehearsal state" in which he would "allow the presence of the audience to influence the quality and subject matter of my memory."[3] Talk also does not have to be the main feature of a performance for it to be included in a discussion of talk performance. Yvonne Rainer, potentially the outlier in this study as a dance artist who does not primarily use monologic talk, instead offers important insight into the potential for contingent variation to be found in even minimally deployed dialogic talk, especially where that dialogue is being used to actively negotiate the terms and content of the performance as part of the performance itself.

This definition of talk performance stems from the emergence of performance as an expansive terminological category that has enabled particularly radical thinking about art and offered new analytical tools for the study of everyday life. In these terms, talk performance might be almost endlessly applicable, a way to engage talk wherever one might find it by applying to any and all speech genres analyses enriched by theater studies, performance studies, and literary studies and by the broad influence of performance in cultural studies writ large. Under this model, talk performance might encompass dramatic monologue, stand-up comedy, slam poetry, autobiographical storytelling, radio dramas and documentaries, political speech,

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[2] David Antin, "tuning," *Tuning* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1984), 105–42.

[3] Spalding Gray, "Notebook: 1978-1979," Spalding Gray Papers, Subseries C. Notebooks, 1964-2003, undated, container 35.1, Harry Ransom Center.

courtroom testimony, academic lecture, and ordinary language-based self-presentation through speech in all sorts of contexts. It could also come to encompass representations of speech in other media, such as literary work written in the form of ordinary speech or a musical composition scored using the rhythms of ordinary speech.[4] In this broader sense, talk performance could be usefully applied to any and all instances of talk bound up in both form and content with temporal, spatial, sonic, embodied, experiential phenomena, materially or conceptually distinct from written language, either purely ephemeral or also portable and reproducible.

In order to make critical use of talk in this way, though, this study returns to the careers of these three specific artists as foundational to understanding what undergirds and enables a distinct category of talk performance. Talk performance in the more narrow sense that I use it in this study is defined by extemporaneous speech in art-specific, non-fictional contexts, predicated on structured but contingent performance outcomes kept deliberately in flux, and shaped by the tension between the undecided, in-the-moment live event and the institutional frameworks comprised of disciplinary histories, critical vocabularies, and situational relationships with the audience and the site that mark off and enable a talk performance event. By establishing a definitional category based on formal throughlines of space, time, and relational contingency, it is possible to understand what is being represented and referenced in more general fixed, multimedia deployment of talk as a performance material. Through these artists' aesthetically diverse performance work, this study weaves together disciplinary contexts, art performance, and media environments in order to materialize talk as a distinct performance medium with distinct

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[4] Such as Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* (1953) or the operas of Robert Ashley.

strategies attached, and thus generates a more nuanced and targeted vocabulary for talking about talk in useful and non-reductive ways.

Extemporaneous Speech

The observation that talk is merely a type of performance that has been under-studied is a facile one, even if in large part true. In point of fact, analysis of talk as a feature of both everyday and specialized categories of performance is already among the tools commonly used in modern cultural studies, including performance ethnography and oral history, and is central to certain academic disciplines such as folklore studies or areas of media studies concerned with sound and voice.[5] Indeed, the modern history of performance studies is in part dependent on broadening the approaches of the oral interpretation of literature program at my own institution, Northwestern. Oral Interpretation was itself built on the academic tradition of elocution, which posited that speech itself could be shaped and taught quite apart from the content being delivered. Oral Interpretation posited vocal and embodied performance as a means of fusing performance and content to present and comment upon literary work. And the subsequent shift toward a new category of performance studies marked that program's institutional acknowledgement that performance could provide an interpretive dimension not only to the intellectual encounter with literature, but could be expanded to allow for performance itself, including language-dense

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[5] For examples from across these disciplines: Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Elizabeth C. Fine, *The Folklore Text: From Performance to Print* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994); Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (University of California Press, 2008); Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (MIT Press, 1999).

everyday performance such as those found in oral histories or ethnographic encounters, to

emerge as equally legitimate objects of analysis.[6] This has sometimes meant that contemporary

performance analysis has privileged image, movement, and non-linguistic sound over spoken

language as a corrective to the long logocentric history of Western theatrical practice and to

distinguish the contributions of performance from those of dramatic literature.

This study takes up this skepticism about dramatic text, and the commitment to temporal,

spatial, embodied performance by incorporating talk into a historical understanding of the latter

and severing it from the former. While there are a number of ways to understand talk as a

productive and informative object of study, what this study focuses on is talk as a generative

strategy in art-specific performance contexts, which also destabilizes the performance as an

aesthetic object. The key component of a performance that simultaneously generates and

destabilizes its own content is extemporaneity, a term which has the distinction of variously

signaling something composed on the spot, deployed on an unexpected occasion, or prepared in

advance but delivered in whole or in part with minimal guidance. This elasticity allows for the

creative strategies of all three artists, even where their work might begin to linguistically repeat,

so long as they are using the occasion of performance to motivate their production and

deployment of speech.

Extemporaneity, then, can include Gray's on the spot arrangement of phrases and

anecdotes, many of which he has used in some form before, as well as Antin's live working-

through of ideas he had begun to think and talk about in advance of his performance, and

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[6] Useful perspectives can be found in Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance* (Cambridge UP, 2004); and the essays in "Part III: Performance of and Beyond Literature," *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2005).

Rainer's impromptu arrangement of set performance material together with the dialogic

exchange and negotiation with her performers that arrangement necessitated. Terminologically,

extemporaneity holds much in common with its near-synonyms improvisation and spontaneity,

but it has neither improvisation's implication of material generated entirely in the moment, nor

spontaneity's sense of either occurring unexpectedly or of expression unmitigated by self-

conscious strategy.[7] Extemporaneity's key qualities are its provisionality and its contingency on

the occasion and circumstance of performance, which suggests performance's ephemerality.

Extemporaneous speech does not preexist the occasion of performance, and it does not outlast

that performance, but comes into being in relation to the occasion, site, plans, and necessities of

the performance event, even if similar talk has been occasioned before and will be again in

similar ways.

Among the aims of using extemporaneity as foundational to this project, as it seems to be

among the aims of the artists studied who use extemporaneous approaches, is to understand talk

as distinguished from other forms of language production and circulation, namely writing and

text. Both Gray and Antin come from specifically textual lineages – drama and poetry – both of

which rely on the figure of the speaker to articulate their content on the page, but which

nonetheless assert an enduring primary textuality that preexists and outlasts performance. The

roots of Rainer's system of contingent, dispersed, interdependent signaling, on the other hand,

was not an expression of textual logic, but of the dialogic structures of talk that defined her

choreographic practices even before Rainer started talking extemporaneously with her dancers

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[7] Of course beyond linguistic connotation, the distinction between these categories in practice is much less clear. Indeed, the performances of Rainer's included here would prove to have both historically influenced and conceptually tempered ideas and practices of improvisation.

onstage. Perhaps even more obviously, it is a talk-specific circumstance (front-facing public address) and occasion (theatrical performance or academic lecture), which motivate and enable an instance of talk performance for Gray and Antin. Both knew roughly what they were going to talk about, and even much of what they were going to say, but they had not yet said it at the start of the performance and they relied on the performance to complete the action of saying it, sometimes in ways that privileged the act of talking over the imperative to organize language into a coherent, and thus textualizeable, statement. For Rainer, on the other hand, talk was the organizational instrument by which movement-based performance material was fragmented and knit back together onstage.

Talk remains tied to the body in all of these performances, dependent on the thought processes and phenomenological experience of the talk performer and the attention of a present audience. It exists for as long as someone is talking, and then not at all once that person has stopped. To revisit it, it must be regenerated according to the circumstances that occasioned it in the first place. Yet in the case of all three artists the unrepeatability of their performances was at least for some portion of their careers incorporated into the work as an explicit element. Gray initially relied on external media to prompt and arrange his autobiographical recollections, even when those external forces scrambled his telling beyond narrative coherence. Antin's performances were de-emphasized in the published work they yielded, seen by only a few, and never repeated, though he would revisit the same topics and ideas. And like Gray, Rainer's collage performances depended on constantly rearranging and recombining pre-set elements so that each performance was unique and could not replicate another.

Paradoxically, though, the very possibility of capturing and circulating talk introduced by media formats and their attendant technologies was in part responsible for the conceptualization of talk performance. Once talk could be captured through recording and/or transcription, it was possible to imagine its reproduction and circulation, and so, presciently, its potential market and aesthetic value. Eventually all three artists allowed their performance practices to be subsumed within a media environment capable of reproducing the aesthetic form and the content of their talk performances, while leaving behind the contingent procedure tying their performances to the time and place of their origins. With the film and text adaptations of his later monologues, Gray's actual and virtual performances became more focused on his verbal mastery in delivering a narratively coherent story, and less dependent on the intermedial contingency of the performance occasion. In the case of Antin, this complete mediatization occurred almost simultaneously with the conception of his talk poetry project, a fact dependent on the inextricability of writing from the literary context of poetry, despite poetry's origins in and virtualization of oral performance. For Rainer, her turn away from dance left open the potential introduced by her collage performances, but her own editorial impulses were redirected into filmmaking. And when she returned to dance decades later, the logic of film editing remained in her new dance work.

Perhaps the greatest confusion attending the articulation of talk performance as a distinct genre concerns the degree to which talk is or is not text and talking is or is not writing. Though this distinction is easy to make under ordinary circumstances, under the conditions of talk as a performance material the potential for its reproduction in text, and even for the representation of talk markers like stuttering and interrupted sentences, can make the distinction between talk in

and of itself and its textual representation seem insignificant. At the most basic level, this study means to sort out whether talk and text are the same thing, or as good as the same thing, and how and why that status might shift for any given work. In particular, I ask whether extemporaneous talk and the conditions it requires might be able to ward off the collapse of performance back into literature, or if perhaps it might hasten it.

Artistic Discipline

The most intractable problem this dissertation confronts is the problem of disciplinary categories, which outlast nearly every conceptual and aesthetic development that otherwise promised to cast off the orthodoxies and strictures of established art practices. Those established disciplinary practices, from theatrical realism to lyrical poetry to modern dance, had by the end of the 1960s accrued a stultifying sense of aesthetic excess, artifice, and self-seriousness that reflected the view of all establishments, political, aesthetic, or otherwise, at the time. The various disciplinary vanguards of the late 1950s and 1960s turned to minimalist, abstract, and immersive aesthetics that looked nothing like their antecedents. A number of these – the happenings, environmental theatre, postmodern dance, conceptual art – meant to topple the practices and expectations of the disciplines from which they emerged. Nonetheless, I find that discipline persists where aesthetic and political ruptures have leveled other orthodoxies, particularly at the intersection of artists' individual biographies and associations, the critical and scholarly institutions through which their work is interpreted, and the media formats which attend disciplinary constructions. In the face of aesthetic refusal, I argue that discipline remains constant even when all disciplinary signifiers have dropped away.

By employing three artists from three different disciplinary lineages as examples of the meta-category of talk performance, I am intervening in what have largely been discipline-oriented accounts of performance innovations that necessarily understand those innovations primarily in relationship to disciplinary histories.[8] Instead, I offer a framework to understand talk as a strategy that can respond to the performance situation at the most fundamental material level, as a real time encounter between performer and audience marked off, but not determined, by its designation as art and as a particular category of art. In each of the cases I focus on, the artists turn at some point from a fundamentally contingent and undecidable talk practice to a disciplinarily determined media format as a means to domesticate and label their use of extemporaneous talk for wider circulation.[9] By tracing their talk practices through these transitions, it is possible to see the impact and the intransigence of disciplinary frameworks in processes of conceiving, presenting, parsing, and historicizing art practice. Talk performance, in fact, becomes a new designation itself through this study, which cannot help but begin to take on some of the tendencies and dimensions of disciplinary category, and to redirect intellectual

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[8] Key examples include: Theodore Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, Theatre Production Studies (London: Routledge, 2000); Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); James Martin Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (University of California Press, 2003); Steven Clay, *A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960-1980 : A Sourcebook of Information* (New York Public Library and Granary Books, 1998); Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, New Ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980); Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962–1964* (Duke University Press Books, 1993).

[9] My use of "undecidability" in reference to the anti-disciplinary contingency of talk performance throughout this dissertation relies on Henry Sayre's use of the term, which he based on ideas borrowed from both Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, to describe the paradoxical tension introduced when a work of art is premised on rejecting its own discourse situation and therefore must also uphold the category that discourse supports in order to remain coherent. He actually uses the term to describe the simultaneous mutual dependency and mutual exclusivity of Antin's talk performances and their published text versions. Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (University Of Chicago Press, 1992), 33, 210.

energy toward delimiting and instrumentalizing a settled definition of talk performance. In response, this study returns to the points in these artists careers when talk could introduce undecidable contingency, and to observe the recrudescence of disciplinary and media forces that both built on and foreclosed the possibilities talk introduced.

Any proposed performance category comes equipped with a theory of performance, usually one closely tied to a certain set of discipline-bound experiences and expectations. This theory sets limits on what does and does not belong to its category, often by privileging contextual and relational clues. The popular and scholarly conversation around nearly every disciplinary category ultimately comes down to the question of in or out – what must be present in order to qualify as disciplinarily coherent, and at what levels? This conversation means that all art forms inevitably include artists and movements that seek to dismantle the traditional apparatuses of their discipline while maintaining some part of the disciplinary structure – spectatorial, historical, critical, institutional, rhetorical. Talk occurs in a number of examples of aesthetic refusal in the modernist avant-garde as a minimalist intervention into disciplinary lineages, especially by incorporating the discourse that attends each discipline into the performance itself. Given talk's unique qualities as an immediate, self-explanatory instrument, this study will build a critical and practical vocabulary for understanding talk as a distinct performance material, and talk performance as a distinct approach that artists from a variety of backgrounds take to working with it.

Such an interdisciplinary understanding is one of the contributions that this study can make to the already limited treatment of voice, orality, and address in discipline-oriented scholarly treatments of the recent avant-garde. The subject of the solo performance work (that is,

not the soliloquy, but the monodrama or the stand-alone monologue) has received some academic treatment within theatre studies. Deborah R. Geis's *Postmodern Theatric(k)s* and the more recent monograph it inspired, *The Contemporary American Monologue* by Eddie Paterson, connect contemporary monologue performances to the traditions of dramatic monologue and, in the latter case, popular oratory traditions in the US.[10] Michael Peterson's *Straight White Male Performance Art Monologues* takes a critical race and gender driven Marxist approach to the phenomenon of male solo performance in the 1980s and 90s, focusing especially on Gray and his contemporary, the multi-character solo performer Eric Bogosian, in terms of their performances of white male privilege in the guise of cutting edge performance.[11] And Gray has posthumously inspired one monograph, William Demastes's admiring and rather narrowly focused career retrospective, *Spalding Gray's America*.[12] These works all understand single-voiced performance as a kind of theatre, to be evaluated according to the conventional elements of theater: dramatic text, set and staging, modes of representation, dramatic interpretation. Even Peterson, who deploys the term performance art, treats it as a label bestowed on certain performers as a kind of high art status symbol "not clearly distinguishable from theater."[13]

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[10] Deborah Geis, *Postmodern Theatrics: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor, Mich: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Eddie Paterson, *The Contemporary American Monologue: Performance and Politics* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015).

[11] Michael Peterson, *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

[12] William Demastes, *Spalding Gray's America* (Limelight Editions, 2008).

[13] Peterson, *Straight White Male*, 12.

Two apparently similar anthologies of performance texts, Mark Russell's *Out of Character* and Jo Bonney's *Extreme Solo,* were published near the end of the century.[14] However, they take significantly different approaches to collecting solo performance texts. Russell, who like Peterson rejects a distinction between theatre and performance art, collects work mostly by solo performers who appeared at the popular downtown venue PS 122 during the 1980s and 90s, when he was the artistic director there. On the other hand, Bonney, a theatre director who has worked extensively with Bogosian, to whom she is married, offers an exemplary sample of 20th century solo performers that includes a much broader and more diverse selection of popular and avant-garde performers from a variety of backgrounds than Russell's collection. These include comics, actors, and those who do identify as performance artists from the vaudeville era through the 1990s. She also includes short introductions to each work from scholars, producers, directors, critics and others familiar with their work. In her attempt to create an open-ended category of "solo performance," Bonney's collection comes the closest to connecting solo work across disciplines and eras in the way that I have been envisioning. Yet as a book, the words it contains remain of necessity tied to text as a means of preserving and representing past verbal performance. And in the end both are anthologies of performance work, not scholarly endeavors, and can only signal the possibilities of a more expansive performance category.

Poetry has its own body of literature dealing with voiced performance, even putting aside the larger body of literature that speaks about poetic voice and address metaphorically. The

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[14] Mark Russell, ed., *Out of Character: Rants, Raves, and Monologues from Today's Top Performance Artists* (Bantam Books, 1997); Jo Bonney, *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000).

interrelated collections *Close Listening* edited by Charles Bernstein in 1998, and its follow-up a decade later, *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound* edited by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, both include a number of scholars and experimental poets who posit the live, sonic phenomenon of poetry performance as another, distinct dimension of poetry's material life.[15] In particular, Bob Perelman's "Speech Effects: The Talk as Genre" introduces a distinct category of "poet's talks" to poetic discourse. An even earlier collection edited by Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig and published in 1981, *The Poetry Reading*, looks at poetry readings themselves as a distinct performance genre. More recent monographs, Lesley Wheeler's *Voicing American Poetry* and *American Poetry in Performance* by Tyler Hoffman, deal with the entwined relationship between poetry and performance in 20th century America.[16] In each of these cases, performance is figured as an additive to or outgrowth of the tradition of poetry, and though theatre occasionally appears as a reference point for the configuration of poetic performance, any sustained engagement with other performance traditions are not significantly evident.

Antin himself is the subject of several essays and chapters that deal with poetry in and as performance. He figures into all three of the edited collections mentioned above, as well as Sherman Paul's *In Search of the Primitive*, which groups him with other "primitivist" poets, and David W. Huntsberger's *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry*, which places him in a cohort of "procedural" poets. The chapter "No More Margins: John Cage, David Antin, and the

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[15] Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin, *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[16] Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981); Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

Poetry of Performance" in Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, links Antin and Cage through

a poetics entwined with performance.[17] He was even the subject of a special issue of the *Review*

of Contemporary Fiction, in which his work was considered in terms of his performance,

publishing, and criticism practices.[18] Still other articles consider Antin in context of oral poetics

and sound studies.[19] Surprisingly few, however, are primarily concerned with Antin's talks as

performances in and of themselves, let alone their relationship to other performance traditions.

Talk has not usually been a focus of dance scholarship, though Susan Leigh Foster's

Dances That Describe Themselves theorized an improvised choreography through the career of

Richard Bull, which relied in part on self-investigatory speech.[20] Some more recent, still-

emerging work has also begun to use instances of talk as a way to understand identity formation

in dance.[21] Accounts of Judson Dance Theater and its participants, which often include Rainer as

a central figure, also frequently treat talk as one example of the ordinary actions with which

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[17] Sherman Paul, *In Search of the Primitive: Rereading David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Gary Snyder* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); David W. Huntsperger, *Procedural Form in Postmodern American Poetry: Berrigan, Antin, Silliman, and Hejinian* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1981).

[18] Stephen Cope, Ed., *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 7.

[19] Henry M. Sayre, "David Antin and the Oral Poetics Movement," *Contemporary Literature* 23, no. 4 (1982): 428–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/1207942; Barry Alpert, "Post-Modern Oral Poetry: Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, and David Antin," *Boundary 2* 3, no. 3 (1975): 665–82, https://doi.org/10.2307/302184; Jon Cotner and Andy Fitch, "Re-Tuning: David Antin and the Audio Text," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 33, no. 4 (July 18, 2009): 195–206, https://doi.org/10.1353/esc.0.0098.

[20] Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Wesleyan, 2002).

[21] Belmar, Sima Vera, "Easier Said than done: Talking Identity in Late Twentieth-Century American Concert Dance." (PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2015) ProQuest Order No. 10186554; Peter Dickinson, "Textual Matters: Making Narrative and Kinesthetic Sense of Crystal Pite's Dance-Theater," *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (April 2014): 61–83; Dickinson, "Between Dance and Theatre: Framing Contemporary Vancouver Movement Aesthetics." Presented to the Performing the Boundaries Between Theatre Studies & Dance Studies Working Group, American Society for Theatre Research Conference. Baltimore, 2014.

Judson Dance has been identified.[22] Rainer herself has been the subject of some scholarly

attention, including Catherine Wood's *The Mind is a Muscle,* focused on Rainer's dance work of

the same name, and significantly Carrie Lambert-Beatty's *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and*

the 1960s, which approaches Rainer from an art historical perspective sensitive to, though not

primarily rooted in, dance and dance studies.[23] Lambert-Beatty's treatment of Rainer within the

visual cultural of the 1960s, which also includes one of the only extended scholarly

considerations of the late-1960s collage performances, represents the potential for

interdisciplinary scholarship in understanding historical performance work. However, Lambert-

Beatty's framework is visual culture, not verbal performance, and the work is centered around

Rainer's career alone, not placed alongside any of her contemporaries in other disciplines.

As in these previous treatments of talk in performance, the chapters of this dissertation

spend a good deal of their space and time considering the ways that each artist does and does not

take up the most recognizable elements of their discipline. However, by placing these three

studies side by side, I mean to identify how disciplinary structures impacted them individually

and how their underlying impulses have been shared across disciplinary borders. Models for this

approach can be found in scholarly works that come from an oblique angle to cut across

disciplinary boundaries, binding diverse artwork together according to some conceptual

similarity, or historical or geographic convergence. Works that fit this description and turn up in

this study include Sally Banes' *Greenwich Village, 1963*, Daniel Belgrad's *Culture of*

Spontaneity, and Shannon Jackson's *Social Works*, all of which knit together multi-disciplinary

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[22] Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (Routledge, 2007); Banes, *Democracy's Body*; Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*.
[23] Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind Is a Muscle* (London: Afterall Books, 2007); Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (The MIT Press, 2008).

work under some broader theme, topic, or inquiry – a geographic and temporal convergence, the role of improvisation in postwar art movements, or socially engaged practice across theatre and visual arts.[24] Using talk as the blanket concept for such a study constitutes a contribution to the surprisingly small body of scholarship that both moves between disciplinary contexts with some fluency, treating them on more or less equal footing, and at the same time takes art practice and the dynamics of art making seriously, rather than merely as a cultural product that serves as a barometer of some larger cultural phenomenon.

Drawing on three figures from a similar cultural, geographic, and aesthetic milieu, who are nonetheless divided by disciplinary identity, it is possible to trace the particular influence of discipline on the development, circulation, and mediation of their various talk practices. Interestingly, they are very rarely related to one another, or even appear in the same accounts of the post-1960s avant-garde. Henry Sayre devotes space to both Antin and, much more briefly, Gray in his book about the avant-garde after 1970, *The Object of Performance*, as examples of the use of vernacular narrative in avant-garde performance.[25] And intriguingly, Sara Jane Bailes devotes a few pages of her study of failure in contemporary experimental theatre to comparing the use of self as material in Gray's and Rainer's work.[26] But their careers are not usually connected, and especially not when it comes to talk. Gray and Rainer certainly both appear, in

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[24] Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Duke University Press Books, 1993); Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (University Of Chicago Press, 1999); Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (Routledge, 2011).

[25] Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, 27–28, 201–10.

[26] Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 190–91.

separate sections, of most comprehensive surveys of performance in the 1970s or the late-20th century avant-garde like RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art*, but Antin, primarily known to poets and poetry scholars, rarely appears in such accounts, even where his wife, the performance artist Eleanor Antin, does.[27]

Simply putting these artists beside one another constitutes a contribution to thinking about disciplinary relationships in the post-1960s avant-garde. I find that the scholarly and critical conversation about art, even at this moment in postmodern history, is so controlled by disciplinary categories and assumptions that it becomes difficult to imagine how to productively relate artists from disparate disciplinary backgrounds. But if it is possible to locate a similar impulse in these artists, who come from very similar contexts, but different disciplines, then many of the differences that develop in their practices and circulation can be traced to the disciplinary forces with which they have had to contend and the media formats by which those disciplines circulate.

In part, talk performance is meant to be a corrective adjunct to the work that *performance* has done in arts practice, arts institutions, arts education, and art theory and scholarship since the 1960s. Performance during this period became a critical term that could be applied across disciplines or even outside arts practice in ways that have enabled focus on the ephemeral, embodied, experiential, temporal, networked aspects of people doing things in spaces with other people in many different contexts.[28] To the extent that performance, performance art and the scholarly field of performance studies, in particular, emerged from and responded to theatre and

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[27] RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, Third Edition (Thames & Hudson, 2011).

[28] See for example: Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Routledge, 1988); Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2004).

theatre studies, and to the extent that theatre and theatre studies has been historically bound up with literary studies, performance discourse has had a tendency to evince a certain skepticism about language, especially in big chunks, as bound to dramatic literature's textual rigidity and to the methods and approaches of literary studies.[29] By adding *talk* to performance this study emphasizes the embodied, temporal, spatial, and relational dynamic not only allowed, but made necessary by talk that has been practically and conceptually liberated from its page-bound associations with literary or dramatic text.

At the same time, through categories of performance posited as distinct from theatre, dance, music, and so on, institutionalized performance practice and theory since the 1960s has also jettisoned or minimized certain vital aspects of the long traditions of stage performance, either aligning itself with visual arts vocabulary or defining itself specifically in opposition to theatrical performance.[30] This process has sometimes involved creating something of a straw man version of theatre history that posits a significantly more conservative and illusory image of theatrical practice than a history of 20th century theatre might actually bear out. So while forging a distinct category of talk performance that is scaffolded on and adds to the conversation around performance as a distinct transdisciplinary category, talk performance can also offer a corrective to those aspects of performance discourse which tend to isolate theatre from the radical edges of performance practice and performance art from the rich and diverse histories of theatre and other performing art forms, enfolding them in a new disciplinary category largely defined by its ostensible anti-disciplinarity.

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[29] For a perspective on this history: Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[30] This narrative can be found in Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*.

Media

This study instigates an inquiry into experimental performance practices at a particular moment in history when avant-garde aesthetics were actively being absorbed into mass media forms and circulating free of their original contexts. As such, each of the artists in this study evince a career trajectory that takes them from centralizing the irreproducibility of their live performance practices and the circumstances which gave rise to them to subsuming their original performances within virtual representations of those events and their content that circulate via text, video, or film. Additionally, at the foundation of their careers each relied on fixed media formats – text, recorded audio, film and photographs – to differentiate the generative extemporaneity of their live performances from the portable, fungible, stabilized media objects and sources to which those performances responded and would eventually succumb. Though ostensibly minimalist events emphasizing presence, the voice, and the body as performance's essential elements, each of these performer's works relied on media technologies to set the horizons of possibility for apparently ordinary extemporaneous talk, to condition its reception, and to dictate the forms in which talk can circulate.

I find that part of what distinguishes these works at their particular historical juncture is their reliance upon what I have termed intermedial contingency and contingent liveness. The former refers to performance, as a medium, being made mutually dependent on other media formats for its realization in the moment, especially through the interaction of extemporaneous talk with fixed media sources and objects within the performance. As mentioned earlier, the designation "intermedia" is borrowed from Dick Higgins as a way to refer to the new, undefined

art forms that emerge when distinct established media meet and overlap.[31] I argue that the talk

performances included in this study, in their initial form, are fundamentally contingent upon the

disciplinary constraints and fixed media structures they encounter. The latter term suggests that

liveness in performance is also always already bound up with the structures of disciplines and

media formats to articulate a performative present, preceding and apart from the mechanisms

through which those performances circulate and are preserved. The mere existence of recording

technologies and avenues of secondary representation actually make extemporaneous

performance possible in the present by displacing the burden of preservation and circulation onto

the future through passive forms of media capture that can instantaneously inscribe and replay

any performance gesture.

This speaks to what may be the most often cited philosophical opposition in performance

scholarship, between Peggy Phelan's and Phillip Auslander's views of performance's ontology.

Phelan claimed that the defining feature of performance is that its "only life is in the present... To

the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction, it betrays and lessens

the promise of its own ontology."[32] Auslander, however, rejects this polarization, arguing that

performance can not only be reproduced by mass media, but happen in and through it, and in fact

that media can be as volatile and entwined with its own present as performance is usually

understood to be.[33] While the sympathies of this study lie with Phelan's sense that in its

resistance to mass reproduction performance by definition places ethical limits on its own scale,

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[31] Higgins and Higgins, "Intermedia."

[32] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge, 1993), 146.

[33] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2008), 43–63.

it is also unavoidably true that these performances are inextricably bound up with media technologies and their capacity for reproduction.

However, understanding the nature of that entwinement is essential, in particular the way the performances themselves made use of media. This was twofold, first media was employed as a fixed presence actually or conceptually invoked in the work in order to distinguish the shared, relational present between audience and performer from its possible future reproduction. This is in line with Phelan's view, performance is that which is not mediatized reproduction, an understanding that will help clarify the surprisingly difficult concept that a Spalding Gray monologue is not its film adaptation, and a David Antin talk performance is fundamentally not a published talk poem. Second, on the other side of that entwinement the extemporaneously produced content of each of these works paradoxically relied on the possibility of media capture and circulation for its coherence, a coherence consolidated by the disappearance of media traces from the content of the work itself. The more media interference, in other words, the more tied to the original idiosyncratic performance event the work would be, and the more seamlessly extemporaneous the more available to media reproduction and circulation the work became. The artists in this study, and their contemporaries, were thus able to navigate their professional careers, whether in terms of institutional representation, disciplinary coherence, or market viability, precisely because of the mediated afterlives that technologies of capture and reproduction allowed.

The affordances of media technologies for talk performance are best understood through the concept of entextualization as articulated by linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs to describe the various processes by which verbal discourse can be isolated

and removed from its original context as portable language units that can then be recontextualized elsewhere. Bauman and Briggs identify performance, in the most traditional and familiar sense of a heightened or intensified, marked presentation as a condition "...that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of speaking is to be understood. Performance puts the act of speaking on display -- objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. Performance heightens awareness of the act of speaking and licenses the audience to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment."[34] Entextualization, then, describes the ontology of talk performance in terms of talk performance preparing its own discourse for technologically-enabled decontextualization and mediated recontextualization.

This is not merely a process that tempted ephemeral artists away from their media-resistant art practices. I argue that given market forces, disciplinary expectations, and historical conditions, most especially the availability of and wide familiarity with certain technologies of capture and reproduction, the processes of entextualization as it came to be embedded in talk performance was more or less a historical inevitability. As I use the term to describe the particular situation of the artists in this study, entextualization means that it is only under historical conditions in which mediated decontextualization and recontextualization is possible that the ephemeral practices I describe here could even be conceived and distinguished as artwork. Yet it is precisely that process of entextualization, decontextualization, and recontextualization that talk performance's extemporaneity promised to avoid. It is the very

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[34] Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (January 1, 1990): 73.

possibility of mediatization that shapes talk performance and that, paradoxically, talk performance is predicated on resisting.

This is perhaps clearest in the case of Spalding Gray, who I demonstrate introduced external fixed media objects and fragments, especially text and recorded audio, into his early performances to ensure extemporaneity and illustrate the distance of his talk practice from those media presences. At the same time, the presence of that fixed media introduced the possibility of the mediated circulation to which his work would eventually succumb. These later, more narratively unified, monologues replicated literary drafting rather than employing embodied remembering and relating to deliver a more set performance, primed for adaptation to text and film formats. Though still built around a representation of virtuosic extemporaneity, these more settled later performances were able to scrub the foundational awareness of media as a material presence, upon which his early works were built, from their widely-circulating media adaptations. In these widely distributed representations of Gray's monologues, most notably his well-known *Swimming to Cambodia* (which premiered onstage in 1984, was published as a book in 1985, and released as a film in 1987), Gray's authorial anxiety was supplanted by a more generalized neurotic personality telling stories into the darkness.

Similarly, and perhaps more directly, David Antin relied on the passive capture of audio recording technology to allow him to sincerely deliver his talks as situationally dependent, irretrievable thought-events, which ended for him in the room where they were delivered. This then allowed him to treat his encounter with the transcribed audio of his talks as an experience of found text, which he came to fresh, and was therefore able to privilege his editorial interventions in the moment over his impulses in performance. I refer to Antin's artistic and generational

position as part of a "culture of capture," in which the increasing availability of relatively easy to use and portable passive recording devices made it ever more possible to consider ordinary utterance as a kind of automatic inscription. This pervaded the thinking about speech in the latter half of the 20th century, whether or not that speech was being actively recorded. Its very recordability rendered talk irreversibly capturable, and so available to textual rearrangement and reimagining. This meant that distinctly post-war phenomena such as politically sensitive talk that might be heard by bugged phones or rooms during the Cold War, various forms of improvisation from jazz to comedy, or the songs and dialects captured by ethnographers and folklorists for preservation by portable audio recording, were all primed for entextualization by this recording culture.

In the case of Rainer, media traces permeated her performances as both the signal and the noise. Recorded or recited text, and later film or slide projections, often provided an apparently discontinuous counterpoint to the movement onstage. At the same time, I argue that language and language systems themselves provided mixable and replayable structures, modeled on recorded media, through which her work materialized and could be reproduced. That is, dance works both early in her career and later, employed dialogic structures that generated the performances moment to moment using predetermined codes and signals. Rainer was dependent on talk to model and materialize those controlling systems, and thus to imagine more variable plastic possibilities beyond dance, in film in particular, where editorial intervention could be both technologically (and authorially) centralized and quasi-invisible. But before she moved into filmmaking, her dances came to present the opposite arrangement, in which her authorial and editorial interventions were centralized, and their resultant product deliberately deferred.

My analysis of the process of mediation across these three case studies relies in part on an understanding of the structure of media as articulated by Marshal McLuhan, who saw technologies of creation, reproduction, and distribution bringing the usually isolated event of authorship and the communal instance of reception ever closer together.[35] McLuhan's theories have become so pervasive that they are often left out of our understandings of the way live performance formulates itself and circulates through media. However, as technologies of capture and broadcast became more common, the line between the live and the mediated was rendered ever-thinner. McLuhan understood this occurring through the new communicative possibilities established by each successive new medium, the capacity of which was essentially set by the requirements of the content native to the prior technology. However, my argument rests not only on the increasing fidelity and immediacy with which new technologies could deliver extemporaneous utterance moving ever-closer to the conditions of the live, but on a more totalizing state of mediatization in which that live utterance is already dependent on its mediated future. In the model of a mediatized environment, all possible media and all possible content reciprocally shape and inform one another, no matter what media conditions happen to obtain, until the point of mutual, inextricable, and total suffusion.[36] As my case studies here show, it is paradoxically the more total and seamless the immersion in a media environment, the more extemporaneity can be displayed as a virtuosic practice, while it is often through the fragmented

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[35] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Rev Edition (The MIT Press, 1994). 83-84

[36] A. Hepp and F. Krotz, *Mediatized Worlds: Culture and Society in a Media Age* (Springer, 2014), 4–5.

and contingent interaction with media possibilities and formations that liveness is defined and authenticated.[37]

By identifying those circumstances under which the particular ephemeral and contingent materiality of talk, which will inevitably give way to some kind of mediated afterlife, can be glimpsed in these works, I am making an argument for talk itself as a unique category that exists, however temporarily, as its own situationally dependent and relationally realized medium. Talk, it seems clear, has its own medium-specific qualities, possibilities, and limitations that can be analyzed, distinguished, and compared quite separately from the qualities of literary or dramatic text. For this I rely in a limited way on Walter Ong's understanding of orality as distinct from literacy. Ong argued that in context of orality language is always embodied and extemporaneous, and that only the advent of literacy makes the concept of an objective text outside a subjective instance of utterance conceptually possible.[38] Like his mentor McLuhan, though, he saw the acceleration of technology under the conditions of modernity bringing the technologically-enabled utterance ever closer to its moment of dissemination, replicating something of the conditions of orality in modernist phenomena like those described here.

This study tracks the talk performance careers of Antin, Gray, and Rainer in terms of the institutional and media structures available to them and to which they were subject. In parallel, these narratives articulate common points of resistance to media fixity at the origins of their talk performance practices, and the subsequent influence of certain homogenizing avenues of

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[37] Jacob Smith makes a relevant point when he argues that once radio broadcasts could be recorded and edited, the performers actualy appeared more extempooraneous than they did live since they did not have to worry about making a mistake; it could always be fixed before airing. Smith, *Vocal Tracks*. 17-30.

[38] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen & Co, 1982). 123-129.

development that shaped and reformed those practices according to the demands of market forces, the expectations imposed by disciplinary lineages, and the cold eye of mediation. Those influences often resulted in more accessible and popular work, which nonetheless sacrificed the unique procedural approaches that distinguished these talk performance practices at their start. But by turning toward the difficulty in articulating the more confounding aspects of these practices in their early stages and looking skeptically at the surface coherence and clarity media formats offer, I propose that it might be possible to imagine a situation in which these artists chose not to foreclose the boundary-dissolving potential that ephemeral talk in process momentarily presents, and to reclaim the potential of that refusal. Though, at the same time, it also becomes clear that the relationship between extemporaneous performance and its mediated afterlife is most likely inevitable in the contemporary context, and that it is always and only by moving between the poles of extemporaneity and fixity that the possibility for unifying and self-reflexive experiences embedded in the contingency of live performance makes itself known.

Post 1960s America (The 1970s & 1980s)

To some extent the periodization of this project selected these artists. Other historical frameworks might include John Cage's lecture performances, which I see as a common source for all three artists, or even much older antecedents like the literary performances of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, or else bring the study up to the present through slam poetry, first-person storytelling, vlogging, and podcasting. But focusing on this key transitional period, when both conceptions of art categories and technologies of capture and reproduction were so rapidly and radically changing, it became clear that these three artists came out of and fit into their own

art historical moment particularly well. In the cases of Gray and Antin, they represent the artists most emblematically associated with talk in performance during this period from their respective disciplinary backgrounds of theatre and poetry. Since this project engages talk in theatrical performance and literary practice, these are the obvious choices. Rainer, despite her status as probably the most iconic artist in this study and the one most tied to the era in popular imagination, is a less obvious choice, but her work provides insight into the way talk figured even into disciplinary lineages not otherwise connected to language. Through Rainer, talk becomes materially entwined with the body-based turn from text as the underlying basis for the temporal, physical, relational performance that came to characterize this historical moment.

Limiting the study to the American avant-garde post-1960s grants insight into the historical conditions under which this work developed in what was a highly influential period and milieu, even in an international context. The postwar American avant-garde has exerted a disproportionally large influence on the ethos and aesthetics of contemporary arts over the last 75 years. The earlier part of this period, the high modernist renaissance of the 1950s and early 1960s, has been widely and thoroughly chronicled, as have the liberatory, chaotic, and revolutionary artistic changes of the 1960s.[39] There tends to be an assumption that the creative activity of the period immediately thereafter, in the 1970s and early 1980s, has been similarly retrospectively chronicled and reevaluated, but in fact the scholarly treatment of this era from a theatre and performance history point of view, at least, has been somewhat scant in the years

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[39] Among the accounts of artistic activity during this period: Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde*, Rev ed. (Penguin, 1976); Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*; Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (University of Michigan Press, 2008); Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*; Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries*; Arthur Sainer, *The New Radical Theatre Notebook* (New York: Applause, 1997); Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*; Bottoms, *Playing Underground*; Harding and Rosenthal, *Restaging the Sixties*.

since. I believe this is in part because by the mid-1970s the institutional apparatus of the

university and of academic and arts publishing was often being shared with the artists

themselves. This meant that the work of this era got a great deal of consideration as it was

happening, in journals like *The Drama Review* (TDR) or *Performing Arts Journal* (PAJ,) in

alternative press outlets like the *Village Voice*, and in experimental small press publishing, which

often put together scrapbook-like publications, with scripts, performance documentation,

interviews, essays by the artists, and some sustained intellectual criticism.

      Similarly, the line between poet and literary scholar became less bright in this period,

with scholarly treatments of individual poet's practices often accompanying and circulating

alongside their poetry in little magazines, small press publishing, and in a turn toward live poetry

performance in experimental poetry readings, emerging spoken word genres, and even academic

symposia like the 1975 ethnopoetics conference considered in the Antin chapter.[40] Though this

early scholarly and self-reflective artistic work laid the groundwork for what came after, it still

stands to be addressed from a perspective not deeply entrenched in that milieu, and with an eye

toward a cross-disciplinarity that even those radical outlets and institutions had net yet quite fully

addressed.

      Following the impulses of 1960s artists to tear down all the structures and strictures of

disciplinary orthodoxies and histories in favor of immersive, in the moment, experiential

engagement, artists in the 1970s and beyond found they had to re-situate themselves in a

reconfigured disciplinary landscape and its realigned institutions. The new institutional identities

these artists, critics, and scholars found themselves taking on, some in academia, others of

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[40] See: Kane, *All Poets Welcome*; the ethnopoetics conference is documented in *Alcheringa*, New Series, 1976, Vol. 2 No. 2 (Special Issue), *Alcheringa* archive, accessed October 2, 2014, http://ethnopoetics.com/9/9.html.

necessity in new institutional structures built to support new art categories, depended on charting

new strategies for articulating art theory and practice in these new contexts, intellectual,

aesthetic, and pragmatic. Discipline remained the least loaded institutional structure to turn back

to, and each disciplinary lineage incorporated the upheaval and discovery of the 1960s into their

disciplinary history and lore in ways that took on very different afterlives. Since so much of the

institutional apparatus had moved from individual artists and collectives to academia and

publishing, looking at three artists navigating their own way through that cultural landscape

using performance, especially when they had chosen ways of working that empowered them to

self-theorize their own work within the structures of the performances themselves, provides an

instructive set of examples.

Equally importantly, at this same moment an intellectual apparatus emerged that built on,

but over time moved away from, the vanguard art performances of the era. Modern performance

studies, as articulated during this period at New York University by Richard Schechner and

others, built on the lessons of Schechner's and his colleagues firsthand experiences as artists in

experimental theatre, which often pushed at the traditional fourth wall to create immersive

performance environments. This re-imagining of the disciplinary boundaries of theatre prompted

Schechner's proposal for an expanded field of theatre studies rendered as performance, which

covered not only theatrical and non-theatrical performance-based art work, but also reached far

beyond the art context to public ceremony, ritual, and everyday life, neither in the theater nor the

gallery.[41] This built on and advocated for a new focus on cross-cultural experiences with

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[41] Richard Schechner, "A New Paradigm for Theatre in the Academy," *TDR (1988-)* 36, no. 4 (1992): 7–10, https://doi.org/10.2307/1146210.

performance and ritual between countries and cultures, especially non-Western contexts, using the techniques of anthropological research, combined with Schechner's own training as a theatre researcher, to introduce methodologies for analyzing performance in whatever contexts they could be identified within theatre and far beyond.[42]

Talk performance, then, adds something new to the conversation by turning to the other side of the performance studies coin to ask not how to use the tools of theatre and performance analysis for an expanded engagement with performance writ large, as performance studies has been doing for nearly half a century, but how to use the emergence of performance as a critical concept in scholarship at the particular historical moment the study occupies to better understand what happens in art-specific contexts, and why, in relation to these theoretical developments. Applying an expansive, art-enabled critical approach back to art making itself seems a fitting response to the discipline-bound institutional approaches to even the most radical modes of art making, which are able to compare those works to others in their disciplinary lineage, but use examples from other categories sparingly and often deliberately naively.

The choice of case studies reflects the fact that these artists are entwined and in contact with some of the key phenomena of the 1960s and post-1960s era that also informed and paralleled these changing understandings of performance. Rainer was closely involved with visual artists spanning abstract expressionism to pop art, minimalism, and conceptualism, including her friend Robert Rauschenberg and her longtime romantic partner Robert Morris, both of whom also worked as performers, choreographers, and designers with Rainer and her fellow

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[42] Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies an Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Richard Schechner and Victor W Turner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Carlson, *Performance*.

Judson Dance Theatre dancers. Antin was also closely tied to vanguardist visual art practices through his associations with the minimalist sculptors and conceptual artists he was friends with, wrote about as an art critic, and programmed into the University Gallery at the University of California San Diego, where he became Director in the late 1960s. He was also in contact with and nominally a part of the ethnopoetics movement led by his friend Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock. Ethnopoetics is in many ways a corollary movement to Performance Studies, combining the techniques of poetry with those of anthropology to give diverse oral traditions that might fall outside the conventional bounds of Western poetic literature equal footing, especially by attending to the sonic, spatial, temporal, and embodied dynamics of oral poetries as a feature of textual translation.

For his part, Gray's reach was less interdisciplinary; however, his background as a member of Schechner's company The Performance Group put him at the heart of some of the most important experimental theatre coming out of the 1960s, which proved to be the embodiment of Schechner's developing understanding of environmental influence on performance and the nature of ritual. When Gray then co-founded what would become The Wooster Group with Elizabeth Lecompte, he also had a hand in creating the troupe that many would come to understand as most directly embodying the ethos of the media-saturated, theory-heavy experimental theatre of 1970s and '80s. Gray also maintained an active relationship with the New Age self-help movement, especially as manifest in certain Northern California enclaves like Santa Cruz, which he romanticized and where he returned again and again. Though most avowedly not an art movement, self-help provided an aesthetic framework for self-awareness and self-presentation that threatened to make art performance essentially irrelevant by endowing

the individual with the tools to aestheticize their own experiences. Gray in fact remained

somewhat ambivalent early on about whether his autobiographical performance practice

constituted an artistic development or a therapeutic modality.

These interdisciplinary connections to the particular aesthetic ethos and artistic ideology

of the 1970s are especially relevant since the standard narrative about re-institutionalization

during this era tends to focus on the emergence of an entirely new category of "performance art."

This narrative is variously, and sometimes contradictorily, told through the emergence of

performance as a critical analytic category, the development of performance as a strategy in

studio art practices where it did not have the same history as it has in the performing arts, and the

emergence of a more identity-based politics, initially around issues of gender in particular, and

soon after around issues of race, ethnicity, and sexuality.[43] Closely tied to the body, these new

performance strategies swept up all the many radical developments of the previous decade to

create embodied art under a new cross-disciplinary umbrella. Yet the new designation of

performance art tended to describe an ambiguous and contested, but nonetheless non-inclusive,

new creative category (or categories) which always seemed to promise a refuge from disciplinary

expectations and pressure, but ultimately came to exert its own aesthetic and ideological

controls. By examining artists who to some extent returned to their original disciplinary

conversation, in disruptive but nonetheless coherent ways, an alternate story of on-the-ground

negotiation of post-1960s performance strategies emerges.

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[43] See, for examples: Carlson, *Performance*; Goldberg, *Performance Art*; Sayre, *The Object of Performance*; Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Routledge, 1997).

The career trajectories of these particular artists do not necessarily match up perfectly with the post-1960s periodization that the title introduces. In the case of both Rainer and Antin, a significant amount of space is dedicated to their work made during the 1960s, though it is their later work that most clearly fulfills the concerns of the project. However, in Rainer's case even that "later work" begins in 1969. Similarly for Antin, the first steps toward his talk poetry were taken in the 1960s. For this reason I am interested in stipulating a "long post-1960s" as a correlative to the various configurations of the "long 1960s" as a term to identify a period of social, cultural, and political change stretching from the late 1950s to the early 1970s.[44] The long post-1960s would then begin at any point during the later 1960s, 1970s, or even early 1980s at which it is possible to identify a cultural turn from an immersive experience of the forces and phenomena identified with the 1960s to a retrospective and reevaluative turn backwards to survey and understand that period of change. I argue that Rainer made this move with the work she began making around 1968, which fundamentally reevaluated her creative output since 1960. Antin also turned to a nostalgic revisiting of his 1960s antics in New York during the anti-Vietnam War activities of the period as soon as he arrived to his new home in San Diego in the late 1960s, where he developed his talk poetry as a decidedly post-1960s format. On the other hand, Gray responded to the immersive rituals of both Schechner's 1960s environmental theatre and his own self-actualization work to conceive his autobiographical performance formats, first in collaboration with Elizabeth Lecompte and The Wooster Group, then on his own, starting in the mid-1970s.

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[44] See: Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (A&C Black, 2011).

Although each of these artists represents a unique relationship to extemporaneous talk, their work often emerged in context of similar impulses circulating in their creative milieu, which help to contextualize the disciplinary reception and creative landscape within which they were operating. Gray was making his autobiographical performances during the 1980s alongside a number of iconic artists doing solo performance in downtown Manhattan, many of them at the venue PS 122, including Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, and Eric Bogosian. These performers were all known for using the minimal material of their bodies and spoken language to create challenging, political, boundary pushing work. Miller, Hughes, and Finley were part of the NEA Four, a quartet of artists whose federal grants were revoked due to the content of their work. Thanks to this notoriety, far more people knew who these performers were than knew what they did, and for most their blend of self-aware theatrical monologue and off-kilter stand-up comedy routine became synonymous with the category of performance art, despite having nothing to do with the gallery-based, anti-spectacular, embodied practice that finally laid claim to the category.[45]

Antin, for his part, was loosely associated with both ethnopoetics and the language poets, all of whom were interested in the complex relationship between spoken and written language. As documented in Daniel Kane's *All Poets Welcome*, he was also a part of a poetic milieu on the

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[45] These competing disciplinary histories of performance art are often told separately from one another, and both suggest a much more settled and consistent usage than the record bears out. The essay usually credited with consolidating the term wasn't published until 1986, and even there the author Noel Carrol used "performance art" to refer to the experimental theatrical practices typical of the NEA 4, while "art performance" signaled for him the kinds of bodily interventions into gallery spaces to which we now apply the term "performance art." Noel Carroll, "Performance," *Formations* 3, no. 1 (1986): 63–81. Even if "performance art" was in use in the 1970s, it was by no means agreed upon: a 1979 special issue of *The Drama Review* floated a now-abandoned term for much of this same work, "autoperformance," which the issue applied to Gray, Judson dancer Deborah Hay, object performer Stuart Sherman, the post-gallery "activities" of happenings founder Allan Kaprow, and California-based life artist Linda Montano, among others, based on the fact that they all tended to conceive of and perform their work themselves. "Autoperformance Issue," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Mar. 1979.

Lower East Side in the 1960s in which the line between public performances of poetry and publication were very thin in context of a series of regular poetry readings where mimeographed local poetry journals containing the work read at these events were produced and disseminated weekly.[46] Elsewhere during this same period literary examples of reversed talk-text relationships began to appear, with talk as the source of material presented as fixed text, thanks to the technologies of passive recording in the new culture of capture. Transcribed tape recordings, for example in Andy Warhol's *A, a novel* or Jack Kerouac's *Travels with Cody*, suggested that with fairly little effort talking could be writing. Though all of these examples figure the relationship between talk and text in a complex way, the contribution of this project is to focus on the performance event itself, where these artists in particular used talk to discover and shape their work, rather than as the raw material from which the work is shaped.

Rainer was at least initially quite singular in incorporating talk into dance. Her contemporaries in Judson Dance Theatre did embrace the use of spoken language as part of the everyday vocabulary of movement they drew on or as an equally good accompaniment to dance as music, sometimes quite centrally as in Trisha Brown's *Accumulation with Talking* (1973). Other contemporaries similarly employed talk as sound alongside apparently unrelated choreography, notably Merce Cunningham and John Cage in Cunningham's 1965 dance *How To Pass, Kick, Fall and Run* in which Cage's variable live recitation of stories from his series of one-minute reminiscences, *Indeterminacy*, was used in place of a musical score. However, Rainer spoke and used spoken language earlier and more often than any of her asscoiates from

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[46] Kane, "Ch. 2: OralPoetics on the Lower East Side," *All Poets Welcome*, 27–56.

the beginning of her career.[47] But dance uniquely presents the possibility to consider embodied, kinesthetic, spatialized performance in a way that other disciplines, whose legacies do involve speech and text, could not. Though talk is peppered through dance practice of this era as a way to both push back on the orthodoxies of dance as a category and as a connector to dance's historical relationship to drama, Rainer's multifaceted and long-term connection to talk in her work as sonic and visual material, as well as a tool of public direction and negotiation through which her shifting process orientation could be focused, made her use of talk an essential, if elusive, innovation of her work.

Although these artists all spent at least part of their careers in geographical proximity to one another, sometimes demonstrably aware of each other, and in certain cases even personally known to own another, they operated and circulated in very different spheres. Clearly Rainer and Antin knew one another in New York in the 1960s, he was friends with the same minimalist sculptors she associated with, including Carl Andre who performed in and made set pieces for one of her works and her lover Robert Morris, whose performance *Check*, which was featured on a concert program with a dance by Rainer, included Antin and his wife Eleanor in its very large cast along with Rainer.[48] Rainer and Gray also knew each other; at least one reference in Gray's journals mentions telephoning Rainer to ask her to come to one of his performances.[49] And a

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[47] Rainer also drew on the legacy of modern dance, in which Martha Graham, José Limón, and their contemporaries would present "lecture demonstrations" that involved both explaining and showcasing their work. Rainer originally called the first of her collage performances "Lecture Demonstration" before it ultimately premiered as *Performance Demonstration #1*.

[48] Judson Dance Theatre program, March 23-25, 1965, Box 37 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers, 2013, bulk 1959-2013 1871, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

[49] In his notebook entry for January 12, 1979 Gray mentions telephoning Rainer to invite her to a performance of his and Lecompte's show *Rumstick Road*, "Notebook: 1978-1979," Spalding Gray Papers, container 35.1.

draft of an essay in Rainer's archive on the film *Sherman's March* from 1985, when Rainer's political convictions as a feminist had become much more overtly integrated into her work, while not about Gray, critiques the subterranean misogyny of self-consciously neurotic male autobiographical performances at a moment when Gray's profile was on the rise for doing just this sort of work.[50] It is not clear whether Antin and Gray knew each other, though Antin certainly knew of Gray and his work. Interestingly, he differentiated himself from Gray based on the claim that Gray was trying to be entertaining while Antin was only entertaining by accident.[51] Gray, for his part, may well have not been aware of Antin at all, who was already living in San Diego by the time Gray moved to New York in the late 1960s. In any event, his inspiration for a performance he first called a "speaking memory" a decade later does not seem to have been inspired by Antin or his "talk poetry," despite arising at a temporally proximate moment.

Avant-garde

This period also represents a key transitional moment for the life of the avant-garde. The technologies that became available between the 1960s and the 1980s, from the cassette tape to VHS to the Xerox machine, allowed for easy recording, replay, and reproduction and became cheap and commonplace; at the same time the avenues of distribution, from video stores to cable television to public broadcasting, became more accessible and widespread. These developments created the circumstances for the emergence of new creative forms, including sound and video art, and the avenues of circulation by which the avant-garde could find itself newly mainstream

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[50] Rainer, "What's Wrong with Ross McElwee's Sherman's March," ms dated October 10, 1986, Box 31a, Folder 3, Yvonne Rainer Papers, 2013, bulk 1959-2013, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

[51] David Antin and Charles Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin* (New York City: Granary Books, 2002).

and subject to the pull of market demands on a large scale. By the early 1980s, Laurie Anderson could have a hit record on a major label, while television shows like *Alive From Off Center* and *Trying Times* on PBS, or even *Late Night with David Letterman* on NBC, could recruit experimental artists to reframe their material or create new content in the guise of edgy, off-kilter comedy or music. The cool, self-mocking irony that worked best in these contexts thus supplanted much of the fiery, chaotic sensuality that had been the default pose of the previous generation's avant-garde and had fueled the dissolution of many of the boundaries that these newly programmable formats began to fill in.

The avant-garde is particularly important to the conceptualization of this project, which focuses on artists who were deliberately and explicitly wrestling with the limits and expectations of their disciplinary lineages, and of the art situation as a whole, especially in direct response to the celebrated avant-gardes of the 1960s that immediately preceded them. Labeling these impulses "avant-garde" connects the artists in this study with the self-identified avant-gardes which came before them, both immediately in the 1950s and 1960s, and to the pre- and inter-war avant-garde movements of Europe, from which the oppositional models taken up in the US in the 1960s were derived. As a term, avant-garde offers a rubric of cross-disciplinary boundary pushing and aesthetic refusal that no other term adequately describes, save perhaps for its closest translation, vanguard, which I use occasionally as well. Other options in common use each have their own limitations: "experimental" leans toward aesthetic invention but does not necessarily suggest dissolution of disciplinary expectations or boundaries, "downtown" is too closely tied to the specific geography of New York City, and, as discussed earlier, the broad reassignment of the label "performance art" to live art that resists disciplinary categories has served to establish

its own distinct orthodoxies. An identification of avant-garde signals both an oppositional

position and an attitude of broad inclusion across boundaries. At its foundation, this inquiry is

interested in talk performance as a discipline-resistant, vanguardist stance that sought to

undermine and re-imagine the terms of performance across disciplinary contexts. For this reason,

the project aligns talk performance with an avant-garde sensibility and avant-garde history, even

where an artist like Gray clearly made the move from the avant-garde into the mainstream over

time.

The American avant-garde, however, has accrued certain historical associations that this

study does not specifically combat, though it hopes to point them out. In choosing artists from

the 1960s and 1970s who have become particularly emblematic and whose work has been

subject to processes of mediatization, the study does reflect the fact that the avant-garde of that

era has largely circulated as a default-white milieu, regardless of the actual make-up of the

people historically on the ground. The particular formalist constitution of the postwar American

avant-garde has often been criticized for aligning its minimalist and apparently ordinary

aesthetics with a depersonalized and putatively white idea of neutrality that erased the actual

demographic and figurative texture and diversity that made up the urban landscape in which the

work emerged.[52] Rainer herself, in her memoir published in 2006, conceded scholar Carrie

Lambert-Beatty's critique that the construction of the body as "neutral" in her early work ignored

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[52] For some accounts of this dynamic and the often ignored minoritarian and transnational avant-garde, see: James M. Harding and John Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement*.

the social forces that would be brought to bear on a differently raced body performing the same actions.[53]

Though the racial disparity in representations of the American avant-garde, and that avant-garde's blind spots when it comes to race, are not the subjects of this study, I do point to places where race, class, and gender privilege shaped the artists' work and reception, and the ways they have benefited from white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.[54] I also underline moments when it is appropriate to call out the voiced attitudes of these artists for racist, sexist, or homophobic attitudes, however unwitting, as both Antin and Gray sometimes deserve to be. There is no doubt much room for improvement here, but I do believe that this study of the procedural aspect of extemporaneous talk performance lays the groundwork for a much broader application of this category in the future that can expand and reach beyond the milieu of the avant-garde to encompass different racial configurations than the largely privileged positions these comparatively successful, well-known, and well-off artists enjoyed.

Case Studies

That potentially expansive project begins in a targeted way, with a study of art-based talk performance strategies among three artists who emerged in context of the American avant-garde in and after the 1960s. This construction is mindful of the potential to use talk performance as the basis for understanding extemporaneous orality as a distinct, serious, and intrinsically expressive

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[53] Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (The MIT Press, 2006), 398. Even earlier Rainer, who came out as a lesbian in the 1980s, had also acknowledged the privilege and professional advantage her heterosexual identity had granted her in the 1960s.

[54] For example, Gray's easy access to the closet in his work, which relies on his position as an average straight white guy, when by most accounts his sexual practices were consistently much more fluid than his performance persona suggested.

form of physical, temporal, active engagement, dependent on acknowledging its interdependence with the environmental, relational, and institutional contexts within which it operates in both art and non-art contexts in the future. Though these possibilities inform and enable this project and what may be its eventual contributions, its first commitments are to the art and artists studied and to the historical discoveries and theoretical insights that emerge from the archive first and foremost. The findings contained in the chapters that follow are based in deep and sustained work in the archival collections of each of these three artists. I was able to discover material that had not been widely considered before, and to trace their use of talk over large swaths of their careers, in order to understand how their talk strategies developed and changed over time, and in response to what external and internal forces. This approach describes all three of the main chapters of this work, though each with a distinct result. I deal with each in their own chapter, which takes account of the extant scholarship about their work, their disciplinary backgrounds, and their critical and popular reputations in order to understand their talk performance projects, with an eye toward the relationship of their careers to those of the other two artists in the study.

The chapters are arranged to some extent in reverse chronological order, starting with Spalding Gray, then David Antin, and concluding with Yvonne Rainer. Gray is in many ways the founding figure of this dissertation, and was often the reference point for me in understanding all three. But there is also a way in which Gray, emerging latest chronologically and overlapping with the mass-mediated avant-garde that became mainstream in the 1980s, moved most seamlessly into his fully mediated identity, which has become so complete that most accounts give little thought to his extemporaneity and almost no thought to his origins in the avant-garde. Moving backwards from this familiar context, the reader can see the complex relationship with

media in performance becoming more inescapable and more central to an understanding of Antin's, and then Rainer's, processes.

Antin's talk poems remained reliant on making clear their audacious conception of the relationship of live extemporaneous performance to textual permanence, though this conceptual boldness helped him conceal some of the actual procedural maneuvers he used to maintain his authorial prerogatives. And Rainer, whose dance work, due to both disciplinary and historical conditions, remains the least documented and the least self-aware of its relationship to talk, was specifically dependent on emphasizing interruption and discontinuity – keeping her performances unfinished and unfinishable – and on foregrounding her ambivalent relationship to authorship. The collage performances of Rainer's I focus on, culminating with *Continuous Project-Altered Daily*, are particularly unavailable to mediated entextualization by design. And in Rainer's case the move into a more fully mediated environment, which all three artists made sooner or later, ultimately meant reimagining her disciplinary alliances by becoming a filmmaker in order to nominally resolve her still-unsettled approach to performance. This backwards trajectory, then, moves from the somewhat familiar media conditions of the world we live in, in which instantaneous mediation supports a Mcluhanesque notion of recording media as an extension of our extemporaneous impulses, back to a moment when the apparent impossibility of permanence and entextualization seemed to throw up road blocks wherever mediation tried to resolve the problems of live performance.

The first chapter, "Spalding Gray: Intermedial Contingency to Mediated Extemporaneity," traces Gray's career in terms of its relationship to theatrical performance and media starting from his work as a member of Richard Schechner's The Performance Group. The

chapter then follows him through the founding of the Wooster Group and their collective, multimedia trilogy *Three Places in Rhode Island* (1974-79), which was derived from Gray's autobiographical memories, and in which fixed media objects played a key role in developing Gray's extemporaneous style. I then focus on two of his early, lesser-known autobiographical performances, *India and After (America)* (1979) and *The Great Crossing* (1980). These works used chance procedure and fixed media to structure his performances and resist presenting a set, settled, coherent narrative in favor of a performance that emphasized its own contingency and dependence on the performance context. The end of the chapter deals with the way he purged external media from his signature performance, *Swimming to Cambodia* (1983), in order to emphasize his virtuosic extemporaneity. This enabled the monologue's adaptation in 1987 to a widely seen film, on which Gray's popular reputation rests. After that, I argue that he operated as a very different cultural figure whose work was predicated on his relatability and self-disclosure rather than on his idiosyncratic extemporaneity and performative contingency.

Chapter 2, "David Antin: Talking Text and Texting Talk," similarly traces the development of Antin's talk performance format through his earlier use of found and collaged textual material and his experimentation with improvisation and audio recording equipment, as well as by way of the biographical shift in which the insular experimental poetry community he was addressing in New York could literally no longer hear him once he moved to San Diego. Once he had discovered his capacity for extemporaneously delivering uninterrupted discourse before groups of people, he drew on ethnopoetics, conceptual art, minimalism, and the life performance movement his wife Eleanor Antin was a part of, along with philosophy, both classical and modern, and available media technology to conceive and self-theorize a new

category of talk poetry. His talk performances, nominally the source of his poetry, were quickly transmuted into text via recording, transcription, and editing, a process which foregrounded the ease of technological capture, and to some extent glossed over the textual strategies through which, I discovered in the archive, he was able to somewhat surreptitiously make use of the kind of strategic editing most literary authorship depends upon. I conclude the chapter by examining multiple accounts of an event that reveals some of the mechanisms of Antin's process and moves the object of analysis from the textual product of that process to the instigating performance. In this case, that performance was a 1978 talk at the San Francisco art space 80 Langdon Street that was interrupted by objections from fellow poets in the audience and ended in a contentious debate about whether a talk poem had occurred, when it could be said to have started and stopped, and who had the power to do so.

And in my final chapter, "Yvonne Rainer: Talk Structure and Editorial Negotiation," I identify talk as a structuring mechanism and as a fixed media presence in Rainer's initial dance career, focusing especially on her evening length works through the 1960s. I find that talk, or what I call talk structures, dialogic systems that allow choices within a certain range of possibilities to be made between dancers in performance in the moment, occurred frequently in these works, alongside live and recorded textual recitation that often specifically tried to resist the liveness of performance. I then focus in particular on some experimental intermedial performances she made after breaking with her more traditional choreographic career, including *Performance Demonstration* (1968-69), *Rose Fractions* (1969), and especially *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* (1969-70). Over the course of developing these pieces, she used talk to structure pre-existing dance sequences and other multi-media elements and to realize the

contentious, collective, permanently in flux state of artists negotiating the acquisition and execution of performance material on stage, which eventually subsumed these performances entirely. By focusing on the contingency of her process, I argue that Rainer opened up her performances to the contentious interventions of all the artists involved, eventually resulting in a divergence by which her dancers moved toward totally spontaneous work, while Rainer pivoted back toward directorial control via a move into filmmaking. I conclude by looking at her first feature length film, *The Lives of Performers* (1972)*,* which had a dual life as a live performance called *Performance* (1972)*.* In this work, talk moved into its position as the material content of the piece, while the technology of film editing replaced talk in structuring and shaping, and even revealing, the cumulative process of constructing the piece out of its disparate parts.

The epilogue looks forward to the mediated afterlives of all three performers' work, moving backwards through the case studies toward Gray. I meet Rainer on the cusp of returning to dance in the mid-1990s, through a series of correspondences with a group in France that was staging a reconstruction of *Continuous Project-Altered Daily (CP-AD)*. Moving through a dialogic improvised "meeting" with Xavier Leroy, one of the dancers from the 1996 reconstruction, staged in Berlin in 2000; *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, her collaboration with Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project that same year; and her new body of dance work in the 21st Century, I observe that her second dance career has in many respects proven to be a further extension of *CP-AD*. Rainer has continued to rearrange the same material used in *CP-AD* and has often recounted the contentious process of realizing it and then relinquishing her control of it in the early 1970s as part of these performances, but she has carried with her the settled editorial strategies of filmmaking, consigning any extemporaneity to

contained sections of a predetermined whole, even while she recreates the collage aesthetic of the earlier works.

Antin at least occasionally continued his talk poetry practice until shortly before his death in 2016, and so examples of returns to his archive are somewhat more immediate. But I find that with the increased availability of his archive in various forms, it is becoming increasingly possible to revisit the performances that were the source of his talk poems rather than their textual representations. First, the very recent online availability of a plurality of source recordings of Antin's talks, many of which were initially digitized by the Getty Research Institute during my time conducting research there, have fundamentally changed the ontology of Antin's talk poems for many who now encounter them, almost instantly reversing the relationship between audio recording and transcribed text. I then turn briefly to an autoethnographic interlude to account for what performance can do for an understanding of Antin's talk poetry. I recount three of my own Antin-derived performance experiments as examples of how embodying the performances Antin's talk poems notionally reference can occasion an encounter with aspects of Antin's practice not available on the page. These experiments included a faithful reading of one of Antin's talk poems, an anarchic attempt to take up Antin's extemporaneous impulse in a multivalent and non-hierarchical context, and a participatory re-performance of the aborted 80 Langdon Street incident that brought a "failed" talk poem back to fully embodied life.

Finally, I turn to the two very distinct ways Gray's legacy has been dealt with after his death. One, undertaken by his estate, insists on blurring the distinction between Gray's performance practice and literary authorship through posthumous publication projects, new

hybrid performance scripts, licensing performance rights through a script service, and even placing his archive at the Harry Ransom Center as part of their collecting focus in American dramatists. The other, undertaken by people who admired and emulated his work form afar, usually via the film of *Swimming to Cambodia*, takes Gray himself and the physical performance format he established as the fixed media against which the artists he influenced could articulate their own experiences and contingent relationship to his legacy. This surprising and ever-expanding archive of what I call tribute performances uses Gray's suicide and the *Swimming to Cambodia* film as texts to re-perform and deconstruct, sometimes by emulating Gray's performance style, sometimes by explicitly rejecting it and with it some version of Gray's tragic fate. Another set of what I call table performances, which do not explicitly reference Gray, use the formal elements of his performance to authenticate a distinct genre of direct address solo performances that replicates Gray's format at the presentational level, but lets go of his underlying process.

Though the remainder of this study is devoted to these three case studies, one direction this project might take in the future is to extend this analysis more broadly to the relationship between extemporaneity and media across many different performance contexts during this same period. Clearly the broader mediatization and mainstreaming of avant-garde practices and aesthetics during this period would be an area of focus, but, as mentioned earlier, this would also be an opportunity for aesthetic and demographic diversity, enabling an understanding of talk performance as an example of intermedial extemporaneity employed more broadly both within and beyond the postmodern avant-garde. Legal testimony, stand up comedy, spoken word poetry, first-person storytelling all stand as intriguing examples of extemporaneous talk deployed as a

seemingly unmediated example of authentic self-disclosure, which in each case turns out to be complexly mediated and staged. A particularly intriguing possibility would be to look at rap and hip-hop in their earliest stages, as the form took shape through intermedial live interactions between recorded music and extemporaneous speech. These examples offer insight into the conception and reception of extemporaneous talk in popular culture, and how social, political, and media conditions shaped the realization and circulation of extemporaneity as a highly mediated, culturally negotiated, mode of performance.

CHAPTER 1
SPALDING GRAY: INTERMEDIAL CONTINGENCY TO MEDIATED EXTEMPORANEITY

Introduction: Before *India and After*

Spalding Gray sits in his loft in Lower Manhattan. It is early 1979. He has had a difficult few years after suffering an emotional breakdown while touring as an actor with The Performance Group's production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* to India three years earlier. In the interim, together with Elizabeth Lecompte (his on-again off-again partner, with whom he shares the loft), he has produced the second and third parts of a trilogy of collaborative performance works based on his life. And he has begun to define a new category of solo performance work, using memory as found material. Gray turns on his tape recorder and talks. He talks about everything he can remember happening in India and in the year after: his stop in Amsterdam where he was gripped by indecision, his return to New York in a state of exhaustion, his escape by bus to Santa Cruz, his stint in a Las Vegas jail, his brief career as a pornographic film actor, and his struggle to make new work in a state of emotional collapse. It comes out as a litany: an audio diary containing the personal, raw material from which a performance can be made.[1]

That summer, as a visiting artist at Connecticut College, Gray talks through these memories in front of an audience for the first time. To interrupt the flow of memories and to structure the piece, he tries to intersperse excerpts from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which he explains he had been reading when things started to go bad for him in Kashmir, but he

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[1] Spalding Gray, *India and After*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, n.d., C4927, Harry Ransom Center.

soon abandons this device.[2] Later still, back at The Performing Garage, his home theater in New York, the piece has acquired a name, *India and After (America)*, a second performer, Meghan Ellenberger, and a format it will keep through several years of tours and remounts. According to this format, Ellenberger reads dictionary definitions at random, which Gray extemporaneously associates with anecdotes that he tries to tell within given time limits. These fragments intimate a coherent narrative, but never quite add up to the whole story, tethering him to the present while holding back the impulse to give a full account of the past.[3]

By focusing on preserving the disorganized and seemingly random process of recalling the past, and hinting at the poverty of theatrical representation when it comes to accessing the experiential richness of first-hand experience, I argue that Gray was developing a means of generating a performance rather than developing a specific performance, per se. In time, this process would consolidate into a genre deeply associated with the very impulses Gray's early performances purported to criticize or sublimate: the tendency toward personal disclosure, the presentation of an authentic self, and the shaping of memory into linear narrative. But his breakthrough hit, *Swimming to Cambodia*, which would become Gray's signature piece and facilitate this development, was still years in the future. It would become an art house smash when Jonathan Demme adapted it to film in 1987, and its popularity would help give Gray a modest yet comparatively lucrative career as an iconic touring monologist and occasional character actor in film, on television, and on Broadway.

As his popularity grew, Gray's apparently confessional performances became more and more familiar, following a smooth and fatalistic arc, traceable in the formal standardization and

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[2] Spalding Gray, *India and After (Ct. College)*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, 1979, C4929.
[3] Spalding Gray, *India and After*, VHS, Spalding Gray Papers, 1980, GRS071.

increasing narrative coherence of the monologues, from formal representation of his neurotic internal conflicts to masterful reporting of those conflicts and their external circumstances. This path from fragmented extemporaneity to apparently stable narration led all the way up to the 2001 car accident that left him physically and mentally transformed, precipitating a sharp decline that concluded in his 2004 suicide, which ironically, and perhaps predictably, made him more famous in death than he had ever been in life. By then, yet another transformation had begun, one that has been championed and prolonged by his estate in the years since his death, namely Gray's continued transformation into a primarily *literary* figure. Gray himself, late in life, established, and the estate has encouraged and actively promoted, this understanding of Gray as first a talented and troubled writer, and only secondarily as a performer. This popular literary figure remains only dimly related to the postmodern experimentalist of the 1970s and early 1980s, who sought to resist the logocentrism to which Gray's work now so easily, and successfully, succumbs.

By meeting Gray at an early and foundational moment in his career, this chapter positions him quite differently than do more recent understandings of his persona and his career, which rely primarily on widely circulating media adaptations of his performances. Returning to the archive of Gray's pre-*Swimming to Cambodia* performances recuperates the intermedial, contingent form Gray initially established as a means of ensuring extemporaneity and resisting the expectations of either theatrical performance or literary production. In the following discussion, I privilege the conditions of live performance and the presence of the self over the replicable and portable fixity of narrative material and representational performance.

In Gray's early talk performances, the relationship between the performer in the present and the material collected in his own past remained a persistent, if irresolvable, embedded tension. Perhaps surprisingly, it was often specifically the physical presence of fixed media objects – primarily recorded audio and text on the page, but also the props, costumes, and sets that took on a mediated relationship to Gray's past as a performer – which designated and structured instances of contingent liveness in his performances. I refer to this scaffolded liveness, which relies on the presence of fixed media objects, as *intermedial contingency* or *intermedial extemporaneity* in order to signal the precarious situation that made Gray's extemporaneous performances possible. In fact, it is the disappearance of these media objects from Gray's performances that paradoxically signaled the successful mediation of his form, which came to rely on a notional sense of Gray's extemporaneity to reify his work as heroically authoritative, secretly planned out, and highly structured in advance.[4]

This chapter therefore distinguishes between two different career narratives for Gray. According to what has become the standard narrative of Gray's career, his past performances are retroactively imagined as prototypical of a format that has since become standardized as the one-person show or the autobiographical monologue. This process unfolds according to a model of gradual developmental progress borrowed from literary drafting and theatrical rehearsal. However, according to the alternate narrative, which I emphasize here, Gray can be understood to have employed carefully arranged circumstances to newly generate his material in an ever-shifting performative present, stripping the theatrical situation down to the ostensibly immediate

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[4] Michael Peterson writes, "… the table, notebook, and water glass of most of Spalding gray's performances … constitutes and legitimates the presence of the solo performer in a manner more subtle than but perhaps as effective as more obvious design elements. Such physical elements of the monologic apparatus can emphasize the heroic aspect of the performance…" *Straight White Male: Performance Art Monologues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 5.

form for which he became known, which was then popularly taken up by Gray and the many artists and writers he influenced as an approach to presenting reportorial truth and reifying authorial performance.

By examining both how Gray's performance format came into being, and how it has been mediated and remembered, I propose that it is possible to understand the ways in which the category I am calling talk performance both resists, and inevitably must succumb to, disciplinary expectations that insist talk and text are inextricably linked. This inevitability is only intensified by the commercial pressures exerted by media circulation and its need for endless reproduction. An understanding of Gray's career that stretches back before his work started circulating widely in secondary media formats emphasizes the way in which, given that theatrical performances come to be stabilized by what repeats rather than distinguished by what changes, Gray's initial moves toward extemporaneity and contingency represent provocative and unconventional ideas about narrative and the relationship between talking and writing. These understandings resist the assumptions of both dramatic theatre and literary performance, even as they go on to take advantage of Gray's status as a white, American, ostensibly straight man to masquerade as politically and aesthetically neutral.

Following a brief survey of the critical reception of Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* in its book and film versions, which have almost exclusively formed the enduring popular understanding of Gray's performance persona and creative approach, the chapter returns to the origins of Gray's career in the New York avant-garde. Gray started working with one of the key experimental theatre troupes coming out of the 1960s at the very beginning of the 1970s, co-founded the most well-known post-1960s experimental theatre company in the US, and then lead

the charge toward solo performance that characterized a wide swath of the theatrical avant-garde in the 1980s. In subsequent sections on Gray's position in the post-1960s avant-garde and on his arrival in New York and early work with The Performance Group (TPG), I argue that Gray presents a bridge between the two adjacent eras. Gray drew on the approach of his TPG director, Richard Schechner, who wanted to cut through theatrical artifice to arrive at a truthful shared encounter between audience and performer, and he was representative of the media-heavy, irony-laden aesthetic through which artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s expressed skepticism toward both spectacle and immersion, turning instead toward what they saw as the flatness and absurdity shared by ordinary existence and modes of theatrical representation.

I then detail the development of Gray's authorial work in tandem with his creative and romantic partner Elizabeth Lecompte, who had been Schechner's assistant director, in response to Schechner's approach. Gray and Lecompte collaboratively created *Three Places in Rhode Island*, a trilogy of performances made over the course of five years from 1974 to 1979, which formed the foundation of what became Lecompte's ongoing company, The Wooster Group. In particular, this section details the role that recorded media and media objects played in developing the performances from Gray's autobiographical material and, eventually, his use of extemporaneous speech to respond to that recorded material in performance. Though Gray suspected he may have reached the end of the road with theatre after the trilogy, I explain how his encounter with New Age self-help thinking on the West Coast in the late 1970s renewed his sense of purpose in conceiving a form dedicated to the act of remembering in the moment rather than to seamlessly weaving a finished narrative for posterity.

What follows then is an extensive account of two early performances – *India and After (America)* (1979) and *The Great Crossing* (1980) (later re-worked as *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* [1980]) – in each of which Gray used fixed text sources to structure the performance in the moment onstage and complicate both the narrative content of the pieces and his own authorial and temporal relationship to that content. These sections are enabled by my access to Gray's archival recordings of these performances at stages throughout their development. This material facilitates an account of Gray's performance format in its formative stages not previously available, given the documentation and adaptations of his works that have been generally available.

In the final sections of the chapter, I connect these strategies to the earliest versions of *Swimming to Cambodia* (1983)*, also newly available to researchers through Gray's archive, which originally made extensive use of outside texts in its conclusion. This is in contrast to later versions of this performance, which circulate widely, and to Gray's subsequent monologues, each of which use external media minimally if at all. Instead later media adaptations capture a seamless and spectacular version of Gray's virtuosic extemporaneity, which conceals rather than revealing his performance's contingency. Easily adapted to both text and video, these mediated performances became materially and conceptually accessible to audiences, imitators, and scholars like myself, drawn by the apparent immediacy that Gray's performances promise, but ironically ignorant of the media relationships that I show had been making his performances possible from the start.

***Swimming to Cambodia*: What We Talk About When We Talk About Spalding Gray**

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the 1987 film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* to a popular understanding of Gray and his performance practice, including and perhaps especially for those who care very deeply about Gray's work.[5] The monologue was the direct result of a small role Gray played in the 1984 Roland Joffe film *The Killing Fields*, about the American bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and the subsequent genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. The film was shot in Thailand as a stand-in for Cambodia, and Gray's monologue centered on his experiences there while making the film and, in the original stage version, its impact on him afterward. Premiering in early 1984, months before *The Killing Fields'* fall release, Gray initially presented *Swimming to Cambodia* in two parts. Audiences at The Performing Garage could see the work over two consecutive nights, the first focused on auditioning for and shooting *The Killing Fields*, the second describing his travels in Thailand after his role in the film had ended, and his return to the United States. In 1987, Jonathan Demme's 85-minute film adaptation presented a much more streamlined version primarily focused on Part 1, with a few key sequences added from Part 2 – most iconically the "perfect moment" Gray sought and eventually "found" while swimming in the Gulf of Siam. This version, released to art house movie theatres, cable TV, and home video, was widely seen, at least in comparison to Gray's live performances and the audience for art house fare in general.[6]

Film critics in the popular press, most of them encountering Gray for the first time, recognized a particular political authority in Gray's minimalist and self-reflexive presentation,

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[5] *Swimming to Cambodia*, directed by Jonathan Demme, (Cinecom Pictures, 1987).
[6] *Swimming to Cambodia* played in more than 20 theaters and earned over a million dollars at the box office. "Swimming to Cambodia (1987) - Box Office / Business," *IMDb*, accessed July 28, 2016, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094089/business.

which blended comic self-effacement with newfound political awareness, and which may have bested *The Killing Fields* in conveying its anti-war message. Gene Siskel wrote that the film "is dominated by Gray's belief that the wackiness and horror he witnessed during the making of the movie is as revealing of the human condition as the celebrated film itself."[7] Sheila Benson remarked that "he places the events in Cambodia inside our heads as vividly as 'The Killing Fields.' With one-hundredth of the cast."[8] And Janet Maslin explained that, "What elevates this above the realm of small talk is Mr. Gray's roundabout – and peculiarly suspenseful – way of dramatizing the episode's moral and political repercussions."[9] The film has since become the reference point for Gray's signature style and a stand-in for his larger body of work. It has come to be seen as a formal template for Gray's subsequent monologues and as a talismanic example for a later generation of solo performers, writers, and first-person reporters, who I argue took up the signature elements of his performance via the movie's circulation, especially the mixture of personal confession and reportorial research that characterized this work in particular.

In reality, the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* both amplified and erased Gray's approach to performance. In many ways, the formal arrangement of Gray's monologues (table, chair, notebook, water glass, microphone, flannel shirt) and the unique circumstances of this particular work's context (Gray reporting back on a specific set of experiences he had access to through his privileged position as an artist) became merged in the popular imagination. Gray's early adventures in experimental autobiography are little remembered, but his ironic amateur

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[7] Gene Siskel, "'Swimming to Cambodia' is Fascinating," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1987.

[8] Sheila Benson, "Movie Review: Mesmerizing Strokes in 'Swimming to Cambodia,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 1987.

[9] Janet Maslin, "Film: Spalding Gray's 'Swimming to Cambodia,'" *New York Times*, March 13, 1987.

reporting in *Swimming to Cambodia* can be understood as an under-acknowledged point of origin for a large subset of cultural phenomena, from the theatrical one person show, to the millennial vogue for ironic and self-aware memoir, to public radio and podcast formats, to the informal storytelling competitions and showcases that populate the literary scenes of most big cities in the U.S. today. Through *Swimming to Cambodia,* Gray became a genre.

Inevitably, scholarly and popular awareness of Gray proceeds from an initial encounter with the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia,* or one of his four subsequent monologues – each of which was performed at Lincoln Center, toured widely to major regional theaters, and was published in hardcover and glossy paperback versions aimed at a mass market. Two of these were also made into films themselves.[10] These later monologues are distinguished from the ten or so or pieces he made before *Swimming to Cambodia*, in the years between 1979 and 1984. This chapter focuses on two of these earlier works, which I argue were built on the scaffold of intermediality, contingency, and indeterminacy. In contrast, Gray's later monologues were characterized by narrative fixity and wide circulation in "finished" form once he began to publish his monologues in the mid-1980s and especially after the release of the film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* in 1987. Though Gray always developed his work extemporaneously, I argue that it became professionally and economically expedient for him to make work that could be reproduced and coordinated for cross-media adaptations and long theatrical runs. As Gray repeated this development process and as his success granted him more time to develop each

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[10] Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box* (Vintage, 1992); Nick Broomfield, *Monster in a Box* (Image Entertainment, 1992); Spalding Gray, *Gray's Anatomy* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Steven Soderbergh, *Gray's Anatomy* (IFC Films, 1997); Spalding Gray, *It's a Slippery Slope*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997); Spalding Gray, *Morning, Noon and Night*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

monologue, he became increasingly able and willing to deliver a streamlined final product that could have as easily been written as generated through performance.

The popular understanding of Gray based on *Swimming to Cambodia* and his subsequent monologues tends to cast him as a deceptively strategic performer, using the persona of a self-involved neurotic to uncover "universal" truths about the human condition. The relatively limited scholarly responses to Gray, in contrast, often focus on what the authors see as Gray's privileging of his own experience and his shallow or facile treatment of the complex dynamics of power and representation in his monologues. Among the more extensive critiques, Michael Peterson positions Gray as the poster boy for the "straight white male performance art monologue." Writing of *Swimming to Cambodia*'s relationship to *The Killing Fields*, Peterson states, "While necessarily engaging in political questions raised by the film (and the process of its making), the monologue spends much time on Gray's career and personal relationships." He further charges that, "(t)he actual superficiality of Gray's work is merely exacerbated by the weight of the subject matter."[11] Gray's more supportive commentators, however, see this same tension between the personal and the political as the chief feature of his performances, uncovering the very structures from which he is benefitting. Gray's biographer and his passionate apologist William Demastes argues that "while *The Killing Fields* documents the devastating results of America's misuse of its military and power, *Swimming to Cambodia* gets to the roots of the problem by showing that the 'innocent' and even well-intended acts of Western camera crews, directors, and actors are little better."[12] The value of doubling down on

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[11] Peterson, *Straight White Male*, 57, 60.

[12] William Demastes, *Spalding Gray's America* (Limelight Editions, 2008), 134.

The Killing Fields' critique of Western imperialism by confessing the imperialist sins of those making the movie is clearly at issue in these analyses, and in the performance itself.

Yet Gray's ironic, polished delivery, along with the editorial simplification of the monologue for the film version, have led performance scholars to see his political and cultural attitudes as ambivalent at best, and his performance style as a regressively popular, diminished take on autobiographical performance art. Even Demastes's account, which sometimes borders on the hagiographic, struggles to find direct evidence of political conviction in Gray's piece, ceding the power to locate political meaning in Gray's narrative to his audience: "It takes the critical instincts of the audience to see beneath the surface and to draw out the relations that Gray… plants beneath the naïve presentation."[13] Performance scholar Peggy Phelan has a more pointed critique of what she sees as Gray's resistance to self-examination, even as she acknowledges a latent radicalism in his monologue form: "I am disappointed that he has not faced the truly radical potential innovative edge in his project. To face this edge in *Swimming* would require that Gray abandon his boyish unconsciousness and explore his own misogyny, racism, colonialism, and economic imperialism, which run like sludge throughout his text." However, Phelan's critique allows for the potential in Gray's more aesthetically radical past, lamenting what the film of *Swimming to Cambodia* has lost: "His attempt to use himself as his own material is no longer unusual or raw; he himself has polished it and other performers' more radical self-explorations have inured us to the shock such an approach originally had."[14] Both Phelan and Peterson, the scholar who maintains perhaps the most sustained criticism of Gray,

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[13] Ibid., 120.

[14] Peggy Phelan, "Spalding Gray's Swimming to Cambodia: The Article," *Critical Texts* 5, no. 1 (1988): 29.

point to this more radical past when Gray's performances had the potential to function as singular avant-garde events before they became generic, formulaic, widely circulating cultural phenomena.

Unacknowledged in these critiques is the slippage between Gray's earlier work, his oeuvre overall, and the highly edited, polished, and choreographed media adaptations of his later monologues, beginning with *Swimming to Cambodia*. Peterson, commenting on *Monster in a Box*, Gray's follow-up to *Swimming to Cambodia*, argues: "The more famous he becomes, the less real he can seem, and the more his anecdotes resemble those of a good talk-show appearance."[15] Though these critics sense something missing from Demme's film and Gray's subsequent monologues, the structures of which came to more closely resemble one another, they search for it in the content of the pieces rather than the procedural logic which generated them. Even Demastes, who alone does deal extensively with Gray's early monologues from before the release of the film, tracks them according to thematic throughlines rather than their formal development. I argue that as Gray's performances became increasingly mediated, whether in fact or in affect, their artistic efficacy and their status as innovative or progressive were increasingly called into question.

In the mediated forms in which Peterson, Demastes and most other scholars and critics encountered Gray's work, his tongue-in-cheek ironic distance was often read disapprovingly as in competition with his reach for authoritative first-person reporting, either lending gravity to his narcissism or making light of a situation with real political import. The eventual entwinement of these later performances with their complex mediated status is what spurs my inquiry into the

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[15] Peterson, *Straight White Male*, 71.

political and aesthetic potential to be found in his more formally experimental early work, which has received very little critical attention. While usually less overtly political in subject matter than *Swimming to Cambodia*, I argue that these early works used contingency and extemporaneous fragmentation in response to fixed media forms to offer an alternative to literary authorship as a model for Gray's presence in his own work. Henry Sayre uses the Derridean concept of "undecidability," as opposed to Cagean compositional "indeterminacy," to describe this condition under which an artwork's form is not determined until it is submitted to the circumstances of reception.[16] These early performances, especially when understood in context of Gray's prior career in experimental theatre and traced over the course of their developmental processes, emerge as ephemeral instances of extemporaneous talk predicated on being something other than authored text. They occur always in a shared present particular to the conditions of live performance, built on but independent from the past. I argue that these distinguishing qualities specifically resisted the very disciplinary identification and mediated reproduction that would eventually enable Gray's popularity.

In fact, as my analysis of *Swimming to Cambodia* in its developmental phase at the end of this chapter will show, even that monologue originally involved a deeply reflexive, unresolved examination of Gray's political conviction that, in its earliest form, sublimated his autobiography into an intertextual meditation on mortality and personal responsibility. Both stage and film versions involve Gray grappling with his newfound political perspective in contrast with his self-involved pursuit of a "perfect moment" (and, in the stage and print versions, his new careerist aspirations in Hollywood, as well.) But Gray's adaptation of the monologue to a new media

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[16] Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

environment made deliberate use of naïveté and editorial strategy to obscure the crises of conscience in response to *The Killing Fields* that the earlier versions of the monologue centralized. Instead, *Swimming to Cambodia* plays as an extended comic riff on the neurotic downtown New York artist on an exotic film shoot, interspersed with a straightforwardly reportorial -- if nonetheless charismatic -- account of the historical situation that the film depicts. By moving back before the familiar format of Gray's film, this chapter identifies the origins of the form and uncovers the very different procedural approach to narrative fixity, authorial control, and the nature of the performance event that originally characterized Gray's work.

Gray Areas: Irony and Sincerity in the Post-1960s Avant-garde

Gray's talk performance format evolved in response to the shifting formal expectations of the post-1960s theatrical avant-garde within which Gray first emerged. Far from a primitivist return to oral storytelling, Gray's talk performances were initially enabled by the availability of the same immediate and malleable technologies of capture and reproduction that were at the same time giving birth to everything from video art to hip hop. Following the ethos of immediacy, inclusivity, informality, and originality that characterized the 1960s downtown avant-garde, experimental performance by the late 1970s had become largely delimited by the media technologies, critical discourse, and institutional structures that brought the work to successively larger audiences (from "downtown" to middlebrow to mainstream) and appropriately conditioned those audiences to receive it. While the downtown New York avant-garde of the 1960s relied on geographical proximity and social connections, the new experimental arts milieus that came after the 1960s relied on aesthetic kinship and disciplinary delineation, through

both institutional support structures and the critical conversations responding to and promoting

new work, to establish reapportioned aesthetic categories, each with a different fate in the global

marketplace.[17]

Gray arrived at his stabilized and accessible format via a path that lead through the

epicenter of the post-1960s artistic vanguard. His eventual mainstream acceptance therefore cuts

two ways: on the one hand, it reveals the ease with which a white, middle-class, ostensibly

straight, American man with a sympathetic and charismatic personality working with personal

material was able to move from the fringes to the mainstream; on the other hand, it illustrates the

ways in which that move effectively obscured the formal and conceptual strangeness to be found

in his early performances, such as a theatre piece comprised of a random sequence of narrative

fragments generated on the spot through free associations based on prompts selected by chance

and arbitrarily assigned time limits.[18]

By re-capturing the vanguardist tendencies that animated Gray's early performances

rather than privileging his eventual set, linear form, it becomes possible to identify a relationship

between Gray's autobiographical monologues and other contemporaneous tendencies in

experimental performance. In this way, I argue that Gray's early impulses were related to a

discipline-resistant, participatory, contingent, and self-investigatory understanding of art which

has characterized post-1960s developments in performance from experimental theatre to

performance art, in poetry from language poetry to slam, and in post-studio art practices from

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[17] Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*; Richard Schechner, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde: Why It Happened and What We Can Do about It," *Performing Arts Journal* 5, no. 2 (1981): 48–63; Sayre, *The Object of Performance*; Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*; C. Carr, *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Rev. ed. (Wesleyan, 2008).

[18] Spalding Gray, *India and After (America)*, Betamax, Spalding Gray Papers, 1982, GRS103-104.

conceptualism to relational aesthetics.[19] And his late-career and posthumous reputation as theatrical raconteur and literary memoirist maps onto the institutionalization of these corollary art movements, which sought to de-institutionalize and uncouple themselves from disciplinary categories by bringing life into art and art into life, but which found themselves critically and curatorially at the institutional center of their source disciplines nonetheless.

The initial turn toward the informal, the ordinary, and the dematerialized amongst Gray and his cross-disciplinary contemporaries has roots in the mid-century avant-gardist tendency described by Daniel Belgrad as a "culture of spontaneity," which injected an improvisatory ethos into experiments with form and process in the plastic, literary, and performing arts. Like later experiments in Gray's own era, these spanned disciplinary categories, encompassing abstract expressionist painting, beat poetry, bebop jazz, and more.[20] That culture of spontaneity itself can trace its roots back to the presentist embrace of impulse in the interwar European Avant-garde, which responded to the technology, violence, and colonial encounters of the early 20th century with such formally dissident phenomena as non-linguistic vocal improvisation in Dadaist performance poetry or Surrealist automatic writing.[21]

More immediately, Gray was consciously in dialogue with the formally resistant and experimental, outré, boundary pushing, collectivist riot of the 1960s and its aftermath, from

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[19] Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*; Theodore Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre*; Goldberg, *Performance Art*; Carr, *On Edge*; Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s*; Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981); Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop*, 2013; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presse Du Reel, Franc, 1998); Sayre, *The Object of Performance*.

[20] Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America*.

[21] Goldberg, *Performance Art*.

which Gray himself emerged. American avant-garde performance in the 1960s recaptured some of the European avant-garde's political urgency, but also proposed performance as a space of utopian and liberatory possibility.[22] The later 1970s and early 1980s, on the other hand, saw the encoding of a more ironic, apolitical, distant, individualistic, hyper self-aware, mediatized, geographically dispersed avant-garde. This newly mass-marketable avant-garde presented itself as a stylistic category, often skeptical of the urgency and political ideology that characterized the resistant and contrarian attitude of the 1960s and earlier avant-gardes.[23]

This aesthetic ethos was marked by the transition of Soho, where Gray lived and made his work, from a newly hip neighborhood of Manhattan to a globally recognizable and replicable stylistic brand.[24] The story of Gray's rise to fame and mainstream acceptance is in many ways also the story of the mainstreaming of the downtown New York avant-garde as it came to circulate in the 1980s. This milieu embodied a theory-heavy postmodernism that sluiced freely back and forth between the art world and academia, where the field of performance studies was in its infancy.[25] Rather than the gritty, you-had-to-be-there posture of the previous generation, this neo-avant-garde was knit into the endlessly reproducible electronic and digital textures (or deliberate lack thereof) of synthesizers, computer monitors, Xerox machines, and lo-fi VHS tape.

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[22] Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre*; Shank, *Beyond the Boundaries*; Goldberg, *Performance Art*; James Martin Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, *Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); Arthur Sainer, *The New Radical Theatre Notebook* (New York: Applause, 1997).

[23] Andreas Killen, *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-Sixties America*, Reprint edition (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2007); Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 ...* (University of California Press, 1973); Carr, *On Edge*; Sayre, *The Object of Performance*; Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[24] Richard Kostelanetz, *Soho: The Rise and Fall of an Artist's Colony* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[25] Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Sayre, *The Object of Performance*.

While earlier avant-gardes had embraced a primitivist approach built on colonialist notions of some mythical pre-modern, non-western mode of truly being in and experiencing the moment, the avant-gardes of the 1980s tended to embrace the inherent inauthenticity of representational art as always already insincere, disconnected, estranged. Gray proved in many ways to be the warm-blooded intermediary who could make the high tech irony of iconic peers from the same era like Laurie Anderson and David Byrne, with both of whom he eventually collaborated, more personable and palatable, something done at least in part through his carrying over of earlier presentist tendencies into what came to be seen as his ironic, though sympathetic, sensibility.[26]

The newly media-saturated nature of this milieu spoke to the loss of the immediacy, intimacy, and possibility that 1960s performance evinced, and for which nostalgia was almost immediately entrenched. Though Gray did not begin making theatre in New York until 1970, his involvement with Richard Schechner's iconic theatre company The Performance Group signals a clear connection to the idea of the performance encounter as a productive and authentic actualization of an ideal personal and political state endorsed by Schechner's *Dionysus in '69*, which was what initially drew Gray and his partner, Elizabeth Lecompte, to The Performance Group. Schechner built this ethos on iconic 1960s avant-garde experiences found in both galleries and theaters, like the Happenings initiated by Allan Kaprow, performance convergences of the Fluxus art group, or The Living Theater's immersive *Paradise Now*. By the time Gray and Lecompte began making their own work in The Performance Group's Performing Garage, those

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[26] Anderson provided the score for Jonathan Demme's film adaptation of Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* and Gray played the off-screen interviewer in Anderson's TV special *What You Mean We?* (1986). Gray appeared as an actor in Byrnes's film *True Stories* (1986) playing a quasi-spiritual spokesperson of sorts for capitalism and the attendant patriarchy.

avowedly sincere 1960s sensibilities, which idealized primitive impulses, unfettered self-expression, and more traditional non-Western cultural practices, had become entrenched. Those 1960s aesthetic impulses were either relegated to the academic institutionalization of cultural studies in general, and performance studies in particular, or, as in the case of a popular sentiment like the early women's movement slogan "the personal is political," were adopted by and diluted in the self-help movement, which Gray both participated in and mocked.[27] In fact, Gray turned from collectively devised theatre toward autobiographical performance while moving between the poles of the New York avant-garde and the West Coast self-actualization movement during the late 1970s and early 1980s. These spheres embodied, at one end, a skeptical ironic distance, culturally coded as "East Coast" high art, and, at the other, a cleansing, allegedly authentic, apparently therapeutic immediacy, coded as "West Coast" New Age process work. The latter de-emphasized artistic or aesthetic categories at all in favor of a promised therapeutic impact, while the former sought to aestheticize the usually unseen process underlying artistic product.[28]

Gray's reputation has been shaped by the fact that it was in context of the mass-mediated mid-1980s, when *Swimming to Cambodia* was released as a film, that most people outside downtown Manhattan and a small circuit of mid-size performance venues around the country encountered Gray. Gray's profile in these wider contexts has proved oddly double-sided. On the

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[27] Richard Schechner and Victor W Turner, *Between Theater & Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985); Victor Witter Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Cornell University Press, 1975); Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Routledge, 1988); Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy, East and West* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s* (Princeton, N.J.: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[28] Certainly this same trajectory can be read into the movement of Rainer's indeterminate dance compositions to the improvisational performance of Grand Union to the process orientation of contact improvisation, as well as to some extent onto Antin's turn from text collages to performance improvisation after his move to San Diego.

one hand, he seemed a smug, ironic, perverse step-sibling to the new entitled, self-absorbed

yuppie class; on the other, he was taken to be an "everyman" whose culturally and

geographically specific biography as a middle class New Englander making a name for himself

in Manhattan appeared "universal" to critics and entertainment industry figures on the East and

West Coasts who often might have come from similar backgrounds. In fact, one of the most

commonly remarked upon aspects of Gray's persona was that he could be so neurotic without

being Jewish or a woman.[29] In this context even his status as an artist was highly unstable, with

confusion about whether he was some kind of post-modern performance artist, an idiosyncratic

stand-up comedian (albeit one known for sitting down at a table,) or a kind of late-20th century

Mark Twain wryly commenting on his time, circulating along with his work.[30]

Performance artists working in theatrical contexts and stand-up comics were two solo

performance categories that exploded in the 1980s, and often mixed with one another in the

venues they played and in the minds of the public. This was especially true at the upper reaches

of popularity for downtown performers like Gray or character monologist Eric Bogosian, who

were often classed as comedians by default in the mainstream, even as they were also seen as

particularly palatable representatives of the amorphous category of "performance art." The term,

at the time, was probably more likely to evoke in the popular imagination the electronic

strangeness of Laurie Anderson or Karen Finley's visceral smearing of food stuff onto her naked

body in the course of her feminist character monologues than the gallery-based body art and

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[29] The cover of his first collection of monologue texts included press quotes calling him a "WASP Shelly Berman," a "WASP Woody Allen," and a "male Lily Tomlin." Spalding Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14* (Vintage, 1986).

[30] The same set of pull quotes yields the insights that he is an "avant-garde Dick Cavett," and "a cross…between David Letterman and Andy Warhol," with "the self-mocking seriousness of a Chevy Chase, the impishness of Steve Martin, Dan Aykroyd's talent for mimicry, and Bill Murray's gift for riding a comic riff into unchartered territory..." - a one-man *Saturday Night Live.* Ibid.

procedural conceptualism around which the term initially coalesced.[31] This cross-categorical confusion was also discernable at the outer reaches of experimentation associated with mainstream comedy figures from Richard Pryor to Andy Kaufman, who pushed back dramatically on the expectations of comedy and whose work has come to look more and more like performance art in retrospect.[32]

This categorical crossfade helped usher Gray into mainstream circulation, and to de-emphasize his avant-garde past. In fact, Gray has often been cast as a generational representative, with a direct connection to the zeitgeist, a kind of living embodiment of his times.[33] However, Gray's talk performance format, at its origins, was much less concerned with either the kind of ironic, media-heavy, self-referential performance work which characterized many of his peers' careers, or with the erudite, entirely sincere, self-reflective approach of a film like *My Dinner with Andre*, to which *Swimming to Cambodia* was frequently compared.[34] Instead, after a decade of collaborative performance based in developing self-referential material into dramaturgically dense theatre pieces, Gray found himself establishing a new approach that allowed his performance to emerge out of presence and process. In stripping his performance down to just talk, Gray had to remove the strictures of theatrical representation, in which scripted action emerges out of conflict between multiple characters in a constructed situation, and the structures

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[31] Noel Carroll, "Performance," *Formations* 3, no. 1 (1986): 63–81.

[32] Scott Saul, *Becoming Richard Pryor* (New York: Harper, 2014); Florian Keller, *Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2005); Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

[33] Demastes, *Spalding Gray's America*.

[34] Louis Malle, *My Dinner with Andre* (New Yorker Films, 1981).

of dramatic form, in which a script provides a literary blueprint for a live performance event. What remained of the dramatic impulse and the theatrical circumstance became the basis for the talk performance genre he would go on to define.

Becoming Spalding Gray

Understood as a response to theatrical representations of the self and construction of holistic narratives, Gray's talk performance format embraced a fundamental proposition about theatre, in which any given moment of reality is contingent upon the collective will of all present, and turned it back on itself to test if presence alone could be sufficient. For Gray, as no doubt for many actors, acting always served as a gratifying means to behave in front of other people and to respond to a given context.[35] The work Gray made in the years leading up to the start of his solo career saw him developing a conviction that it is in the negotiation between the personal, subjective nature of performance and its ultimately public life that the paradoxical and provocative nature of theatrical performance makes itself known. Indeed, self-centeredness is a charge not infrequently leveled at Gray's work. According to this view, these public acts of self-examination do nothing but enact the basest impulses of the ego.[36]

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[35] Gray told many stories about the origins of what would become his performance format. In one, he managed to get a rise out of his mother as a child by fictionalizing his observation of the world -- with firecrackers going off outside he would tell her the neighbor had climbed up on the roof and was shooting his children, just for the reaction. In another he discovered, while performing in his first play in high school, that the audience responded when he did a little hopscotch to avoid tripping over a carpet square that he had not expected, not because he had tripped but because they recognized the moment as real, a fact which paradoxically encouraged him to keep it in, to perform the moment of accidental presence in order to repeatedly win an approving response from a sympathetic audience. Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*; Spalding Gray, *A Personal History of the American Theatre*, performed by Spalding Gray, The Wooster Group, 1982, VHS, 95 min., New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call no. NCOV 278.

[36] Nathaniel Rich, "The Mask Behind the Voice," *The New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2011, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/dec/08/mask-behind-voice/?pagination=false.

We might then ask if switching from the clandestine pleasures of acting to the self-exposure of his monologues signaled Gray's intensification of a narcissistic self-indulgence properly concealed within the actor's craft, or a stripping bare of the conditions that make the theatrical experience possible and unique? In the latter case, the literary concerns with character, plot, and theme of mainstream theatre fade away in favor of a concern with the spatial, relational, and institutional circumstances of the theatrical event itself. Certainly this is the proposition of much postmodern and postdramatic performance, but it is also a set of impulses that critics who emphasize Gray's minimalism, anti-spectacularity, and mainstream success have not been eager to note.

Many in the 1960s generation before Gray's, especially Gray's first New York director Richard Schechner, wanted to emphasize the co-presence and collectivity of the theatrical event through performances that transcended the traditions of Western theatre. They did so by substituting fully inhabitable environments for the proscenium stage, or by creating performances that met the conditions of participatory ritual rather than of spectacular representation.[37] Gray, by contrast, proposed an immersive theatrical experience that was *only* about its status as theatre. By never sensually flooding out his audience or asking them to suspend disbelief, I propose that Gray made theatre itself the environmental condition of his performances.[38]

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[37] Richard Schechner, "6 Axioms for Environmental Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 41–64.

[38] It is also possible to see here a direct connection to experimental theatre of the next generations, such as Forced Entertainment or The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, whose works often take place within a specifically theatrical present that neither attempts to represent a fictional circumstance nor transcend the limitations of theatrical representation.

Gray became disillusioned with traditional theatre early on in his career. By the time he spent a season at the Alley Theatre in Houston to earn his Actors Equity card during the 1966-67 season, he was already prepared to be done with the theatre as he knew it. He thought he might become a psychologist or a social worker and work with children in order to challenge himself to be more generous. That summer, he took his savings from his season at The Alley and moved with his girlfriend Elizabeth Lecompte to San Miguel de Allende, a colonial mountain city in central Mexico that had become something of a hippie refuge. He had met Lecompte, a studio art student at Skidmore College, while performing with a theater troupe in the back of a café where she waitressed in Saratoga Springs the previous year. They had been planning this trip all through her senior year, during his unhappy season at The Alley.

In San Miguel, they took classes at a local art school and integrated into the expatriate community. But, after a few months, Gray began to worry about his mother, who had been severely depressed and institutionalized before he left. He made his way back to Rhode Island, where his father informed him upon arrival that his mother had committed suicide a month earlier, and that they had been unable to contact him in Mexico in time for the funeral. The event of his mother's suicide, coupled with his own absence at the time of her death, would reverberate through all of Gray's work for nearly 40 years until, of course, he echoed it in his own suicide in 2004. It would also form the foundation of the work he and Lecompte would make together a decade later, which would lead directly to his solo performance work starting in 1979.[39]

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[39] Though a fictionalized account, Gray's autobiographical novel is a useful source for some of this history: Spalding Gray, *Impossible Vacation* (Vintage, 1993).

After learning of his mother's death, Gray followed Lecompte to New York. It was there that they discovered the work of Schechner and The Performance Group, whose boundary-pushing, environmental adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae,* titled *Dionysus in '69,* was something of a downtown hit. After seeing their work, Gray dropped his headshot off at The Performance Group's theatre, The Performing Garage. When an actor dropped out of *Makbeth*, Schechner's 1971 adaptation of Shakespeare's play (to portray Mr. Peanut in a TV commercial, according to Schechner) Gray was hired at the last minute to play Malcolm.[40] The Performance Group tended to experience enormous crises regularly, resulting in company members leaving en masse, often dissatisfied with Schechner's paradoxical collectivist rhetoric and authoritarian leadership. This had occurred after *Dionysus in '69*, and when it happened once again following *Makbeth*, Gray and Lecompte, who was by then assisting Schechner, found themselves at the core of the re-formed company.

Schechner's expanding understanding of performance in non-theatrical contexts during the 1970s certainly influenced, directly and indirectly (and may even have been influenced by,) the development of Gray's talk performance project. This developing understanding of performance activity, informed by Schechner's expansive environmental productions and developed through his academic work as a professor at New York University and as a longtime editor of and contributor to the influential journal *The Drama Review* (*TDR*), would come to define the field of performance studies in its earliest stages of institutionalization.[41] Gray's eventual discovery of his own recalled experience as source material seems a practical riff on

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[40] Richard Schechner, "Foreword: Spalding." Demastes, *Spalding Gray's America*, ix.

[41] David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988); Harding and Rosenthal, *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum*.

Schechner's theoretical innovations, which combined anthropological studies of everyday life and ritual performance with the analytical tools of theatre history and criticism.[42] While Schechner came to view everyday life with the eye of a theatre artist, Gray began asking what theatre might look like if it was more like everyday life.

It was with Schechner as his director that Gray first felt he had permission to emerge from behind the edifice of character and to explore being himself, or "playing" himself, on stage. In Schechner's 1973 production of Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime* he directed Gray, playing the character of the rock star Hoss, to take a moment at the end of the play to drop his character and make eye contact with everyone in the audience.[43] Later, in The Performance Group's *Commune,* which drew in part on the Manson family murders, each actor took on a new name and came forward to sing a "song of first encounter." Gray decided to name himself "Spalding" and to speak from his own feelings and desires.[44] This hooked into a tendency he recalled from even earlier, when he would escape the chaos of the collective household where he lived in Saratoga Springs to go to Lecompte's studio and tell her stories of the goings on there: "…the whole situation was so wild that I fled… up the road and began telling [Liz] my stories in her studio while she worked and listened. It felt as if I was peeling them off and dropping them in her lap so I could breathe again."[45] Later, in New York City, Gray recalled going out to explore the city knowing that he could come home at night and tell the story of his day to Lecompte, and

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[42] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

[43] Richard Schechner, "My Art in Life: Interviewing Spalding Gray.," *TDR: The Drama Review* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 154–74.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, x.

so experience it himself.[46] With the license Schechner granted him to perform as himself, and with Lecompte as his ideal audience, Gray was ready to put himself at the center of his theatrical performance, replacing the playscript with his own presence as the text around which the performance was developed and built.

Three Place in Rhode Island **& the Birth of The Wooster Group**

Lecompte had joined TPG shortly after Gray did. Though she did occasionally perform early on, and despite her initial indifference to theatre (or maybe because of it), she quickly became Schechner's assistant director and was frequently put in charge of rehearsals in his absence. Taking advantage of the access to the Performing Garage granted by such an absence in 1974**,** Lecompte and Gray formed a small sub-cadre of TPG members and began experimenting with structured improvisations. These improvisations came to obliquely focus on Gray's childhood memories and associations, in a loose and unplanned way. Gray eventually asked Lecompte to step out of the performance in order to act as a director for what became an impressionistic, mostly movement based performance called *Sakonnet Point*, after a place in Gray's childhood home state of Rhode Island where his family spent their summers. This formed the first of a trio of works they would go on to make together over the next five years, all based in Gray's memory and personal history, which came to be known as *Three Places in Rhode Island*, or the Rhode Island Trilogy. These performances are now understood as the inaugural work of what would

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[46] Gray, *Impossible Vacation*.

become The Wooster Group (TWG), which continues under Lecompte's direction, often considered the most influential contemporary experimental theatre company in the US.[47]

Though it is uncontroversial to say these autobiographical performances were precursors to Gray's solo monologue format (which first appeared as a facet of *Nayatt School*, the third work in the trilogy), they are rarely dealt with as such. Instead, Gray is generally understood to have departed from TWG's experimentation with his solo performances, while the trilogy has been centralized in most accounts of TWG's origins. TWG, and Lecompte's style as its director, has become associated with a highly mediated approach to dramatic literature, which responds to canonical plays as multimedia objects rather than solely as literary texts waiting to be realized in production. These performances deconstruct the play's representational histories and associations in order to treat not only the language on the page, but all the production elements, practices, records, and memories that accrue around it, as the text of the play, available to be cited, sampled, repeated, and commented upon until the many surfaces of the play's performance history detaches from, and overwrites, its narrative content. Gray's monologues, on the other hand, would eventually come to be characterized as holistic, authentic, and fundamentally unmediated (although subject to media capture, in a documentary sense.)

The shared origins, and deceptive similarities, of Gray's and Lecompte's signature styles can be identified in two structuring forces that emerged in TWG's early work, which would go on to define both Gray's solo approach and TWG's performances. The first was the use of physical objects and furniture, the table in particular, as structural through lines with scriptive

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[47] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 57–70.

powers of their own around which performances could be built and connected to one another.[48]

The second shared strategy involved integrating external fixed media presences -- written text,

recorded audio, or video -- into performances as dramatic content and intermedial

counterbalance to theatre as a live and ephemeral medium. This approach characterizes

Lecompte's directorial style, and I argue that this same intermedial logic also informed and

structured Gray's solo talk performances in key ways that have not been fully recognized.

As early as the first piece in the trilogy -- the imagistic, mostly wordless *Sakonnet Point*

(1975) -- the physical objects Gray and Lecompte introduced substituted for the usual textual

foundation upon which performances are built. *Sakonnet Point* offered an impressionistic

landscape populated by recognizable childhood activities and images presented in unspecified

association with one another. The process of creation involved the company responding

improvisationally to objects Gray found in the garbage or in The Performing Garage**,** and the

work grew out of the material possibilities and limitations that space and those objects

introduced, without a script or pre-conceived form. The set pieces and found objects were not

used for specific functions necessary to achieving a pre-determined artistic vision, but were in

fact the raw material out of which the performance was built. This process used the associational

responses of Gray and his fellow performers to these found objects, without any mediating

"characters" motivated by fictional objectives, as in a traditional play. Instead the actions and

objects and, most importantly, the relationship between them, were woven into a structure that

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[48] Gray's table, which, along with his habitual notebook, water glass, and flannel shirt, defined his post-Wooster Group performances, persists to this day in TWG's work as a long, forward-facing table, often installed at the same level as the floor of the stage, where actors sit when not "acting" and from which text is often read aloud.

drew on individual identity and memory, but represented no reality but the present and no people but those in the room.[49]

As theatre historian Arnold Aronson explained, "Lecompte functioned as a dramaturge/director - helping to determine which activities were appropriate to keep and helping to shape them once selected," much as she would with traditional play scripts in later TWG work.[50] Although Gray later claimed that "much of the so-called content of summer themes and lost childhood was an audience projection," evincing an even more abstract structure than generally understood, the activities began with Gray at least inasmuch as he led the exercises and selected the objects, and was given the context of his life by the title's reference to a place in his home state with autobiographical significance, as well as by direct identification, including another performer calling his name, one of the very few instances of speech in the piece.[51] Though Gray and Lecompte's perspectives as creators each allowed for audience interpretation, they had already come to encompass quite different approaches, one focused on a self-reflexive public investigation of personal associations, the other concerned with a quasi-indifferent editorial arrangement of found material. This would continue to define their collaboration, and eventually their separate creative trajectories.

The relationship to objects and actions that structured *Sakonnet Point* constituted a kind of proto-mediatization in which certain objects accrued associational meaning for the artists through their use in performance that could be quoted or cited by employing those same objects elsewhere in order to establish the foundation of subsequent performances. So something as

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[49] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 57–70.

[50] Arnold Aronson, "Sakonnet Point," *The Drama Review: TDR* 19, no. 4 (December 1975): 33.

[51] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 57.

ordinary as a red tent, for example, which was used in all the Rhode Island Trilogy pieces, could introduce the history of past embodied performances into the development of new material. However, like most of TWG's work, these extratextual references embedded in the performance would only have been available to audiences on repeat, attentive viewing.

This use of live citation of information imprinted in the past and accessed in the present was next applied to recorded audio Gray made of interviews with members of his family, which became the basis for *Rumstick Road*, the second segment of the trilogy. The source material for this piece was, first, the physical remains of *Sakonnet Point,* including the red tent, the outline of a house, and a portable record player, elements that would recur throughout the Trilogy and, second, a performance archive that pre-existed its intended life as aesthetic material. As Gray recalled, "In *Rumstick*, I was working both with very personal and objective material. It was material that had not just developed out of me in the workspace but it was material about and from my life. It was something other than art." In fact, he positions all of the preparatory gathering of material for *Rumstick Road* as a personal project outside of art making:

> Before my trip to India I had made some tape recordings of my
> grandmothers talking about their lives. I had no particular reason
> for doing this. I just found that it was a way in which I related well
> to them. It was more fun to talk with a witness, the tape recorder.[52]

Following their return from India in 1977, where the Performance Group had been on tour with their production of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Gray, with Lecompte as director and the performers Ron Vawter and Libby Howe, began to use the tapes much as they had the objects Gray brought in during the earlier rehearsal process for *Sakonnet Point*, as the basis for non-literal and free associative improvisation.

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[52] Spalding Gray, "Playwright's Notes," *Performing Arts Journal* 3, no. 2 (Autumn 1978): 89.

The relationship between the structuring object, behaving as textual source, and the responding performer, transmuting personal associations into performed actions, was applied in *Rumstick Road* to the relationship between Gray as performer in the present and the recordings of his past interviews about his mother's suicide with members of his family. Despite the fact that Gray was actually the creator of the audio document, since they apparently pre-existed the impulse to make the performance, he approached the tapes in a similar way to his approach to the toys he had used in *Sakonnet Point*. That is, he treated them as found material with which he had some networks of association, but which was not in fact material he himself had "authored" in a deliberate sense.

Though Gray's signature table, in its incipient form, appeared for the first time in *Rumstick Road*, and Gray spoke directly to the audience while standing in front of it (rather than sitting behind it, as he would become famous for doing), most of the piece was perfomed in paralell with the audio recordings, rather than dramatically reenacting their content. Where Gray and Lecompte did use reenactment, it was the interviews themselves, and not the incidents being recalled, that they referenced. Sometimes portions were even lipsynched by the actors in recreation of the cirumstance of the interviews. More often, though, the action veered wildly from the ostensible content to present associational actions and images as variations on and responses to the material on the tapes and its themes. These included Gray and Vawter chasing each other through the two rooms of the set, a woman moving in the red tent through a window,

Howes in a wheelchair wearing a rubber old woman mask, and a sequence in which Vawter,

dressed as a doctor, sucked on Howes's stomach until she began laughing uncontrollably.[53]

Although one might recognize *Rumstick Road* as the moment when the audience became

explicitly included in Gray's story, the tape recordings actually materialized another temporality.

This was neither the performative present of the piece, represented by Gray's physical presence

and direct address, nor the instigating event, Gray's mother's suicide, around which the

interviews clustered. From this point forward, the tendency to see Gray's work as a delivery

vehicle for his backstory had the effect of potentially obscuring its experimental propositions

about performative presence, allowing the audience to believe that what the performers were

doing was representing the words and characters on the tapes rather than playing in relationship

to them.[54]

Both Gray and Lecompte felt they had discovered a way of working that critically

resisted theatrical orthodoxies about fidelity and responsibility in representation. When critic

Michael Feingold accused Gray, in the *Village Voice*, of "brutal exploitation" based on a

moment in the play when he told the audience that he was using a tape of his grandmother

reciting a Christian Science text without her permission, Gray responded that it was no more

brutal than Eugene O'Neil's use of his family in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (which would

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[53] Spalding Gray and Elizabeth Lecompte, *Rumstick Road*, performed by Spalding Gray, Libby Howes, Ron Vawter. The Wooster Group at American Place Theater, New York, 1980. VHS, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call no. NCOV 128.

[54] For example, the audience at the 1980 remount at American Place Theatre, in a talkback, insisted on asking about the representational coherence of *Rumstick Road* as a play with a unified story, about Gray's family, the truth of the work, and the actual outcome for the characters, despite the objections of the company, Gray chief among them, that what they had seen may have used material from Gray's life, but that it did not represent his biography. "A Video recording of a Post Performance Discussion with Spalding Gray and American Place Theatre Director Wynn Handman," VHS, 29 min., New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call no. NCOW 42.

figure into the Wooster Group's follow up to the Rhode Island Trilogy, *Point Judith: an epilog*),

only the Wooster Group was "writing with a tape recorder rather than a typewriter" and O'Neil

had "locked the play in a vault for 25 years."[55] Lecompte, on the other hand, asked, "How did

Michael Feingold know we were telling the truth about Spalding's Grandmother? Maybe we

made that up. Maybe Spalding's mother never died. Does that make a difference?"[56] In other

words, while not divorced from representation, what Gray and Lecompte were staging was, in

distinct ways, the rift between his childhood and his present, not its reconstruction. For Gray this

meant the simultaneous presence and absence of the past, and the failure of media to bring the

two together. For Lecompte this meant interrogating theatrical representation as a stand-in for

anything other than itself.

At this point in the trilogy, Gray was not so concerned with reconstructing or even

understanding the past; instead he looked to talk as a means to deal with the present given the

past's enormity and immobility. The historical anecdotes and documentary materials that make

up *Rumstick Road* are not dramatically unified or psychologically resolved within the frame of

the performance. Instead, they are 'gone through,' as one might go through old letters and

photographs in the attic, generating a fragmented and entirely new experience for audience and

performers both. Gray's original idea for the piece was to allow his unexpressed apprehension

about his own mental health to coexist onstage with the document of his family's retrospective

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[55] Michael Feingold, "Review," *Village Voice*, April 21, 1980; unedited draft of letter, Spalding Gray Papers, container 46.4; Spalding Gray, "Letter," *Village Voice*, April 28, 1980.

[56] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 139.

confusion about his mother's mental health without comment or explicit connection.[57] Lecompte recalled that Gray wanted to merely appear onstage "with the tape recorder playing, sitting and looking at the audience, listening to it. Period. That was to be the piece."[58] It was Lecompte who insisted on shaping the embodied performance in contradistinction to the media source.

The performance material that exceeded the information on the tapes both pushed toward the expectations of dramatic illustration, and thwarted that expectation through fragmentation and dramatic contradiction. This tension effectively encapsulates the two directions in which Gray and Lecompte would go. Gray eventually headed toward an aesthetic of cleansing disclosure predicated on his non-dramatized life being adjunct to yet directly referenced on the theatrical stage. Lecompte's later work, meanwhile, has specifically looked to disconnect theatre's apparent representational apparatus from its ability to actually, effectively represent.

Even though telling Gray's life story was not the Wooster Group's project, 'telling' was certainly what *Rumstick Road*, at least, was largely about. And 'talking,' albeit prerecorded, constituted the material out of which it was constructed.[59] Although not yet an autonomous form, Gray's use of extemporaneous talk as found material, which would characterize his early monologues, finally came into view with the next installment of the Trilogy, 1978's *Nayatt School*. In *Nayatt School*, recorded material was again onstage, but even more distant from

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[57] Gray's troubled mental state during this period would later become a subject of his *India and After (America)*, but it is not all clear that his struggles would have been apparent to *Rumstick Road*'s audience at the time.

[58] Savran, *Breaking the Rules,* 89.

[59] As Phillip Auslander suggested about his late monologues, what may have become most important for Gray about his talk pieces was not weaving an engaging and coherent narrative for an audience, but talking as a distinct present action that he could perform over and over. Philip Auslander, "Performance as Therapy: Spalding Gray's Auotopathographic Monologues," in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability & Performance*, ed. Carrie Sandahl (University of Michigan Press, 2005).

Gray's present than the familial tapes of *Rumstick Road*. In this case, the performance employed

an LP recording of the original New York production of TS Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, starring

Alec Guinness, which Gray used to illustrate and notate his own history with the play.[60] In

addition to the record's autobiographical associations, it represented highbrow aspirations within

the middle class suburban milieu in which Gray was raised. Derisively deemed "middlebrow,"

the mass circulation of modernist high art like *The Cocktail Party* record or the recordings of

poets reading their work Gray listened to growing up provided an avenue for him to discover and

enter highbrow culture himself as a young actor, and anticipated the mass circulation of his own

performance work a decade later.[61] Thus the record as an object and medium became as

important as the play itself. Though ostensibly autobiographical, his material relationship to the

play in the piece was equally temporal and kinesthetic. It was to the recording, and even more to

the physical record, that he related, responding in the moment to chance intersections with the

fixed object as he dropped the needle at random on the record.

Nayatt School began with Gray monologuing about his relationship to *The Cocktail*

Party. He equated his mother with the play's main character, Celia Coplestone, who suffers a

psychological crisis, seeks salvation in religion, and ultimately martyrs herself. Gray commented

dialogically on the record while playing snippets for the audience, summarizing the story and his

shifting thoughts on it at various points in his life. Finally, he invited a fellow actress (originally

Joan Jonas) onstage to stiffly read a scene with him about Coplestone's choice of religious

service, which would lead to her martyrdom, over psychological resolution. Resisting the play's

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[60] T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, performed by Alec Guiness, Cathleen Nebitt, et al. Decca, 1950, LP.

[61] For more on the circulation of middlebrow modernism through the spoken word LP at midcentury, see: Jacob Smith, "Chapter 2: Hi-Fi Midcult," Spoken Word Postwar American Phonograph Cultures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

dramatic resolution, as well, the evening ended with a group of children dressed in oversized adult costumes taking over Gray's table and acting out a scene from Eliot's play that quickly descended into exuberant, unplanned, unrepeatable, and highly destructive chaos. Ultimately, the adults took up the anarchic, unself-conscious, and in-the-moment liberty of the pre-adolescent children, constrained neither by textual fidelity nor social decorum they willfully destroyed the record albums in response to which the performance had been structured, finally freed from the rueful introspection with which Gray had started.

The opening of *Nayatt School* is often considered the first instance of Gray's monologue form, but the chaotic triumph of the contingent present over the scripted and recorded past in the finale is rarely given the equal credit it is due. This is especially true for those who would prefer to fit Gray into a theatrically coherent mold. Richard Eder, positively reviewing a run of *Nayatt School* running in repertory with *Rumstick Road* in late 1978, claimed hopefully that despite the onstage evidence Gray's "real subject is memory, not documentation."[62] Only a disapproving reviewer like Mel Gussow, writing of the original production earlier that year, could recognize the disconnect between what he dismissed as Gray's display of the "dry milquetoast humor of a Bob Newhart" in the opening monologue and the ending, which lead Gussow to the prescient, if sarcastic, realization that "*Nayatt School* is not really an ironic commentary on *The Cocktail Party,* but a savage assault on phonograph records."[63] A uniquely insightful comment despite being meant as an insult.

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[62] Richard Eder, "Stage: Spalding Gray's Youth: Operating on Memory," *New York Times*, December 19, 1978.

[63] Mel Gussow, "'Nayatt School'--Misadventures of an Actor," *New York Times*, May 13, 1978.

This point was largely lost to later scholars, and eventually to Gray himself, all of whom focused on the similarity of the opening to the format for which Gray became known, thus casting it as the birth of Gray's theatrical persona. William Demastes, writing after Gray's death, said of *Nayatt School*, "The short opening monologue converted Gray the actor into Gray the person or personality for the first time."[64] And some years into Gray's solo career David Savran described the opening as "a gently ironic monologue delivered by a clever and ingratiating performer… he addresses the audience in a manner both formal and ironic." Savran asserts that, "…he emerges as a whole being... He has a vocation: he is a speaker, an autobiographer, a story-teller."[65] As with Michael Feingold's critique of *Rumstick Road,* Demastes and Savran both held *Nayatt School* to a standard of dramatic success – self–presentation put to a higher purpose, what Feingold called "transcendence" – and disagreed only about whether Gray had achieved it. But for the next several years Gray's artistic inquiry would be as much about identifying, elaborating on, and appreciating the limitations on transcendence imposed by the conditions of live performance as it was concerned with spinning meaning from his own autobiography.

While both *Rumstick* and *Nayatt* used pre-recorded audio onstage, and improvisation in development, it was only in *Nayatt School* that Gray first experimented with responding extemporaneously in the moment onstage. I argue that it was with the contingent, intermedial negotiation that opened *Nayatt* that Gray's talk performance project first truly took shape. A February 1978 rehearsal for the piece, itself recorded by Gray, provides a glimpse into his performance as it first emerged in response to a fixed media source, *The Cocktail Party* record.

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[64] Demastes, *Spalding Gray's America*, 35.

[65] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 109–10.

Gray was trying to coordinate his own enjoyment of the record, an artifact he personally loved and knew well, with a more academic explanation of the play and its interpretations. He wanted the record to provide something of the experience of live performance, but to be indexable like a printed text that he could footnote with his own and other's interpretations as the record played: "So the part that I like is the opening, the laughter, that gives the whole record away. There's no way you can get that from reading, that's the important part about spoken word for me, acting out – is it's live – it makes people laugh."

Trying to listen to, summarize, and speak over the record, Gray bristled at Lecompte's suggestion that he should be able to respond immediately to each drop of the needle on the record. He compared the difficulty in finding something generative every time he dropped the needle to the well-honed skills of jazz improvisation: "…jazz musicians do that and they play all night before they get warm, we're talking about a very short space of time, that's the problem…" Yet Gray did not handle the textual sources he was drawing on to footnote the record easily, either, searching out a passage about the character Julia, he fumed, "…goddammit I had something here I wanted to read about her coming back to look for her glasses, it takes so long to find anything in these goddamn books. I had it marked clearly last night, this from – I swear, is this the same book I was reading last night? Yes, there it is…"[66] However, by the time they were performing the piece on tour in Amsterdam that fall, Gray had become capable of skipping through the record with alacrity and coordinating his summary with bits of information about his

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[66] Spalding Gray, "Intro CP - Spalding's Improv Feb. 8 "78"; Nayatt; Cocktail Party II; Nayatt 1978," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5198, Harry Ransom Center.

own life, weaving together a unique performance at the intersection of the recorded and the live, which would characterize the performances he made moving forward.[67]

Despite his own use of jazz improvisation as a musical corollary for what he was attempting, it is perhaps more relevant to note that at the same time in 1978 as Gray was stopping and starting a turntable to cue up his favorite snippets of *The Cocktail Party*, early hip hop artists in the Bronx were similarly using turntables to cue up and repeat breakbeats at block parties to create contingent, responsive, unchoreographed performances out of the material intersection between DJ, vinyl albums, and audience. Whether the source was dance records or modernist drama, the live events in both cases emerged from the interaction between the fixed media object and the responsive, improvisatory present. And just as Gray's intermedial contingency would eventually be subsumed by a fully mediatized genre that excluded the fixed media objects with which he began, hip hop performances were at that moment being reimagined for the first time as commercial recordings that amalgamated live performance and pre-recorded samples into one portable recording format that could move seamlessly from vinyl to magnetic tape to CDs to digital files.

Speaking Memory

In the early 1980s, after the monologues had become established, Gray told Savran, "…the monologues never would have come into being had not the Group been my first supportive audience, at the table, in *Nayatt.* And then it was a matter of shrinking the table down to a

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[67] Gray, "BSE II Oct. 23 (Mickery 1978); Intro and Celia (Mickery 1978); Nayatt Oct. 1978," audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5155.

desk."[68] A matter, that is, of leaving the group in order to define his talk performance as a self-contained solo practice, though at the time he knew only that he had "…come to the end of a way of working…"[69] He felt he had come face to face with his own past through the Trilogy in a way that, while personally productive, might not be considered "interesting" in conventional theatrical terms. The end of his relationship with Lecompte and his ongoing emotional crises, which had been both facilitated and alleviated by their work on the Trilogy, had left him uncertain about the utility of theatre in his life beyond reckoning with the aftermath of his mother's death. Emerging from a decade-long submersion in the insular, collective art-making at the Performing Garage into the post-Vietnam and post-Watergate America of the late 1970s, he felt that the world might be ending, or his world at least.

If there was to be no future, he was not sure there was a reason to make art anymore and, after *Nayatt School*'s initial run at the Performing Garage, he headed west to embrace the new age self-actualization movement in California, where he hoped he could learn to live free of the need to perform. He entrenched himself for the summer in the culture of workshops and self-help seminars that would continue to interest him through much of his life. During a workshop with the philosopher Amelie Rorty in Santa Cruz he remembered her telling him that at the end of the Roman Empire the most important people were the chroniclers.[70] According to one of many origin stories for his monologues he would go on to tell, this provided the logic he needed to turn

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[68] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 108. The long, front-facing table remains a feature of The Wooster Group's shows, often as a visible place where actors sit when their characters are "offstage." Other references to Gray may have entered The Wooster Group's vocabulary even after his departure, I think of the Gray-like flannel shirt that Kate Valk, who remains seated throughout the performance, reveals she is wearing beneath her costume in *The Emperor Jones*.

[69] Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, xii.

[70] Schechner, "My Art in Life," 162.

back toward the theatre and begin chronicling his experiences extemporaneously for small audiences. Since he was not yet convinced there was to be a future, at least for "white middle-class" people like himself, he determined to work in a form that would leave nothing behind, especially not a physical object like a book. He believed this was the closest he could come to remaining in the present, writing later that he was determined that "each night my personal history would disappear on a breath."[71]

In this turn to a neo-primitivist approach to oral storytelling he was anticipating a future post-literate moment when a media culture occurring at much smaller, non-technological scales would re-center the importance of the face-to-face encounter. His theatrical frame of reference meant a preference for immediate co-presence and skepticism about technological reproduction. Yet his sense of the possibilities for post-literate orality to revivify human communication in real time otherwise align with Walter Ong's idea of a "secondary orality" through post-print technologies that could be shared simultaneously within the newly networked and sensitized media environment of Marshall Mcluhan's "global village."[72] As grandiose, self-centered, and chauvinistic as Gray's anxiety about his own future was, I see his resultant determination to make work that was neither composed nor preserved as a foundational moment of resistance to media circulation beyond the site and circumstance that occasioned his speech. This resistance would define his talk performance project, even as that project began almost immediately to stray from it.

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[71] Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, xii.

[72] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen & Co, 1982), 123-29; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Rev Edition (The MIT Press, 1994), 23-35.

Following his conversation with Rorty during the summer he spent in Santa Cruz in 1978, Gray began sketching out his ideas for this new kind of life chronicle through performance. In his mind this was not yet a theatrical work, as the Trilogy had been, but a format for exploring his internal recollections publically that he called "speaking memory." He imagined developing this process as a kind of meditative practice in a series of experimental performances on off nights at The Performing Garage. These would be much more concerned with their own process of becoming than with delivering an aesthetically realized product. He wrote in his notebook at the time that these experiments would be highly contingent on the presence of the audience:[73]

> …with "Speaking Memory," I want to put myself in a meditative
> non rehearsal state and try to allow the presence of the audience to
> influence the quality and subject matter of my memory.
> A daring and selfish thing to do and a lot of theory but I want to try
> it for 10 Tuesdays or 6 Wednesdays set up a space for myself and
> be there
>
> work out a memory structure in which I begin with one
> memory…[74]

He began performing these pieces the following spring, of 1979, and at first they came easily, the urgency of performance structuring his recall of memories. The first two, which premiered the same year, relied exclusively on his memory for their structure. In *Sex and Death to the Age 14* (1979) Gray merely recalled every association he had with sex or death during the first fourteen years of his life, while *Booze, Cars, and College Girls* (1979) carried on from

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[73] A scenario reminiscent of Antin's "tuning," which he used to describe the way in which his pieces were made in response to the conditions of the performance, rather than preceding them. David Antin, *Tuning* (New Directions, 1984).

[74] Spalding Gray, "Notebook: 1978-1979," Spalding Gray Papers, container 35.1.

there, structured around the archetypal male obsessions of his adolescence and young adulthood. As with *Rumstick Road* and the reception of his later pieces, these early monologues suggested that Gray was typical of middle class white American men of his generation, while emphasizing the hyper-specificity of his self-presentation at the same time. The trick seemed to be in his ability to turn the mundane interesting.

For these pieces, Gray established the working process he would employ for the rest of his career, a reliance on memory rather than memorization, and on the conditions of the present moment to call up the past. Gray always claimed that he started with his own memories and then recalled the last time he related them, using the memory of the previous performance to stand in for the memories of the past events themselves.[75] So, though these first two monologues might seem more free of mediated sources than those that came before or would come after, the performed memories themselves became a kind of meta-text that each performance could draw on.[76] Each instance of remembering worked to fragment what might have otherwise been a coherent narrative, emphasizing the occasion of recall as much as the content of what was remembered. This seemed, to Gray at least, a somewhat radical proposition, which transgressed the expectations of even the experimental theatre companies from which he had emerged that the work, however idiosyncratic, should by default be prepared, or at least its shape anticipated, beforehand.

Gray saw himself not as performing a piece but a concept, somewhat in line with both conceptual art and body art, then overtaking the gallery world. Gray would remember whatever

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[75] Qtd. in Rich Dwyer and Ralph Vituccio, *Performance the Living Art* (Pittsburgh, PA: Zootuch Productions, TPC/Channel One, 1988).

[76] Thanks to Colin Fitzpatrick for this observation.

he was able to while sitting before a small audience, speaking as himself, and whatever he remembered would be the piece. Conceptually this was not that great a distance from the original idea Lecompte remembered Gray having for *Rumstick Road*, in which he would sit at a table playing the tapes of his interviews with his family while looking at the audience.[77] Instead, this was Gray sitting at a table, describing each thing he remembered as it occurred to him.

But, by the time of his third stand-alone talk piece, Gray was working with much fresher source material, about which he did not yet feel settled: the emotional upheaval he had experienced while on tour with the Performance Group in India in 1976 and its reverberations after his return to America in the lead up to making *Rumstick Road.* Developing the piece, which he came to call *India and After (America)*, in 1979 he once again turned to external media to both fragment and knit together his performance. The presence of this fixed media served to distinguish the action of remembering and relating his recent experiences from a textually stabilized recounting of the same events.

Though Gray's talk performance, in his own estimation and in popular reception, would eventually come to seem merely an entertaining way to deliver autobiographical material, there is much evidence that Gray was initially at least as concerned with the performance event as a delimited site where a performance could be constructed and disseminated all at once as he was with spinning a good yarn. In fact, I argue that the intermedial fragmentation he incorporated into the early performances on which I focus actually helped resist slipping into too-easy, crowd-pleasing narrative coherence.

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[77] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 89.

This pull between narrative fixity and performative contingency was evident at least as early as *Rumstick Road*, in which the action pulsated off the stimulus of the "found" recordings, coming into and out of sync with the live action. Crucially, thanks to the juxtaposition of live and recorded speech, it was possible to speak both in the present and in the past, and to suggest the interdependent, but separate, presence of the two temporalities that co-existed onstage. As Gray continued to transition into his solo practice, this division became much less clear, and the present of Gray's performances kept receding farther and farther into the background in favor of their narrative pasts. These multiple intermedial temporalities, which gave birth to Gray's performance format, remained integral to the formation of his individual performances even as they became gradually obscured by the competing process of mediatization which served to commodify and circulate these same performances.

Gray's career, then, and the careers of his individual pieces, evince a pattern of movement that can be seen both in the development of each work and across Gray's entire career. Starting with the performance event as a freestanding act, dependent on bodily presence and temporal simultaneity that is adjunct to, but cordoned off from, other (mediated) temporalities, Gray's performances eventually transmuted at the other extreme into purely representational media objects designed to transmit specific, fixed narrative material. These eventually subsumed the original contingent intermediality of Gray's performances into wholly mediated environments (books, films, television programs, etc.), which paradoxically asserted a

powerfully nostalgic aesthetic that privileged the affective authenticity of unmediated

storytelling.[78]

This process is most apparent within the works themselves through the explicit, physical

presence of materialized media, not only in *Rumstick Road*'s use of family audio recordings,

which were played from a very visible, elevated, onstage DJ booth, but through both incidental

and central appearances of media sources of all sorts onstage as the physical presences against

which Gray's liveness could be articulated, even if only notionally or symbolically. The portable

record player that first appeared incidentally in *Sakonnet Point*, for instance, eventually figured

centrally as an organizing element in *Nayatt School* and even put in an appearance in *Booze,*

Cars, and College Girls during a section in which he described his youthful obsession with

novelty racecar records, which he and his friends would memorize and mimic.

The function of recorded audio, as the fixed media against which the live event pulsated,

extended in the early monologues to Gray's onstage use of fixed texts as a baseline in response

to which he could extemporize, often to prompt or sequence narrative units.[79] This is particularly

apparent in two of the most idiosyncratic of his earliest independent works, *India and After*

(America) (1979) and *The Great Crossing* (1980), which was the original title of the monologue

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[78] For Gray, as for Antin and Rainer, understanding this involves identifying the conditions of possibility that pre-existed what I call talk performance in their work, and in understanding the procedure by which the work articulated itself as available to mediatization.

[79] Media is also a narrative *subject* in Gray's work. His most famous pieces turn out to be about the process of working in another medium – acting in a movie in *Swimming to Cambodia,* or writing a book in *Monster in a Box*. And stories of making work and participating in creative processes in a variety of media are prominent even earlier: the descriptions of the porn shoots in *India & After*, his monologue tours in *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* and *Travels in New England*, researching the photography book for which the monologue would itself become the text in *In Search of the Monkey Girl*, or the various productions he participated in during his pre-Wooster Group days as an itinerant provincial actor in *A Personal History of the American Theatre*. Even in death he imagined a mediated presence, as in the moment in the film of *Swimming to Cambodia* when he eases his anxiety about going up in a helicopter during the film shoot with the knowledge that it was being filmed and if he died his friends could "show rushes in The Performing Garage on New Years' Eve – something would come of this!"

he eventually presented in its fixed form as *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* (1980). More modest versions of this intermedial approach also mark *A Personal History of the American Theatre* (1982), and even early versions of *Swimming to Cambodia* (1984). In these pieces, Gray began introducing textual instruments by which his memories could be called up and shuffled in some immediate way.

In the next section, I will articulate through archival accounts of Gray's developmental processes, the ways that what I call his intermedial extemporaneity functioned and was deployed. I focus especially on *India and After* and *The Great Crossing* as the two pieces that rely most integrally on the physical co-presence of pre-existing text within the piece. These texts – notebook pages, title cards, newspaper articles, book passages, dictionary entries – served as randomizing elements which could structure the everyday content of Gray's experiences from outside his authorial position, and offered assurances that each performance constituted a unique and collaborative experience shared by Gray and his audience. Paradoxically, when the pieces themselves started to be recorded and reproduced for commercial circulation as text or video, they required increasingly strategic advance structuring in order to both reify Gray's gift for extemporaneity and fulfill popular expectations for an entertaining and narratively satisfying dramatic product.

The afterlife of this performance format has been much more connected to a logocentric model of traditional literary and dramatic storytelling than to the kind of contingent, intermedial, anti-disciplinary, temporal and embodied experiments with the performative present which characterize the concerns of post-modern deconstruction and the attendant resistance to dramatic storytelling that marked contemporaneous performance art, to which I argue Gray can be equally

legitimately connected. The usual understanding of the lineage to which he matters, however, encompasses the autobiographical one-person theatrical show, first person storytelling and "live lit" events, and various strains of creative non-fiction and first-person reporting in print and broadcast journalism, all of which posit the possibility of an individual discovering and relating a knowable and tellable truth.[80] From that perspective, it can become difficult to identify the deliberately de-stabilized and temporally contingent approaches to truth telling that informed Gray's practice from the start, and easy to instead use him to confirm a problematically authoritative role for the self-reflexive reporter, who does not interrogate his or her own presentational format or capacity for gaining expertise in the process of using the first-person to establish their authority. This means that the continued circulation of Gray's work, and the work of those who have come after Gray as writers and performers, does not usually engage the complex and discomfiting process of self-reflexive uncertainty that Gray's format originally required.

Meanwhile, the readily available media formats that circulated Gray's work to a wider public, allowing others to access and imitate his style, paradoxically reduced the range of possible applications for Gray's approach, amplifying the most packageable and attractive versions of his form. This process eventually rendered Gray's performed presence a footnote to his literary production, especially after his death, even given the fact that his work's popularity depends on an understanding of his performance of his monologues as either improvised or

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[80] See for example: Rich, "The Mask Behind the Voice."

spectacularly acted to *seem* improvised.[81] I argue that Gray's circulation evidences the power of disciplinary naming and the hidden assumptions that calling his work theatre brings with it across media boundaries to influence and shape its reception under all media conditions. By recovering the unique and deceptively complex intermediality of these early performances, and their process of development, it is possible to understand Gray's influential later work in terms of this interdisciplinary, intermedial, performative logic rather than through the more aesthetically and disciplinarily conservative frameworks of literary authorship, dramatic narrative, and mass mediation which Gray's real, if modest, fame has often served to endorse.

India and After (America)

The earliest and most pronounced use of external media, in the form of pre-existing text sources, in Gray's post-Wooster Group work came in the third of his new "speaking memory" pieces, *India and After (America)* (1979). This work followed closely his first two monologues, which focused on youthful anecdotes mostly more than two decades old. He was likely already performing, or at least at work on, *Sex and Death to the Age 14* and *Booze, Cars, and College Girls* by the time he sat down in his loft across Wooster Street from the Performing Garage in early 1979 to record everything that he could remember about what had happened in his life during the tumultuous year of 1976. In February of that year Lecompte and he had traveled to India as actors in the Performance Group's production of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and*

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[81] Publications attributed to Gray as author, both during his life and posthumously, include: Spalding Gray, *The Journals of Spalding Gray* (Random House Digital, Inc., 2011); Spalding Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia* (Theatre Communication Group, 1986); Spalding Gray, *Spalding Gray : Stories Left to Tell,* Words by Spalding Gray ; Concept by Kathleen Russo and Lucy Sexton. (Woodstock, Ill: Dramatic Publishing, 2008); Spalding Gray, *Life Interrupted: The Unfinished Monologue* (Crown, 2005); Gray, *Impossible Vacation*; Gray, *Monster in a Box*; Spalding Gray, *It's a Slippery Slope* (Woodstock, Ill: Dramatic Publishing, 2008); Gray, *Morning, Noon and Night*.

Her Children, a tour which failed to achieve many of the goals of intercultural exchange Schechner had set for it, and which led to a great deal of tension within the group.[82] Traveling with Lecompte and on his own in India after the tour had ended, Gray had a very hard time psychologically, succumbing to self-doubt, anxiety, and an unquenchable longing for idealized experiences.[83]

In many ways *India and After*, by accounting for the year leading up to the making of *Rumstick Road,* can be seen as an unacknowledged chronicle of how he got to the explicitly autobiographical form he began working in at that time. Telling himself everything that he could remember that had happened in India and after he left, Gray attempted to replicate the process he had already been using, in which he told what he could remember about a subject, and then repeated and embroidered those tellings to make a piece. But, dissatisfied with what proved to be a mostly linear account of such recent experiences, Gray became interested in resisting the drift toward narrative unity, possibly in pursuit of a way to critically intervene into the apparent fidelity of his recollection given how fresh the events were. He cast around for a structural device that would help create the distance he felt he needed between his psychological source material and the instance of performance, as his positional distance from the "found" recordings

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[82] In many ways the failures of this tour informed Schechner's renewed will to find ways to interrelate performance traditions across cultural boundaries, a project that would animate his work as a scholar and an artist for the next several decades and come to define in large part the practices associated with Performance Studies. For more on this tour, see: Richard Schechner, "The Performance Group's Mother Courage in India," *Over, Under, and Around: Essays in Performance and Culture* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004); My own unpublished essay on the history of the cultural conflicts encountered on this tour, particularly around different understandings of Brecht, was presented at the Association for Theater in Higher Education Conference (ATHE) in Chicago, 2011. Ira S. Murfin, "Everybody's Brecht: The Performance Group's Mother Courage and Her Children On Tour in India," 2011.

[83] He would, in fact, become particularly associated with what he eventually termed, in *Swimming to Cambodia,* his search for the "perfect moment" while traveling. A version of this search is described in preliminary terms in this work, along with the crippling indecision and self-doubt that accompanied it.

in *Rumstick Road* and *Nayatt School* had, and as his temporal distance from childhood and adolescent experiences had in *Sex and Death to the Age 14* and *Booze, Cars, and College Girls.*

His first few runs of what would become *India and After (America)* were performed mostly for a tape recorder, at home in his loft with only a few others present. On those early tapes he followed the story more or less in a straight line, only occasionally doubling back to pick up narrative strands or to revise details, mostly in order to make the telling smoother. Gray found this neither personally nor aesthetically satisfying. He told Savran some years later that it was the fidelity of his account that he wanted to try to interrupt: "I was too close to the material. It came out like a travelogue. I didn't know how to fragment it by chance. All the other pieces had been fragmented by memory."[84] The solution he hit on was to employ a de-personalized intervening text to structure the piece from outside of his authorial consciousness.

That summer of 1979 Gray, along with the rest of the Performance Group, was an artist in residence at Connecticut College. Students in the college's summer programs made ready audiences for in-progress showings of new performance experiments, and it was for them that he first performed his new, still untitled work about his travels in India. Since his talk format was quite new and the audience mostly unfamiliar with his previous work in New York, he felt he should explain the concept of the talk pieces in general, and the intertextual approach he would be taking with this new piece in particular, which diverged from the more straight-ahead previous monologues, *Sex and Death to the Age 14* and *Booze, Cars and College Girls.* On the audio recording of this performance, he can be heard telling his audience, "It is not as clear cut as

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[84] Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 73.

the others and as together yet… the reason I have the tape recorder and am recording it is so I

can begin to hear the shape of the piece." The talk pieces, he explained,

> …are some attempt at a kind of public memory of my life, so that
> the memories are not written down ahead of time or rehearsed, so
> that what it really is is a kind of storytelling based on certain
> events that happened in my past – sex and death up to the age of
> fourteen, and then the alcohol and the automobiles and the women.
> Now this piece is a more recent one so I expect it to be a little bit
> differently remembered because I haven't got the same distance on
> it.[85]

As a result, he implied, he needed to bring in an external fixed element against which the action

of remembering and telling could be defined.

He identified the genesis of the piece as a period when he was traveling in Kashmir after

the end of The Performance Group's tour of *Mother Courage*. (In later performances, he would

refer to this as the critical moment when he "lost his will.") He explained:

> I found myself in Kashmir with only one book and that was, by
> accident, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which I had read
> before. And this book, because I was in an isolated mountain
> village, I was able to give a lot of concentration to it automatically.
> There was no work, there was a relationship suddenly with
> Virginia Woolf, which saved me from some of this terrific culture
> shock and somehow touched me down with some of my own
> culture and past. So what I've done is that I've cut out some
> sections from this book and I'm going to experiment with reading
> them in and out of my talk, so that there will also be some readings
> from passages of that book.[86]

Gray's intention seems to have been to use Woolf's book much as he had the recording of *The

Cocktail Party* in *Nayatt School*, as a source of mediated cultural fragments through which he

could explain his own experience. In this case, Woolf's introspective, quasi-autobiographical

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[85] Gray, *India and After (Ct. College)*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, 1979, C4929.

[86] Gray, *India and After (Ct. College)*.

novel, focused on parental relationships and problems of memory and perception, was to create a parallel mental plane that Gray could treat as a kind of home base as he recounted the foreign-seeming settings and circumstances through which he traveled. He felt *To the Lighthouse* provided solace because it represented something of his "own culture" – by which he seems to have meant white, upper-middle class, Anglophone culture in general.

Once he began the performance proper, Gray turned to the novel to obliquely represent the anxiety that touring India as a white, American artist produced for him. Already nervous on the flight from Amsterdam to India, he confessed that he preemptively did "not trust the Indians," a tension only compounded when, with Richard Schechner (his identity obscured, perhaps purposely generalized, as only "the director" in this telling), he went into the cockpit and found the pilots pasting newspaper over the window of the plane to block out the sun. Soon after landing, Gray found himself removed from the comfortable modernity of the airport by the sight of a family using hand masonry tools to work on a stone wall, which he said made him feel as if he had been transported 2000 years back in time. This memory prompted him to shift into his first reading from *To the Lighthouse*, a passage in which Woolf describes a subtle, insidious terror emerging out of the initially comforting sound of the waves of the sea.[87] The passage

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[87] "But here, as she turned the page, suddenly her search for the picture of a rake or a mowing-machine was interrupted. The gruff murmur, irregularly broken by the taking out of pipes and the putting in of pipes which had kept on assuring her, though she could not hear what was said (as she sat in the window which opened on the terrace), that the men were happily talking; this sound, which had lasted now half an hour and had taken its place soothingly in the scale of sounds pressing on top of her, such as the tap of balls upon bats, the sharp, sudden bark now and then, "How's that? How's that?" of the children playing cricket, had ceased; so that the monotonous fall of the waves on the beach, which for the most part beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, "I am guarding you--I am your support," but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually in hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like a ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made one think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow--this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in

served as an on-the-spot metaphor, perhaps, for Gray's realization that the comforts and privileges he took for granted as a white American man not only were not shared by many of the people he would encounter in India, but that those privileges might not be able to protect him from the xenophobic anxieties a foreign environment evoked in him.

However, in the end *To the Lighthouse* does not appear to have offered Gray the structural counterpoint he was after. His use of the passages dropped away after he read just one more selection, leaving him to complete the narrative in the same linear fashion he had in his loft earlier that year. In this telling, Gray found himself increasingly alienated by his foreign surroundings in India during the tour and unable to make sense of his experiences as he continued to travel afterward. Eventually he found himself far off the usual tourist path in Ladakh, at the Tibetan boarder, where he was deeply troubled to find that he felt so anxious and conflicted in the midst of what seemed to him an uncomplicated and entirely harmonious culture.

It was at this point that Gray fled, apparently toward the comfortingly familiar angst of the West. Only once he made it to Amsterdam -- and then, after a bout of paralyzing indecision abut where to go next, back to America -- did it become clear that his crisis, though perhaps triggered by his travels, was the product of a deep psychological divide rather than of cultural difference. In retrospect, it seems clear that his descriptions of India were – similar to a modernist writer like Woolf – impressionistic outgrowths of his unstable mental condition, rather than the cause of his breakdown. And the environments he found himself in once "home," including his father's sterile suburban house, a pornographic film shoot in rural Pennsylvania, the New Age hippie scene he sought out in Santa Cruz, and the Las Vegas jail cell where he

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her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror." Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (New York: Everyman's Library, 1992) 15-16.

spent a week, each proved as foreign and estranging to Gray as anything he had encountered in India.

But *To the Lighthouse*, it turned out, was too enmeshed with the piece's narrative content – and Gray's deployment of it in performance too personal and subjective – to mimic the strange displacement he experienced both at home and abroad. Gray felt he needed a structuring device that remained outside of the work, aesthetically and thematically indifferent, perhaps along the lines of John Cage's chance-based music compositions, in which he used aleatoric procedures and predetermined temporal patterns to structure his pieces. This was to be a fixed text, not for Gray to riff on and play off of as he had *The Cocktail Party* in *Nayatt School*, but rather one that would act on Gray's telling to constrain its narrative structure and estrange its contents in a way that actually reflected the seeming randomness of the experiences themselves.

The reconfigured final template for *India and After*, which he would continue performing for a number of years*,* included a second onstage performer (usually Meghan Ellenberger) who read prompt words and their definitions at random from a large dictionary and then arbitrarily assigned time limits to Gray's anecdotes. In response to each word, Gray would call up some part of an incident from his time in India and the year after, and try to tell it before Ellenberger rang a bell indicating the end of his allotted time, whether he had finished the story or not. The presence of the dictionary promised the ultimate neutral organizational system, in contrast to Woolf's subjectivity and personal meaning for Gray. But it was no less a fixed textual object, carrying its own intrinsic connotations of authority and institutionally sanctioned knowledge, not to mention its contextual association with the imposition of English in India under British colonial rule.

Reflecting the dictionary's rigid order and stability in the face of its non-linear uses, Gray actually told the snippets of his stories in more or less the same way every time, down to the phrasing of individual sentences. But the structure of the performance broke up the sequence and flow of the narrative, creating odd juxtapositions and points of entry, cutting off or starting stories at what would ordinarily be thought to be a mid-point, and often altogether eliding narrative segments that might otherwise be assumed to be of import. This structure served to highlight the act of remembering in order to materialize the performative instance as distinct from the narrative content of the memories themselves. This new structure also kept *India and After (America)* from the kind of entextualized circulation to which, once he had established the formal elements of his "speaking memory" experiment, Gray would willingly submit his other solos, by then re-christened with the theatrically coherent label "monologues" (though, with Ellenberger onstage, *India & After* could not technically be called a monologue itself.)[88]

The usual understanding of this approach, affirmed by Gray and his observers both, is that the fragmentation produced by the random structure of the chance procedure with the dictionary reflected the fragmentation of his psychological breakdown, and helped him deal with it in a therapeutic way. In fact, a brief section of an early recording of *India and After*'s development has Gray reconsidering the utility of his psychiatric treatment in contrast to the benefits of performance. Describing his sense of triumph at having made his therapist laugh, Gray wondered if he might use his "speaking memory" form to work through his crisis in public, "I began to think why not tell just the stories to an audience instead of a psychiatrist, there must

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[88] Instead *India and After* would play the role of "early draft" for a number of more narratively coherent later works, particularly his most significant completed non-performance work, the 1990 autobiographical novel *Impossible Vacation*, which takes much of the material from *India and After* as the basis for its second half. Gray, *Impossible Vacation*.

be a better way of rehearsing this whole thing. After all, I thought I'd trust an audience a little more than a psychiatrist because there are more people with more opinions, so it would be a little more social."[89] This notion that Gray's performances constituted what he sometimes termed a theatrical "talking cure" would go on to circulate along with his monologues and inform the popular impression that Gray embodied the self-centeredness of the 1980s.

However, Gray had also inadvertently hit on a way to complicate the Westerner-transformed-by-travel-in-the non-Western-world narrative that the linear telling invited. By procedurally scrambling the sequence of events he also scrambled the too-easy causal or metaphorical links by which he otherwise connected his mental disturbance to his travels in India. Instead, he presented an interlocking, atemporal network of strange encounters and observations within which his mental instability is as likely the cause of his fearful and prejudiced encounters with the foreign as it is likely to have been caused by those experiences.

At an even finer level of detail, Gray's experimental structure often so obscured the narrative through line, or even the subjects of his anecdotal fragments, that his position as ostensible protagonist, and possibly his identity itself, was partially effaced in favor of collage-like patterns that both impressionistically suggested and narratively obscured the ethno-and ego-centric account of personal discovery through foreign travel to which his stories were otherwise in danger of adhering. Giving up structural control, Gray was able to displace the task of meaning making from his strategic narration of the past onto the shared experience of the performative present. By privileging his idiosyncratic telling over an imperative to accurately communicate what happened, Gray thwarted the narrative expectations of both literary and

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[89] Gray, *India and After*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, n.d., C4927.

dramatic form, and foregrounded his cognitive labor in extemporaneously calling up narrative fragments over the assumed authorial responsibility to curate and organize a work's meaning in advance.

Though Gray still drew on personal memory, aesthetically and structurally *India and After* more closely resembled a highly mediated collage of pre-recorded pieces. I argue that this use of the logic of recorded media to structure a piece around its order, cuts, and edits instead of its narrative content foregrounded what Gray was doing in the moment – responding, relating, strategically recounting – over the self-aggrandizing worst tendencies of memoir. By fragmenting his experience, he multiplied that experience. Ironically, it was the use of these contingent intermedial strategies that made this work particularly unavailable to the kind of wholesale mediatization to which his later performances would be subject.

Considering the three subsequent versions of *India and After (America)* that were recorded for archival video between 1980 and 1982, Gray's raconteurial virtuosity emerges despite his best efforts to emphasize his procedural structure. In these videos, Gray seems to have been trying to arrest, rather than develop, his trajectory toward monologic form. The stories began to open possibilities that spun off from Gray as the central figure, hinting at more varied experiences and a larger cast of characters, even where none existed. In the 1980 video, he told four separate anecdotes which later versions would make clear were all about Caledonia, a single mother he had a relationship with while in Santa Cruz. He does not name her in any of these anecdotes or explicitly connect the women in each story to one another, thus fragmenting a single person into multiple narrative possibilities.

At moments, he could even expand beyond a first-person account. In the 1981 video, given the prompt "Ivory White," he thought for several seconds before beginning "There was a story…" and describing a mythological interaction between Krishna, eating sand on the beach, and his mother, who did not know he was god. The story referenced not a personal experience but a shared cultural anecdote that Gray probably heard while traveling in India, though it was not explicitly marked as such. He also became adept at playing with perspective, moving into and out of his own point of view. In the same performance, at the prompt "revive," he told a story entirely from Lecompte's perspective about learning to overcome her fear of throwing up while taking a yoga workshop in India, and then later repeated the same anecdote as a story she had told him when they met back up in Amsterdam after parting ways in India.[90]

Gray became more and more adept at improvising within the narrative parameters he had established for himself, often playing formal ironic jokes. In the 1981 recording he went silent for the full allotment of one minute after being given the prompt "dumb," with the definition "without speech." By 1982, he had become even more formally adventurous, often demonstrating his control over the material. A frequently told story about dancing with school boys while he was on mescaline in Kashmir, for example, timed out, but instead of dropping it, he picked it back up again several anecdotes later, mid-sentence. And by observing a minute of silence in response to the prompt "turn down", he metatheatrically "turned down" the opportunity to speak.[91] Eventually, he was switching deftly between stories even within one allotted time period, by the end deliberately trying to return to and wrap up each narrative thread

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[90] Gray, *India and After*, VHS, Spalding Gray Papers, 1980, GRS071; Spalding Gray, *India and After (America)*, 3/4" video, Spalding Gray Papers, 1981, GRS060.

[91] Though Savran reads this as a genuine failure to speak, I read it as deliberate and strategic. Savran, *Breaking the Rules*, 73.

left hanging, where in previous iterations he seemed to court incomplete and fragmentary narratives.[92]

By late 1982, when the latest archival video was made, the performance was already over three years old, and Gray had developed a body of work consisting of more than half a dozen monologues. In effect, the genre had been born, and while *India and After* remained a variant, unique in its inclusion of a second performer sitting behind the onstage desk in the position that Gray usually occupied, it largely faded behind his more fully mediated, narratively accessible, and traditionally theatrical works, which would go on to wide circulation. Notably, it was not included in his collection of early monologues, titled after his first solo *Sex and Death to the Age 14*.[93] By resisting fixity, *India and After* remained more a concept than a fully realized performance in the critical memory of what constituted Gray's early career.

The Great Crossing/Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk

While Gray used nominally indifferent external media to create the narrative and psychological distance between the past and the moment of performance to generate *India and After (America)*, in *The Great Crossing* (1980) he reversed this intermedial strategy in order to deal with a past even more immediate than the one in the earlier piece, employing the distancing effect of public reading to deliver his most recent and personally revealing writing. *The Great Crossing* may be the least well-known monologue in Gray's oeuvre, easy to dismiss as an aborted work or an early pass at a later, more "complete" monologue. In its earliest versions, much of the performance

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[92] Gray, *India and After (America)*, VHS, Spalding Gray Papers, 1982, GRS069-070.

[93] Christopher Grobe, working independently of Gray's estate, is currently preparing a version of *India and After (America)* for publication. He hopes to reflect the variation and lack of one definitive version in his arrangement of the text.

consisted of verbatim readings from his private journal, detailing a trip across the country he

took with his new girlfriend Renee in order to tour his monologues on the West Coast. This was

in fact the very tour on which he began performing *The Great Crossing*, so the journal entries

were for the most part just weeks old. At the same time, he also used public textual detritus

collected along the way (newspaper articles, a new age magazine) to approximate the physical

and cultural environments he passed through.[94] And in at least some instances, he brought the

piece's narrative up to the very moment of performance, as if challenging himself to do away

with the division between authoring the work and presenting it publicly.

Much as Gray's dialogic improvisation with the turntable in *Nayatt School* suggested a

contemporaneous, though aesthetically quite different, take on early hip-hop sampling, *The*

Great Crossing came the closest of Gray's monologues to a process of situationally dependent,

in-the-moment creation, which echoed the extemporaneous, freestyle rhymes of early hip hop

MCs that came to be known as rap. With this work, made as Gray recognized his monologue

format concretizing, he seemed to be trying to maintain an approach that mimicked neither

authorship nor acting in its process of becoming, without relying on the spectacularity of either

the hip hop MC or the stand-up comic in its self-presentation.

Though *The Great Crossing* remained relatively obscure, a substantially different version

of the same material did premiere in New York, just months after the initial performances on the

West Coast, under the title *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* (1980). This version was

eventually published with his other structurally stable pre-*Swimming to Cambodia* monologues

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[94] A strategy reminiscent of David Antin's pre-talk poem works, which often involved reappropriated textual collage. David Antin, *Meditations* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971); David Antin, *Definitions* (New York: Caterpillar Press , 1967); David Antin, *Code of Flag Behavior*, (Black Sparrow Press, 1968).

in the collection *Sex and Death to the Age 14* (1986).[95] This transition from the ephemeral,

contingent, and intermedial format of *The Great Crossing* to the fixed piece known as *Nobody*

Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk best represents the change in Gray's approach from the

extemporaneously generated, conceptual and situational early performances to the replicable and

circulatable, recognizably dramatic form that his monologues would ultimately take. This was at

least in part a result of excising the fixed media object to which the performance originally

responded, and replacing it with the performance itself as a composed and repeatable

retrospective narrative.

While, like nearly all of Gray's work, *The Great Crossing* depended on some deliberate

division between his past experience and his telling in the present, no other work brought the two

into such close, even overlapping, proximity. Ultimately, this emphasized the material and

procedural distance between talk and textuality as much as between the remembered past and the

performative present. As he read his travel diary in the initial performances of this piece on the

West Coast, he verbally footnoted what he had written, explaining and commenting on his

ostensibly private thoughts in public.[96] In this way, the raw material of his daily jottings were

structured by his extemporaneous comments on that material in the moment of performance, a

hybrid perhaps of the "found" personal media in *Rumstick Road* and the intermedial

improvisation with *The Cocktail Party* in *Nayatt School.* Gray had become not only the

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[95] Significantly, this collection did not include his two other indeterminately structured works, *India and After (America)* and *A Personal History of the American Theater*. It also did not include *In Search of the Monkey Girl,* a version of which had already appeared as an essay in Randal Levenson's photography book of the same name.

[96] The passages he reads can be found starting on July 9th and running through the month of July in Spalding Gray, "Journal: 1980," Spalding Gray Papers, container 35.4.

extemporaneous responder in dialogue with fixed media objects, but also the author of that fixed media source, as well.

This relationship was probably never closer than in *The Great Crossing.* At least some performances concluded with the story of what had happened to him that day before arriving at the theater. Gray seemed to be pushing at the boundaries of what could be labeled a distinct and delineated performance work, as opposed to an ever-changing improvisational exercise. As the archival recordings of his West Coast tour suggest, Gray seems to have been caught between the promise and economic necessity of shaping his still-new talk performance format, just beginning to gain traction as touring works, into something repeatable and commodifiable, and the value he found in being able to respond to his memories and the performance situation in the moment, leaving no trace, as he had originally imagined with his foundational pledge that his "personal history would disappear on a breath," existing only for a shared performative instant.[97] Though perhaps a familiar dilemma, the decision about what to make saleable and circulatable, and how to do so, remains key for an artist whose works exist first as concept or process, and only secondarily as physical objects or in reproducible media formats. As Gray's career demonstrates, the decision to concretize an ephemeral performance matters not only in the artist's own survival, but in shaping a critical and historical understanding of their work.

The only complete audio document of the performance still billed as *The Great Crossing* that I know of was recorded on September 13th of 1980 in San Francisco. Here, Gray prefaced the reading from his private diary with a very public source text, giving a straightforward reading of two newspaper articles he had encountered on his trip. The first described a shift in nuclear

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[97] Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, xii.

policy under President Carter from a strategy of mutually assured destruction to the capability for sustained, low-level nuclear war to act as a deterrent throughout an engagement. This was followed immediately by an article about a woman in Phoenix who had seen the face of Jesus in a tortilla. Though the nuclear article seemed to have something to do with Gray's grim sense of impending doom about the future, and the tortilla story got a lot of laughs, Gray delivered both in the same calm and measured tone usually recognized as "neutral," as if setting a baseline for the presence of performed text in the piece, no mater the source.[98] The news reports, and by extension his own experiences, were cast as uninflected found material, capable of revealing his thoughts and feelings, but not of being independently expressive in absence of his performed elaboration.

After the newspaper readings, Gray emphasized the uncomposed nature of his performance, explaining that, "It could start anywhere, but I'm choosing June 24th at Schiphol Airport, a place of great anxiety for me…" He then launched into three stories of fraught departures from Amsterdam – the first cribbed from *India and After* and the most recent immediately preceding his "Great Crossing" in late June of 1980. Back in New York, Gray's girlfriend Renee, appearing in this work for the first of many times as a character, had bought a car with money he left her so they could embark immediately on their cross-country trip.[99] Once they had cleared up some car trouble and were ready to go, Gray introduced the other, more personal, textual source around which the performance would be structured – his diary entries from the road. He explained the conceptual motivation for this in terms of building in a space

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[98] Spalding Gray, *The Great Crossing; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, n.d., C5007, Harry Ransom Center.

[99] Renee would remain a ubiquitous presence in his work until their marriage and divorce more than a decade later, chronicled in the second to last completed monologue, *It's a Slippery Slope*

between a past actor who had experienced the things described, but had no control over their

presentation, and a present performer who could narrate and comment upon, but would not be

held responsible for, that past actor's deeds,[100]

> What I wanted to do before I talk any more or speak any more was
> to read entries from the diary. I was going to actually dedicate this
> section of the piece to Lewis and Clark and Jack Kerouac, but I'm
> not going to do that…. The thing that I've been working from is
> this diary here, now the idea was that I was trying to find at least
> two of the - at least two Spalding Grays – and trick him, the
> perverse Spalding Gray who is here in front of you tonight would
> trick the private Spalding Gray who kept a diary not thinking he
> was going to read it but thought that he would speak openly about
> the situation and therefore be able to censor things … [101]

The diary represented both the most immediate record of these past experiences and the earliest

impulse toward transforming them into narrative material. Paradoxically, it was Gray's inscribed

past consciousness that he posited as uncontrollably confessional, and his extemporaneous

presence as a performer that could stabilize and edit what the journal's text revealed. Here Gray

acknowledged the social dimension of what he was doing, the very different phenomena of

writing for some abstract and ideal future audience and self-consciously verbally addressing a

specific, visually and spatially proximate audience in the present. By framing it in this way, Gray

defined the way that his talk performance was not writing, despite its inherent potential to be

written.

Indeed, the diary entries proved truly personal: petty, ponderous, emotional, graphically

sexual, and mundane. The entries revealed Gray to be motivated, and hindered, by both

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[100] In many ways this anticipates an argument that David Terry would make about Gray's much later monologues. David P. Terry, "Once Blind, Now Seeing: Problematics of Confessional Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (July 2006): 209–28.

[101] Gray, *The Great Crossing; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, 1980, C5007.

selfishness and self-consciousness, and to be much more immediately concerned with his own comforts and internal life than his ironic travelogues usually suggested, pre-occupied as they often were with the unusual characters he met. Much as the dictionary had in *India and After* and the title cards featuring names of plays Gray had acted in would in *A Personal History of the American Theatre,* Gray materialized the diary as a fixed physical presence to be dealt with in performance – a media *object*. His readings incorporated not only what he had written, but the textual environment of the daily planner in which he wrote, equalizing printed dates and calendar markings, such as "New Moon; Orangemen's Day," with his own writings in what he read aloud.

When he felt the impulse to reflect or comment, he would stop and verbally footnote what he read in the moment, before returning to the structured text. It was often these asides which provided the fleshed out scenes and character portraits that painted a more vivid picture of the journey and the people they met along the way. But Gray might read days and days worth of diary entries at a stretch without comment before inserting some slight, seemingly minor thought or anecdote. After leaving his brother's house in Pennsylvania, their first real stop, Gray flatly read his account of campsites, places they swam, and where they bought beer across almost the entire Midwest before his first pause to comment on an entry from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan – the story of a friend's son's indecision about what toy to choose when Gray offered to buy him something in the Kmart.

Gray, as would become clear in subsequent performances of *The Great Crossing*, was wrestling with his form, wondering if he could continue performing monologues in the way he had been over the previous year or so, as contingent intermedial procedures, or if he would eventually have to commit to a more conventional dramatic literary model. Still understanding

his ephemeral live performances as distinct from processes of literary production, Gray was toying with the respectability promised by publishing, and the relatively long trace left by the printed word, even as *The Great Crossing* offered a picture of the fundamental divide between extemporaneous talk and the materiality of text. *The Great Crossing* provides a glimpse of Gray deciding who, and what, his performances were for. Were they subjective personal reflections for intimate and uniquely situated (temporally, institutionally, and geographically) audiences, or were they a canon of enduring, if eccentrically developed, dramatic literature? Though *Swimming to Cambodia*, in both its content and its fate as a work, would portray him ultimately choosing the more career-oriented path of narrative coherence and cross-media adaptation, in *The Great Crossing* Gray was still testing if it was possible to make a performance of responding to a situation in the moment, including the anecdotes and memories that might be triggered, rather than simply narrating a composed and tightly edited story about the past.

He found ironic reflection of his dilemma in the eccentric places and characters the encountered everywhere they went on their trip. One stop brought them to the rural South Dakota homestead of Jim Lockhart, a railroad worker who they met through an introduction from Gray's swinger dentist in New York. He and Lockhart knew one another from Toastmaster's conventions, an organization which Gray described incredulously: "The idea of the Toastmasters convention is that you can get up and talk about anything, its just learning how to talk." Amazed that such an organization existed and somewhat dismissive of its purpose, Gray fantasized about leaving performance entirely to become a writer, saying "I have no real longing to get back in front of an audience."

Gray's anecdotes frequently feature doubles of himself, men who relate to the world by delivering self-disclosing monologues. In *India and After (America)*, these included the guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, who talked for hours to his followers at his ashram in India, or the man in the Las Vegas jail cell who occasionally emerged from a blanket to deliver a ten-minute long, quasi-coherent monologue about how he got there. These figures, who speak mindlessly, automatically narrating their existence, increasingly became cautionary examples for Gray, who was actively shaping his performance away from idiosyncratic cataloguing and toward narratively strategic recounting.[102]

Ultimately, an extemporaneously delivered linear narrative account of their travels in California supplanted Gray's intermedial relationship with his diary once they reached the West Coast. While this approach resembled the reportorial "travelogue" pieces still to come (*Swimming to Cambodia* in particular), Gray brought the piece right up to the present in an attempt to both generate and structure his telling before an audience, without an external mediating force intervening. Performing in San Francisco during an extended stay in the Bay Area, he brought the narrative around to what had happened just that day. He had been feeling disoriented in his new environs and had moved from one living arrangement in the city to another in the East Bay: "At last I am beginning to feel safe in Berkeley, and I got up this morning, I walked into the bathroom and it was filled with smoke, a towel was on fire – how could this have happened?" Gray realized the dog he was caring for had thrown the switch on an electric heater.

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[102] Gray, *India and After*, VHS, Spalding Gray Papers, 1980, GRS071.

After putting the fire out, he took the dog for a walk and saw a car with its lights on. He found he was excited to be able to turn them off and save a stranger's battery, and that he did not even look around for someone to witness his good deed. This became, by implication, the destination of his journey, to lose the need for an audience to be present in order to make sense of his experience or, conversely, for anything he did in front of an audience to be understood as fundamentally more meaningful than what he did alone.[103] It represented, perhaps, the road not taken, one closely associated with the new age scene in nearby Santa Cruz where he was repeatedly drawn, and where he had first thought of the possibility for a meditative "speaking memory" a few years earlier. *The Great Crossing* may have come the closest to that early impulse for his "personal history to disappear on a breath," to detach the work from both media sources and media formations, to exist for a moment and be gone.

Adding new experiences almost as soon as they occurred, the monologue kept growing and changing as he toured it, informing Gray's inquiry into the value of his talk performance project as he presented the still-fresh experiment alongside his more established monologues in each new city. In a recording of a performance in Seattle he can be heard talking about picking up a woman after his show in Portland just a few days earlier (Renee had already gone back east.) Seducing her with talk about the value of keeping a journal, he brought her back to his hotel where she sat with him in the bathroom while he took a bath and told him her life story. This was another of the self-narrating Gray surrogates that he often met in his monologues, at once playing the role of Gray and serving as his audience. Gray told his Seattle audience that he found that having an audienced bath enhanced the experience, especially since he had not

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[103] Gray, *The Great Crossing; S.F.; Last Performance; September 13*, Spalding Gray Papers, C5007.

performed for several nights before his Portland show and his ego was beginning to suffer. He

said that he felt like he had nearly disappeared and that having an audience restored him.

As Gray toured he found his notoriety growing, after a few years of performing mostly in

his home theater in New York. After San Francisco, the performance acquired a story about

hanging out with Sam Shepherd, whose play *The Tooth of Crime* he had acted in at the

Performing Garage a decade earlier. Shepherd took him backstage at a Lou Reed concert, where

he found himself awkwardly trying to hold his own with Shepherd and Reed. Gray's self-

conscious unease amongst these confident, successful, masculine artists represented the precipice

at which he found himself, a path headed farther into the experimental fringe on one hand, and

one going forward into mainstream success on the other.

The contradiction between the desire and economic necessity for a larger engaged

audience and the need to process his experiences almost as they occurred came to a head in an

apparently authentic moment of mid-performance crisis in Seattle. Caught between his impulse

to generate new work in response to his own immediate experiences and the apparent pressure to

shape his material into something entertaining, replicable, and recognizable as theatre, he

stumbled over the very premise of what he had been doing during the year and a half that he had

been performing the monologues, and where he should take his form next:

> There are many other stories I could tell. There is also a piece
> called *Booze, Cars and College Girls* I used to do in New York.
> You can only tell the same stories so many times, I can't stand it
> anymore. Tonight's stories are all new, I haven't dealt with them at
> all, I feel they are best at their freshest, and I am really at the point
> where I really don't know what to do with that problem, since I am
> in the position where I am trying to make a living from doing what
> I do and I think I can't do it. Because it means setting them, and
> making them into routines and acting and being a stand-up
> comedian or what have you. *Booze, Cars and College Girls* just

> dealt with my drinking days, my car days, and my college women
> days. If this was entertaining for you that probably would have
> been equally entertaining for you, but it wouldn't have been as
> good for me since it wouldn't have been as fresh…"[104]

Having found refuge in the immediacy and ephemerality of his talk pieces, he understandably

balked at the imperative to repeat the stories and shape them into a set body of work. In fact, he

foresaw the direction this would take him: in order to make talk pieces that were saleable and

circulatable, he would have to begin to let go of the sense of free play and extemporaneity that

had kept his performances anchored in the present, and allow them to become in large part pre-

determined repetitions of what he had done before. Though ultimately this would spell

professional success for him, at this moment he understood that it came at the expense of the

very things that were most important to him about his talk performance project.

While Gray put this dilemma in terms of the way the work was serving him and his own

experience, I argue that the important loss Gray recognized was the slipping away of an

idiosyncratic format that resisted easy distinctions between inscription and enaction. Gray's

crisis during the Seattle performance was both a petulant complaint about having to dramatically

reenact an experience no longer personally useful to him, *and* it was also an expression of deep

frustration that the unique character of his talk pieces as contingent, situational, intermedial

emergent phenomena might have to be sacrificed in order for him to advance professionally as

an artist. In light of his eventual success it is easy to dismiss this early dilemma as an

independent artist merely anxious about "selling out," but focusing on this early work also

complicates the status he acquired in subsequent years and has maintained as a popular

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[104] Spalding Gray, *The Great Crossing; S.F.*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, n.d., C5005, Harry Ransom Center.

storyteller, essentially indistinguishable from a literary author. By defaulting to dramatic literary form, Gray had to yield the talk pieces' challenge to pre-existing disciplinary lineages and the pull of external media formations. Although he could preserve the spectacularity of his skills as an extemporaneous performer across media, he had to forfeit the intermedial contingency that tethered his pieces to the collective present of the performance event in order to realize the success, and exert the formal influence, that he ultimately achieved.[105]

In its formal premiere months later at Dance Theatre Workshop (DTW) in New York, where it appeared under the title *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk*, the re-configured piece followed a similar arc as the West Coast performances of *The Great Crossing*, but without the presence of the diary entries. Employing linear, past tense narration, Gray delivered a truncated account of the trip, reaching Santa Cruz in under 20 minutes of stage time. The rest of the performance continued to bring his account of his trip closer to the moment of performance, preserving as much as he was able of what had happened between the crossing and his return to New York. So the story of how the dog he was caring for lit a towel on fire – which had happened "just today" in his San Francisco performance -- became just one more instance on his tour to relate. And whereas the Seattle performance had petered out and ended in self-doubt about his formal approach, the New York version extended beyond the West Coast tour, ending with him traveling back across the continent and home to New York, and another proximate stopping place: DTW, where he was performing the re-configured piece.

Onstage he told of meeting a homeless woman sitting on the stairs outside of DTW a few days earlier, when he had come to check out the space in advance of his show. A former dancer

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[105] Gray, *The Great Crossing; S.F.*, C5005.

originally from Las Vegas, she told Gray her life story, like so many before her, and then asked him for a million dollars for an apartment, which, Gray joked, might have indicated that she was not as crazy as he first thought. He confessed that he briefly considered taking her home with him, whether for a sexual encounter or just to help her to clean herself up is left ambiguous, but he quickly reconsidered, ending on his one-word second thought: "no."[106] In effect, Gray was turning down adding further adventures to his trip with this final self-refusal. Whether that was out of the altruistic impulse to do a good deed without needing an audience that concluded the San Francisco version of *The Great Crossing*, or a return to the repressed self-denial of his New England upbringing, was left unclear.

After the apparent end of the monologue, Gray explained, apologetically, that he had called the piece *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* because press releases had already gone out with that title. It was originally going to be a piece based on taped interviews with his father that he had done some years before, in which he would have moved around in some manner, perhaps something like what he and Lecompte had done with the tapes in *Rumstick Road.* An abandoned possibility, perhaps, for a version of Gray's solo performance that would have looked different than the monologue format with which he became identified. There is no evidence that Gray ever returned to this idea, but he did explain the origin of the title. On one of the interview tapes his father had said he understood that none of his sons became businessmen because "nobody wanted to sit behind a desk." To make up for not doing that performance Gray offered three short memories of his father, as a coda of sorts. He did not try to integrate these into the piece as a whole, but left them as a disconnected postscript pointing to a potential piece that

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[106] This is also how the published version of the monologue ends, with a short coda explaining his father's quote, below, which gave the piece its title. Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14.* 148-9

never was. This appendix nonetheless became a textual fixture, in one form or another, of

subsequent versions of the piece, both in performance and in print.[107]

By November of 1982, when *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* was documented for a

series of archival videos that included all of Gray's monologues to date, the monologue's

narrative had been more neatly confined to the trip and his time in California (though the

epilogue about his father remained.)[108] In addition to his habitual table and chair, a road map of

the US hung behind Gray, with a pointer on his desk, coming closer to what would eventually

become the now-familiar setting for *Swimming to Cambodia*. Though the diary entries were

gone, he had continued to add printed media found on the trip to be read during the performance

throughout its development -- a placemat from a steak house in Murdo, South Dakota; a news

clipping about end times survivalists in Oregon; an article from the new age *Good Times*

newspaper about UFOs on Mount Shasta and the spiritual future of Santa Cruz – in addition to

the twin newspaper articles that continued to open the piece.

These artifacts anticipated the move toward the ironic, oddball Americana that would

captivate many in Gray's cohort within the mass mediated avant-garde of the 1980s, as in David

Byrne's *True Stories*, in which Gray appeared.[109] And, more to the point, as fixed texts they

remained in the piece as concrete evidence of where Gray had been, positing his monologue as

the ultimate show and tell, an implication that would continue to shape the reception of his work.

This new intermediality proved quite different from the unstable, contingent accounts of the past

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[107] Spalding Gray, *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk; DTW 11/22/80*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, C5093.

[108] Spalding Gray, *Nobody Wanted To Sit Behind A Desk*, Betamax, Spalding Gray Papers, 1982, GRS103-104, Harry Ransom Center.

[109] Thanks to Harris Feinsod for this connection

in *India and After* or the early versions of *The Great Crossing.* Here Gray began using textual

fixity to inch his format from the contingent performance concept it had been toward the hybrid

of confessional memoir and first-person reportage that would come to fruition with *Swimming to*

Cambodia in its text and film adaptations*,* and continue to influentially circulate for the rest of

his career and long after his death.

Circulating to Cambodia

Gray's work would remain always at least conceptually entwined with structural and narrative

extemporaneity, even as it became increasingly available to an aesthetic logic that assumed art's

expressive form will always eventually be permanent and stable. After wrestling with the nature

of his performance form's pull toward media fixity in *India and After (America)* and especially

through *The Great Crossing/Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk*, Gray created just one more

solo predicated on random chance. This was his 1982 monologue *A Personal History of the*

American Theatre, which began with Gray shuffling a stack of cards with the titles of plays he

had acted in prior to the start of the Rhode Island Trilogy. He used the chance order of the cards

to sequence anecdotes about each show differently every night.[110] Other than *A Personal History,*

all of his subsequent solo performances involved a series of recalled experiences organized

according to a temporal, experiential, or geographic logic external to the work itself, dictated by

the concerns of narrative clarity and thematic coherence rather than procedural fragmentation.[111]

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[110] Gray, *A Personal History of the American Theatre*, VHS, 1982, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call no. NCOV 278.

[111] Though at the same time, Gray was also establishing a format that came to be known as *Interviewing the Audience*, which he would perform sporadically for the rest of his life, in which he would dialogically elicit from selected members of his audience what amounted to brief, on-the-spot versions of his monologues, but about their

These monologues came to be associated with Gray's seemingly effortless recounting of diverse

sets of realistically reported, temporally and thematically bounded recent events, all featuring

himself as the protagonist.[112]

Not coincidentally, it was also in this period that the impulse to publish the content of the

monologues as literary products introduced itself, though Gray did not initially conceive of the

monologues themselves as transferable to literary form. With the exception of a few fragments

published as "excerpts" from Gray's early work,[113] his transition to being a "writer" began with

him writing down stories that had appeared in his early monologues as independent literary

efforts that he submitted to magazines as stand alone stories or personal essays, without the trace

of their history as performance material.[114] Although Gray has been widely referred to as a writer

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own lives. Like the dictionary in *India and After*, these performances were predicated on the intersection of individual memory with an external force, in this case Gray's questions, which gave shape to the thoughts and recalled subjective experiences of the audience participants in the instance of performance. It could be argued that Gray "deposited" his penchant for destabilized, contingent performances into this format, which was often presented as a special event alongside a run of one of Gray's monologues, while dedicating himself to fixing and entextualizing his monologue form for maximum circulation. Spalding Gray, *Interviewing Audience at the Kitchen*, audiocassette, Spalding Gray Papers, n.d., C4860, Harry Ransom Center.

[112] These non-contingent monologues *47 Beds*, *Travels Through New England*, *Terrors of Pleasure: The House* were all published in Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*; *In Search of the Monkey Girl* was published in the photography book of the same name, Spalding Gray and Randall Levenson, *In Search of the Monkey Girl*, 1st edition (Millerton, N.Y: Aperture, 1982); *Swimming to Cambodia* and his four subsequent completed full-length monologues were each published in individual volumes, Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia*; Gray, *Monster in a Box*; Gray, *It's a Slippery Slope*, 2008; Gray, *Morning, Noon and Night*; Gray, *Gray's Anatomy*. *Swimming to Cambodia*, *Monster in a Box*, and *Gray's Anatomy* were also adapted to films. *Terrors of Pleasure* was filmed as a cable special.

[113] Spalding Gray, "Excerpts from 'A Personal History of the American Theatre,'" *Performing Arts Journal* 8, no. 2 (1984): 36–50; *India and After (America),* Eds. Michael Slater and Cynthia Savage, *Poets' Theatre: A Collection of Recent Works* (New York City: Ailanthus Press, 1981), 76–84. (Thanks to Christopher Grobe for drawing my attention to the latter.)

[114] These include Spalding Gray, "Caledonia, Typescript Drafts, 1984," Spalding Gray Papers, container 11.16-17; Spalding Gray, "The Farmers' [sic] Daughter, Typescript, 1984" Spalding Gray Papers, container 12.9, as well as the story of his unconsummated affair with the Connecticut College student he variously called Laura or Nora that he repeated in several of the monologues of this period, including *The Great Crossing/Nobody Wanted…*, and *Travels Through New England*, and which forms the basis of his novel manuscript, Gray, "Fear of Fear (unfinished Novel), Typescript Synopsis, Drafts, and Fragments, Undated," Spalding Gray Papers, 12.10-15.

or a playwright in the decades since his emergence into the mainstream, both by himself and by

others, in point of fact that reading of his work was not immediately available to his audiences or

himself for the first several years of his solo career.[115]

In fact, Gray's monologues were so predicated on their contingent liveness that even the

early media adaptations of his performance material tended not to pretend to recreate the

circumstance of live performance, but to see his monologue style as source material for new

works that combined his direct address delivery – usually directed to the camera without

reference to theatrical space – with fictional or documentary material in order to make a work

particular to its medium. These video works usually had their own title and premise and did not

purport to be a version or an adaptation of an extant live performance work, even where

language was directly repurposed from a monologue.[116] It was only once the pieces became

textually replicable and could be seen as rehearsable and reproducible, not solely dependent on

the media conditions of theatrical performance to be realized, that the performances themselves

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[115] Gray's understanding at the time of performing and writing as mutually exclusive activities was evident in the way he wrestled with his desire to leave performance for writing in *The Great Crossing*. During the same period Gray was also experimenting with literary pursuits that were separate from his monologues, including his abandoned autobiographical novel "Fear of Fear" and his work of disturbing, surreal pornography, *7 Scenes from a Family Album,* which was published as a chapbook. Gray, "Fear of Fear (Unfinished Novel)..."; Spalding Gray, *Seven Scenes From a Family Album*, First edition (Benzene Editions, 1981).

[116] These included the video *Spalding Gray's Map of LA*, which interspersed material repurposed from *Booze, Cars, and College Girls* and elsewhere with fictional comic scenes of Gray dealing with LA's car culture; *Spalding Gray: A Life in Progress*, a documentary about Gray that used footage of his performances of *Sex and Death…* among other pieces; *Terrors of Pleasure*, a cable television adaptation of his monologue about buying a vacation home, with cutaways to brief dramatizations of certain key moments; and Gray's episode of the public television anthology series *Trying Times*, which featured a fictionalized version of Gray named "Gary" living in LA with his partner "Sydney" and contemplating having a baby in a dangerous world while dealing with a loud neighbor played by comedian Louie Anderson. It included opening and closing monologues delivered directly to the camera by "Gary," as well as from some of the other characters performed in the same style. Bruce Yonemoto and Norman Yonemoto, *Spalding Gray's Map of L.A.* (1984); Cecilia Rogue, *Spalding Gray a Life in Progress* (New York: Cicada Films, 1988); *Spalding Gray: Terrors of Pleasure*, dir. Thomas Schlamme, (Lionsgate Entertainment, 1987); "Bedtime Story," dir. Michael Lindsay-Hogg*, Trying Times*, Season 1, Episode 4 (PBS, 1987).

came to seem much more portable: able to reliably tour to larger regional venues, to be published

and circulate as textual scripts for Gray's dramatic performances, and eventually to play as

concert films representing Gray's live performances before theatre audiences.

By the mid-1980s, the distinction between his monologues as situated performances and

the life of the material they contained as literary product had started to blur, initially with the

publication of the collection of his early monologues, *Sex and Death to the Age 14* (1986). In the

introduction to the book, Gray explained that the monologues had always existed only in

performance, never as composed scripts, before he was offered the chance to publish them:

> …perhaps they never would have been written at all if Melanie
> Fleishman from Random House hadn't approached me. At first I
> was intimidated by the idea and thought that I would have to take
> the stories in each monologue and rewrite them. When I tried to do
> this I found I no longer had my own voice. My writing was
> derivative and imitative. It was then that Melanie and I decided to
> rework the transcripts from my performances and turn them into
> writing.[117]

This editorial process, by which Gray captured his voice in text rather then losing it in mute

inscription, along with the book's wide availability and circulation, began to establish the media

conditions under which Gray could preserve and disseminate his performance work. Up until that

point his performances had seemed wholly ephemeral, contingent, and specific to the conditions

of theatre. Under these conditions, it also became possible to imagine the book version of what

quickly became his seminal work, the ambitious two part quasi-epic *Swimming to Cambodia*,

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[117] Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, xiii.

which he had been performing over the course of two nights as separate, though linked,

monologues since late 1983.[118]

The natures of these two parts were quite different, though together they built a powerful

tension between a political critique and a personal journey. In the first part, which mostly

matches the monologue as it was presented in the 1987 film adaptation, Gray described being

cast in and shooting the film *The Killing Fields* in Thailand, explaining what he learned in the

process about the American bombing of Cambodia and the subsequent Cambodian genocide, and

implicitly drawing a parallel between American military adventures during the Vietnam War and

a self-satisfied Western film project recreating those events in order to comment upon them. The

second part, of which very little was included in the film save for Gray's now iconic insistence

on having a "perfect moment" in Thailand before he would go home, focused on Gray trying to

make sense of his experience in the aftermath of filming. Hanging around the film set after he

was done shooting, and then back in his rented summer cottage in Krumville, New York with his

girlfriend Renee, Gray experienced a crisis of conscience that left him unable to decide if he

should act on the political awareness he had gained making the film to take humanitarian action

on behalf of survivors of the Cambodian genocide or if he should capitalize on the professional

legitimacy the film had granted him to advance his acting career. In the final two-part version,

Swimming to Cambodia ultimately indicated a clear, if conflicted, decision on Gray's part to

pursue his own success and comfort, perhaps with the hope that his success could eventually be

put to some positive social good.

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[118] Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia* (Theatre Communication Group, 1986).

But while still in development, in late 1983 and early 1984, Gray used a much more open-ended, intertextual technique to represent his deep ambivalence and, in the earliest of these workshop performances, to extend that ambivalence into the performance itself. This section, eventually expunged from the piece, represented the last example of the intermedial contingency that had characterized so much of his talk performance project up to that point. Following his return to the US, he described something like a mild version of the prost-traumatic stress common to veterans of the war in Vietnam, in which he found himself unable to feel pleasure and sometimes confused his environs with those he left behind in Thailand. This reminded him of his experiences returning from India in 1976, and he decided to "sit down and write the whole India experience out," an idea that certainly recalled, but Gray apparently did not believe replicated, *India and After (America)*. Unable to make progress on this literary project due to headaches, or to find relief in the bucolic environs where he and Renee were vacationing, Gray turned to a series of books of philosophy, history, and psychology he had at hand. Fantasizing that he needed Freudian analysis, he sought its substitute in a number of books he claimed to have been reading "since the 60s."[119] But instead of returning to the past, the books brought him into the present moment of performance, supplanting the narrative function of his monologue. These early versions ended not with a decision about his future, but with him sifting through one quote after another, seeking insight on what to do next, but never returning to the narrative present.

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[119] As he might in psychoanalysis, Gray included a number of dreams in his narrative. His departure from Thailand was immediately preceded by a dream in which the producer of the film is resurrected as a Christ figure, only to confront Gray with a series of Freudian sexual anxieties about female genitalia, contagion, and latent homosexuality; and the final version of part two also ultimately ended with a dream.

These texts explored questions about the relationship between individual liberty and security and personal responsibility that were animating Gray's uncertainty about the correct path to take. He used them as intermedial interlocutors to draw his dilemma out from hyperspecific self-referentiality, even where his aim was to justify his own apparent narcissism. In Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Gray found a quote from Sigmund Freud describing what Freud termed the "oceanic feeling," which Gray took to be a defense of narcissism as a connector to the outside world: "Originally the ego includes everything, later it detaches from itself the external world. The ego feeling we are aware of now is thus only a shrunken vestige of a far more extensive feeling, a feeling which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of ego with the external world." Richard Sennet's *Authority* similarly suggested that shared liberation could be found in individualistic division, "liberty finally exists when the recognition I give you does not subtract something from myself." After a stop at a comic book, *Freud for Beginners*, he moved on to psychotherapist Herbert Benoit's book on Zen, *The Supreme Doctrine*, which he claimed to not understand despite repeated readings. The book, as Gray summarized it, ends by "stumbling on the limits of the temporal plane and bringing about the collapse of joy."[120]

> Every human being lives, whether he realizes it or not, in the
> expectation that there shall begin at last the "true life" from which
> all negation will have disappeared. In expecting something other
> than my life of the moment I escape complete identification with
> this life, I save my consciousness from being completely
> swallowed up in the forms that are actually present. This false
> direction of my aspiration creates for me the illusion of time and
> the painful impression that time is unceasingly escaping me.

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[120] Joy, Gray observed in an aside, was the name of the Thai prostitute he considered his "Pat Pong girlfriend," but whom he ultimately dismissed because she could not share mutually in his erotic pleasure, only declare meaninglessly "Joy like you," a deficit he credited RD Laing with explaining to him in yet another book.

Though he did not quote him, Gray mentioned that he found the permissive sense that action should be taken regardless of consequence and that whatever happens is ultimately right that characterized the worldview of Allan Watts, another Western popularizer of Eastern philosophy, uncomfortably close to what Nixon believed about bombing Cambodia. And dipping into a history of the Vietnam War, *Fire in the Lake* by Frances Fitzgerald, Gray was intrigued with Fitzgerald's analysis, which posited the colonialist rather than the native as, ultimately, the "child." A volume on cosmology, *The Runaway Universe,* made Gray think of something other than himself by proposing a theory of the universe in which time will run backwards and we will all be together in the end, which he found comforting. This prompted him to recall remarking to his therapist that he would like to die and come back to tell stories, then die again, in a circular sort of way. His therapist reminded him that if there were room for the two of them to come back, there would have to be room for everything to come back, to which Gray conceded that "there's not room for that in eternity."

Ultimately, Gray found "the two most pleasing books that finally brought me back," which mostly took over for his own voice in the final moments of the piece. The idea of being "brought back" became the only hint of a personal narrative conclusion in this version. In Patrick Hughes's and George Brecht's "anthology of paradoxes" *Vicious Circles and Infinity* he found this passage, which seemed to explain his "perfect moment" on the edge of drowning in the Gulf of Siam*:*

> Linebach had discovered a proof that there really is no death, it is
> beyond question. He had declared that not only at the moment of
> drowning, but all the moments of death of any nature, one lives
> over again his past life with a rapidity inconceivable to others. This
> remembered life must also have a last moment, and this last
> moment its own last moment, and so on. And hence, dying is itself

eternity, and hence in accordance with the theory of limits one may approach death but never reach it.

He then ended with Wallace Stevens's poem *Of Mere Being*, about glimpsing the beauty of existence beyond human judgment or perception, which he said, "finally sums up the entire experience."[121] Ending the performance on this recitation of Stevens' poem in its entirety, without returning to himself in Krumville or narrating any more of his experiences, Gray brought his confusion into the moment through his contingent reliance on external texts to organize and stand in for his thoughts, leaving his dilemma unresolved, or rather its resolution in the hands of his audience, quite apart from his actual autobiographical eventualities.[122]

These quotes remained in part two of the piece, in various positions and sequences, through several months of development as the key to Gray's indecision about his future. In a version performed in February of 1984, his dilemma over pursuing personal satisfaction and professional advancement versus committing himself to the cause of the survivors of the Cambodian genocide was more clearly articulated, and in that instance the books did set him decidedly on one path rather than the other: At wit's end after a near-breakdown at his friend's

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[121]

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze decor,
>
> A gold-feathered bird
> Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
> Without human feeling, a foreign song.
>
> You know then that it is not the reason
> That makes us happy or unhappy.
> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
>
> The palm stands on the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.

[122] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Part 1; 1/31/84," audiocassete, Spalding Gray Papers, C4766, Harry Ransom Center.

beach house in the Hamptons, he turned to the same books and quotes. To this list he added a

book on Sartre, which posited that the "perfect moments" Gray sought in Thailand and in

Krumville were illusions against the reality that there is nothing at all, a bourgeois fantasy of

harmony with the universe. But he countered this with his beloved quote from Freud, by way of

Marcuse, justifying narcissism as "…an inseparable connection of ego with the external world –

the oceanic feeling." "That's what I had!" Gray said, making a discovery about himself and what

his future would hold on which he ended, explaining:

> But I got to give it up and get to Hollywood, I figured, because you
> can only explore the oceanic feeling if you're independently
> wealthy and I had to start building borders, you see, because of
> what happened to Cambodia. And, you see, ignorance is bliss, and
> anyway, all thinking leads to no thinking anyway, so why not just
> stop thinking? Go to Hollywood, become a family man, I mean
> who needs knowledge? Look what happened to Oedipus. I know
> you're going to say he was a family man, but look at the family.
> Get to Hollywood, where the walls come together at perfect white
> right angles. And also I had this theory that Hollywood is the only
> place where holy men go in our world, because the concept of the
> holy man is the person who has no personality. Sri Ramakrishna
> was the last great Indian holy man and he had no character, he was
> Jesus at one minute, then he was a woman, he was dressed as a
> woman, and he was finally enlightened by a man, a naked man,
> who struck a rock between his eyes. He never had any sense of
> himself, but he never went to a psychiatrist. Now Peter Sellers, the
> actor, he was no different from Sri Ramakrishna, Peter Sellers
> never knew who he was, he said the roles were speaking through
> him. But he was unhappy because he was living in the west, but he
> went to Hollywood. So, I figure I'm leaving for Hollywood as
> soon as I get my sweaters out to Far Rockaway to the Cambodians.

In this ending, Gray was left with an unexpectedly paradoxical model in which he imagined

sacrificing his ego by going to Hollywood, where he could fade into middle class normality and

allow the roles he would get on television shows and in movies to "speak through him." This was

contrasted with the apparent self-importance that allowed him to imagine he could make a

difference simply by delivering old sweaters to Cambodian refugees who didn't have proper clothes for the winter in Far Rockaway, Queens. Though he seemed to have chosen Hollywood, he was ultimately left to wonder if there was a meaningful difference between the two choices.[123]

By the time the piece officially premiered the following month, the books had moved from the end to the beginning of part two, repositioned as an ideological prologue delivered outside the narrative. Instead of turning to the books at the end, Gray instead presented a much more detailed account of his return to the US, from Krumville to his breakdown in the Hamptons to his appearance on a radio talk show, during which he manufactured a fictional film career for himself, to Hollywood, where he went looking for an agent. After catching up with some of the Cambodian refugees in California who he had acted with in *The Killing Fields*, Gray fantasized he could help them by convincing Norman Lear to produce a sitcom like Lear's then-new show *a/k/a Pablo*, which had given a lot of Latino actors jobs. His idea was to produce a comedy about Cambodian refugees having a hard time adjusting to life in America -- a middle path, of sorts, between show business and a life of service.

Caught between the two paths in front of him, Gray described driving back from an audition in LA, fantasizing about his new, comfortable life in Hollywood, only to have traffic come to a standstill, and his guilt and sense of responsibility begin to creep in again in the form of a voice telling him to give up his bourgeois aspirations in Hollywood and go back East to live in service by helping the Cambodian refugees in Far Rockaway. But then the traffic started moving again and the voice was replaced by Allan Watts reassuring him: "Relax, Spalding, relax. Enjoy. You're in California now. What is there to feel guilty about? Relax. Enjoy. Life's a

---

[123] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Part 2; Feb 22," audiocassete, Splading Gray Papers, C4764.

party. So what if you came in at the end of it? Relax. Enjoy."[124] A salve, it would seem, for

making the apparently more self-serving careerist choice to remain in Hollywood.

By the following year, June of 1985, the books were no longer in the piece at all, though

another foundational text had been incorporated into the ending. Finding himself in the same

position in which he had ended the previous version -- stuck in traffic, wracked with guilt about

not returning to New York -- Gray recalled Celia Coplestone from *The Cocktail Party*, the TS

Eliot play that had structured his first monologue at the opening of *Nayatt School*, speaking to

her psychiatrist,

> But first I must tell
>   you
> That I should really LIKE to think there's something wrong with
>   me –
> Because, if there isn't then there's something wrong,
> Or at least, very different from what it seemed to be,
> With the world itself – and that's much more frightening!
> That would be terrible. So I'd rather believe
> There is something wrong with me, that could be put right. [125]

This was answered by the voice of Allan Watts, again letting him off the hook from figuring out

if there was something wrong with himself or with the world.

Neither of these post-premiere versions, though, ended with these external voices.

Instead, Gray turned in the end to his subconscious, concluding with a dream he had had in

Hollywood. In the dream, a boy he was babysitting for ran into a fireplace and was consumed by

flames, only to be replaced with a straw effigy of himself. Wracked with guilt, Gray wandered

out into the streets of Hollywood and found a hotel where the members of the Wooster Group

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[124] Gray, "*Swimming tto Cambodia*; Part 2; March 6, 1984," audiocassette, C4770; "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Part 1," audiocassete, C4771, Spalding Gray Ppaers.

[125] T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party*, 1 edition (New York: Harvest Books, 1964).

were staying. Ron Vawter advised him to call the police and confess, but then he found Liz

Lecompte sitting with the boy's mother by a pool. Finding himself unable to tell the true story of

the straw boy to his mother, he instead told a cover story about seeing a film adaptation of *The

Seagull* directed by Samuel Peckinpah and starring himself as the young writer Konstantin

Gavrilovich.[126] He said seeing the film had upset him because "I can't remember acting in it. All

I saw was an image with no memory attached." Indeed, with this fully narrated version Gray had

reached a point where he could present his monologue as a finished product, without requiring

any contact with its process of coming into being, a performance in which he appeared as an

effigy of Spalding Gray, always standing in for his own presence.[127]

　　　Gray's performance became more portable as it became more mediated. He no longer felt

he had to rely on responding to fixed media to generate his monologues in the moment. Rather

his performance itself could be sampled and deployed within a media economy in which

replicability and categorization were highly valued. Gray claimed in the second part of the

monologue that in the wake of his new film career David Letterman's booker, who Gray

identified as the son of a cop from Cranston, Rhode Island, was calling him up every few months

to tell him that, "David wants to know if that funny guy is still sitting behind that desk downtown

and if he could say something funny right now, right now so I can tell it to David, say something

funny…"[128] Gray finally made it onto Letterman, seemingly the height of mainstream acceptance

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[126] *The Seagull* is the play he had hoped to act in when he went to the Alley Theater in Houston in 1967, though he did not get the part. In his autobiographical novel *Impossible Vacation*, it is *The Seagull* rather than *The Cocktail Party* that his stand-in, Brewster North, deconstructs in his first monologue.

[127] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Dub 6/8/85; Part II," audiocassette, C4768, Spalding Gray Papers; Gray, *Swimming to Cambodia.*(TCG, 1986).

[128] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Dub 6/8/85; Part II," audiocassette, C4768, Spalding Gray Papers.

for a downtown artist like himself, in July of 1986, ostensibly to promote the publication of *Sex and Death to the Age 14*. In the segment, Gray and Letterman spent most of the interview trying to explain to the audience, and to each other, just what it was Gray did. Gray went so far as to pull a list of quotes comparing his performance style to that of others from his pocket.[129] These were for the most part the same quotes used to introduce Gray to book buyers on the cover and in the front material of the book, press quotes calling him a "WASP Shelly Berman," a "WASP Woody Allen," a "male Lily Tomlin," an "avant-garde Dick Cavett," "a contemporary Gulliver," and "a Chaucer or a Dickens." Letterman's favorite was, of course, "a cross…between David Letterman and Andy Warhol."[130] The point, of course, was that with the right combination of reference points Gray's heretofore uncategorizable performance experiment could be made familiar.

But when Gray returned for a second time the following spring, to promote the release of the film adaptation of *Swimming to Cambodia*, he had begun to master the art of the talk show appearance, in which his responses to Letterman's questions became thinly veiled excuses to perform sections of the monologue, verbatim, woven into the conversation in the manner that stand-up comics slip sections of their act into their answers to a talk show host's questions.[131] Consciously or not, Gray's anecdotes, their phrasing, and their delivery were becoming part of a

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[129] "07-30-1986 Letterman Riquette Hofstein, Spalding Gray, Ben E. King," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCS8jVhhlOU. Accessed 20 August 2016.

[130] Qtd. from the Village Voice, Philadelphia Inquirer, San Francisco Chronicle, New York Times, Chicago Sun-Times, and Boston Phoenix in Gray, *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, front matter.

[131] "03-04-1987 Letterman Arnold Morris, Spalding Gray," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6kUM-tJu7k. Accessed 20 August 2016.

repertoire of stories he told over and over, often using the same language, sometimes even transferring a particularly attractive turn of phrase to a different story.[132] Gray's use of intermediality had gone from a destabilizing force that always insisted on the distance of the live performance from the fixed media objects around which he improvised to a savvy use of mediation to seamlessly enmesh, and even confuse, his live performance with its fixed representation. The distinction between an iterative instance of live performance and a literary text referencing and representing that performance would continue to slowly blur over the course of Gray's career until, by the time of his death, the conceptual distance between Gray as a performer and Gray as an author became essentially non-existent.

In the form in which most people have encountered *Swimming to Cambodia*, Jonathan Demme's 1987 film version, this late-stage intermediality had chiefly one subject: the film *The Killing Fields* itself, from which the monologue sprung, and to which Gray implicitly compared his narrative project. "The bottom of the iceberg," Gray called his monologue, with the film as the tip, the "footnote to the piece."[133] Demme even cut three minutes of Roland Joffe's film into his own, first a dialogue sequence between Gray and Sam Waterston that Gray usually read from a script in the live monologue, and then a dialogueless visual sequence of the American evacuation of Penom Penh that the monologue referenced but could never represent, which Demme used as a kind of lyrical cinematic coda at the end of his film.

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[132] Gray narrated his repeated failed attempts to leave his mother and go to Provincetown one summer after college nearly identically in *Rumstick Road, Impossible Vacation,* and *Monster in a Box,* while the description of fat men getting massages looking like "200 pound beached whales" appears in both *India and After* and *Swimming to Cambodia* to describe different fat men in different places, and entrances by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh at his ashram in Pune and Gray himself onstage at the Alley Theater in Houston are both described as "a combination of Cardinal Fulton J. Sheen and Loretta Lynn on *Life is Worth Living*" in *India and After* and *Monster in a Box*, respectively.

[133] Gray began workshopping the monologue nearly a year before *The Killing Fields* was commercially released. Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; Monday Dec. 26 1983," audiocassette, C4763, Spalding Gray Papers.

Ultimately, this intermediality also found its expression between Gray's live performance and the Demme film itself. In performances immediately after the film's release, Gray would sometimes explicitly perform the parts of the monologue (predominately part two) not included in the film, completing the piece's original two-part structure, which the film had obscured.[134] And during a brief revival of the piece toward the end of his life, in 2001, Gray would more or less "cover" the film verbatim, with all of Demme's edits intact, prefacing it with fragments of his ultimately unfinished last monologue, *Life Interrupted*, about his recovery from the car accident that started him on the decline that eventually ended in his suicide. Even in Gray's own memory, the film version had come to constitute the entirety of *Swimming to Cambodia,* which his fans came to see hoping for a performance as close to the film as possible.[135]

But Demme's stripped down 85-minute film version of *Swimming to Cambodia* was very much not one and the same with the original two-part monologue. The two-part version, upon which the published version was based, expressed the idea available in all his early monologues that what the audience witnessed was Gray wrestling with the relationship between his past actions and the present act of telling. The film, on the other hand, offered Gray as an impartial observer, both innocent and insightful, responding to everything almost instantly as if in retrospect. This version of Gray could react to but not impact the experiences he had; his ability to witness and comment absolved him of personal responsibility, yet endowed him with a certain political authority. Tellingly, Demme chose to mostly include part one of the monologue, in which Gray learned, and taught, about the Cambodian genocide and humorously dished on the

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[134] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; 17 Oct 87 UC Berkeley (Wheeler Aud.) Recorded for KPFA by Richard Friedman," audiocassete, C4753, Spalding Gray Papers.

[135] Gray, "*Swimming to Cambodia*; 12/12/01; TPG," audiocassette, C4765, Spalding Gray Papers.

ins and outs of a major film shoot, and to cut part two in which Gray wrestled with his

responsibility in its aftermath. Gray's "perfect moment" swimming in the Gulf of Siam, which

allowed him to return to "normal life" in America, was the only significant material Demme

chose to import from part two.

Gray's didactic presentation, complete with maps and a retractable pointer, was actually

quite informative. Drawing, as he acknowledged in his preface to the published version, on

William Shawcross's history of the war in Cambodia, *Sideshow*, Gray was able to make that

history clear and dramatically effective.[136] As Nathaniel Rich, in his posthumous evaluation of

Gray's entire body of published work, wrote, "At eight minutes, Gray's history lesson about the

Vietnam War is easily the longest he had ever gone in a monologue without talking about

himself."[137] The material fact of the monologue is that by way of Gray's hope to supplement his

income and notoriety by taking film work, this history came across his path, and the monologue

results from Gray's efforts to make sense of that intersection for himself. However, Demme's

editing cuts out some of the more egregious moral dilemmas and ambiguities Gray confesses to

in the full performance, making him a hapless and neurotic hero-avatar for the audience, but

rendering him essentially passive and innocent in the process.[138]

Meanwhile, the excised second part of the original two-part version was characterized by

Gray wrestling with the implications of his newfound political consciousness for the choices he

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[136] William Shawcross, *Sideshow* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979).

[137] Rich, "The Mask Behind the Voice," *The New York Review of Books,* 2011.

[138] In the most obvious example, Gray's use of second-person pronouns and the present perfect tense to describe a visit to a Pat Pong brothel without admitting to having gone to one himself in the film elides the extensive description of his relationship with a Thai prostitute named Joy that appears in the book and original theatrical versions.

might make and actions he might take upon returning home, delving deeply into the tension between self-interest and public service, a dilemma that is not resolved within the piece. By contrast, the film version offered Gray's experiences as ironic commentary on the tensions between the horrors of war and the pleasures of tourism, especially when that tourism revisits those past horrors and replicates the structures that gave birth to them. This is a take with real political heft itself, but it remains one in which Gray's personal responsibility is minimized and he is implicated only as a participant-observer.

Gray's piece was originally tied up with the relationship between his self-referentiality and his relative commitment or indifference to a political project. Though these would seem unlikely poles between which to string any of Gray's previous works, the intersection with the history of American military adventures in Southeast Asia produced a genuine dilemma for Gray. It is this dual function, as a vehicle to take inventory of personal development and at the same time to report on issues of political or historical import, especially from remote locations, that went on to characterize the ways Gray's performance genre has been popularized and adapted in the nearly 30 years since the film first made its impact.

This version of the performance established a series of tropes and formal arrangements that would go one to be replicated by Gray and by the many artists who he influenced directly and indirectly. By shaping the piece for easy replication, Gray and his collaborators made possible an ongoing genre of explicit Gray "tribute" performances and still more creative output in the unacknowledged tradition of Gray's project, both in theatre and farther afield in places like public radio reporting and creative nonfiction. Nearly all of these examples take *Swimming to Cambodia* in its film version as their nearly exclusive formal, procedural, and aesthetic source.

This has arguably made Gray's performance style more influential than his relatively modest fame might otherwise suggest. Not only has the one-person show become an increasingly recognizable and mainstream form in tandem with Gray's ascendancy, but Gray has become a reference point for that act of self-referential storytelling in general. In Nathaniel Rich's recent consideration of Gray's literary output, he even credits him for a major publishing trend, "The monologues, most of which have been published, are the main precursor to what has become an enormously popular genre: confessional nonfiction by writers whose lives have been neither exemplary nor public."[139]

The outsize influence of *Swimming to Cambodia* as model and reference for Gray's creative progeny, despite the scope of his entire career as a monologist, evidences the mediatization that overtook Gray's project following his popular success. This is true for a number of reasons. First, while Gray's previous monologues were largely ironic memory pieces taking idiosyncratic form as collections of thematically linked yet fragmented anecdotes, *Swimming to Cambodia*'s thematically and narratively coherent structure could be easily summarized, packaged, and structurally emulated. Secondly, *Swimming to Cambodia* addressed topics of self-evident social and political import, which gave the work a gravity that justified its wider circulation. The trick is that once justified by the gravity of history, the form itself began to justify similar undertakings, whether more lighthearted subsequent outings by Gray, or similar work by others, which always seemed to claim to have important things to say, no matter what their topic. This genre has come to serve the valorization of individual memory as the most

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[139] Rich, "The Mask Behind the Voice."

authentic avenue to the truth, forgetting the lessons of Gray's early monologues that the act of remembering is itself always contingent upon, and subject to, the vagaries of the present.

By the time *Swimming to Cambodia* had established a replicable formal and narrative structure for Gray's monologues, his presence, in the sense which *Three Places in Rhode Island*, *India and After (America)*, *The Great Crossing*, and even the early workshops of the second part of *Swimming to Cambodia* exemplified, had become merely a notional element of its narrative structure. He needed to be there to make the structure work, to report back on his experiences and relate them to his audience in an entertaining fashion, but the coherent and repeatable story he told, and not his living presence, was what his audience, and he, was ultimately after. Gray, in his fully mediated and symbolic form, became merely another medium through which narrative content could be delivered. The presence of the Gray whose performance depended on the performance event, and whose talk was defined against the fixed media forms he read, listened to, or watched, was no longer required.

CHAPTER 2
DAVID ANTIN: TALKING TEXT AND TEXTING TALK

Introduction: *remembering recording representing*

It is 1973 and David Antin is at Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana talking about art

deformation. "Art deformation" is his term for the transformation an artist embeds in a

representational work to signal, for example, that a work is not a picture of something but rather

that it is a painting. It is the aesthetic contortion that asserts the work's art status over its

documentary or informational functions. This is relevant because Antin is composing a talk

poem even as he seems to be giving a talk. He is on the road, composing pieces before audiences

in town after town: a reading tour before there is anything to read. Back home in San Diego,

Antin will commission transcriptions of the recordings of these talks, edit those transcripts, add

to them, rearrange them on the page, collect them, write a preface to each, and publish them as

the book *talking at the boundaries* (1976). When the book appears, the Indiana talk will describe

a sequence of events – *remembering recording representing* – that will give the talk poem its

title: the remembering that he does in the course of composing the piece, the recording that

happens passively by way of the tape recorder in the room, and the representing of the talk

through typographical design.

Indiana is placeless for Antin, empty, foreign. He is trying to make sense of it. A few

years earlier he had moved away from his densely-populated home base in New York, where he

had been a member of a tight-knit community of poets on the Lower East Side, in order to live in

the suburban sun belt city of San Diego, where he had taken a job at the university. San Diego

already seemed very far from New York, and South Bend is neither of those places. In the

preface to the poem he describes spotting, from a bus window, a farmhouse sitting on the median strip of the interstate, where the highway had apparently been built around it. Antin is similarly situated, in between his homes on either coast, between writing and performing, between poetry, that most meticulously deformed use of language, and talk, supposedly its most purely pragmatic application. Antin's art is marooned in between these more clearly defined forms of linguistic traffic, a bit lost like the young man he meets on the bus who cannot tell him where his hometown is, only that his parents will meet him in Indianapolis and take him there. Poetry is Antin's Indianapolis; he is not quite sure where he is going, only that he has to go to poetry first to get there.[1]

South Bend strikes him as stuck in another time. On his cab ride to the university hotel, the driver complains about the school becoming co-educational, the long-haired kids, and the impact of the war in Vietnam. Such traditionalist complaints must have seemed a few years behind the times in 1973. Antin recalls that he had stayed at this same hotel five years earlier, in 1968, as Notre Dame's "artist and critic in residence," just as the student takeover of Columbia University was happening back home:

> i remembered sitting in the dining room
> watching it on television surrounded by tractor salesmen from
> duluth and ball bearing distributors from lansing and their girl
> friends   the men mostly middle aged big
>   and fair haired or graying and overweight   looking
> on
>   uncomprehendingly at the events unfolding on the
> screen[2]

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[1] David Antin, "remembering recording representing" *Talking at the Boundaries* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 93-118

[2] Ibid., 91.

But this uncomprehending gaze goes both ways. In the same hotel dining room he spots a family,

two parents and their college-age son, who seem to be having an intense conversation over

dinner. He spends a long time trying to read them culturally, comparing the son to the kinds of

technically-minded Jewish kids he himself went to high school with at Stuyvescent Science in

Brooklyn, but seeing the father as some sort of financially successful working-class character, a

plumber or contractor, possibly Italian. His imagination full of New York, Antin has no stock

Midwestern characters with whom to compare them. Their indecipherability fascinates him.

Only after examining them for several moments does he realize they are speaking Spanish.

This is all before his talk begins. Antin offers his account of what happened before the

talk began not as an element of the talk, but as its prologue. He is marking the talk off from what

preceded it, what led up to and explicitly impacted, but still was not yet, the talk. Like many of

Antin's early talk poems, this one is about painting, though painting seems to be a pretext for

talking about art, including the art he is making in that moment. Talk of art signals the talk *as* art.

His introduction of art deformation signals the reader to stop thinking about his story, and to

think instead about the grounds upon which his talk can be a poem, and when it becomes one.

remembering recording representing begins with a painter Antin met in Bloomington,

before arriving in South Bend, who has painted a large canvas featuring an unusual depiction of

a woman with a hunched shoulder. Antin understands that this is a "figure"—not a woman but a

representation of a woman—and that her hunched shoulder is not the hunched shoulder of a real

person, but the deformation that clarifies the figure's status as a formal element of a painting.

Articulating an argument nearly identical to that made by Clement Greenberg in his influential

essay "Modernist Painting," Antin explains that in post-war American art painting is about

painting, and if it is about something else, then it is 'literary,' which is an embarrassing thing for a painting to be.[3] A literary painting uses painting to tell a story about something else rather than referring to its own status and history as a painting. Even apparently figurative paintings like this one are usually meant to be understood as abstract paintings in disguise, the figure an aesthetic concept rather than a representational form.

But Antin asks about the woman in the painting anyway, exaggerating his bold breaking of an unwritten rule of art discourse. As he explains in the transcript of the recording of his talk:

> If some one said to you what is this painting you know
> They ask you a question about a figure in the painting they'd say
> who is that I mean what a thing to say   to a painter
>   If you said that in 1953 say   the painter would
> probably not answer at all   but this was 1973   and i'm
> brave   and the painter nervously said it's my wife[4]

Interestingly, though, by the time Antin has edited the poem for publication, he is no longer willing to cop to asking the inappropriate question, though he toys with the possibility that he might have:

> I mean "who is that woman?"   what a thing to say   if
> you said   that in 1953 the painter probably wouldnt have
> answered you at all
>   But it is 1973 and im brave   so i ask the painter "who is
> that woman?" and he answers   nervously "i like to think of
> that as my wife"   actually i didn't ask him anything of the
> sort   he volunteered kind of playfully   that he liked to think
> of the woman in the painting as his wife[5]

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[3] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art & Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 193–201.

[4] Antin, David. "remembering recording representing" transcript, Box 36, Folder 3, David Antin Papers, 1954-2006, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2-3

[5] David Antin, "remembering recording representing," *Talking at the Boundaries* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 95

Here Antin performs his own version of art deformation. What seemed in performance to be a relatively straightforward representation of a conversational exchange with the painter becomes a rather more complex interaction in which Antin proposes an apparently fictional question he could have, but did not, ask. Rhetorically, he uses this as a way to illustrate the sort of thing that one is not supposed to ask in a contemporary art conversation but which he, in analyzing the operation of art discourse, is boldly willing to entertain. The roundabout assertion seems to be that the shape of thought is representational while the shape of art is formal and abstract, and that it is precisely this tension that makes art possible.

This anecdote provides an entry into Antin's project as a whole: apparently quotidian, spontaneous, non-composed, unedited talk establishes itself as art work by entering art contexts in a deliberately uninflected manner that signals the unplanned nature of the work. Antin framed quotidian talk in this way in order to avoid taking advantage of either the formal signifiers of poetry or the aesthetic additives of performance, instead allowing his talk to merely "be" as a secondarily-expressed and passively-recorded product of his situated thinking. That document would then circulate in an idiosyncratic format, designed to signal its resistance to poetic form, which nonetheless became the thing that linked it to poetry, formally and through contextual association. The work's material form becomes the only available means for marking it off from non-art talk. Painting a representational, self-referential figure in 1973 is only ordinary if one assumes the purpose of art is to be representational; it becomes radical if all painting is fundamentally about abstraction. If the definition of poetry is to say something really well in a way which distinguishes it from ordinary speech, then offering ordinary talk containing

apparently straightforward statements as conceptually indistinguishable from poetry becomes a radical proposition about the limits and possibilities of poetry and its definitional categories.

For Antin, a figure in a painting or an utterance in a poem, as part of a lexical system, renders the work a highly codified conceptual claim about representation or language. This claim specifically separates that work from a descriptive or pictorial depiction of some concrete idea, person, or thing. In this sense, the act of painting could be freed from responsibility for looking like something or someone, or for making someone look like themselves. Painting instead becomes responsible for asserting a position about painting as a whole. Similarly, Antin was free to say any of the perfectly ordinary, shocking, or dryly intellectual things he had to say, specifically because by fashioning the talk poem as an assertion about poetry, he had freed himself from the burden to say anything in particular about anything at all.

A Culture of Capture

In 1968, after several years writing art criticism for journals such as *Art Forum, Art in America,* and *ARTnews*, and following a brief tenure as educational curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, Antin and his wife, the performance artist Eleanor Antin, relocated from their native New York to San Diego. Antin had taken a job in the art department at the University of California, first as director of the University Gallery, though he soon became a full-time professor. Shortly after this move, Antin began making and publishing *talk poems*, which have become largely responsible for his reputation as a poet. These works consist of edited transcripts of extemporaneous talks Antin gave before live audiences, presented in an unconventional textual layout designed to represent patterns of speech through a typographical

"score" and to resist the formal orthodoxies of both poetry and prose. This chapter argues that Antin's talk poetry provides a view into how disciplinary structures limit and enable what can be called a poem in context of the arts discourse and media landscape of the post-1960s American avant-garde.

In what follows, I trace the formation of Antin's talk poetry through his career. I employ original archival research to shift focus from his widely circulating published talk poems to the source performances and the processes of mediation he used to shape his literary production. In the course of that research, I have uncovered the ways that Antin's product often deliberately obscured the complexity of its development from extemporaneous talk to published text. I contextualize this within what I call a "culture of capture," in which the increasing availability of audio recording technology from mid-century onward informed a set of procedural and aesthetic approaches to voiced extemporaneity across multiple cultural contexts. These included ethnographic field recordings and oral histories, which in turn shaped concepts of literary voice in ways that influenced a turn toward actual and simulated orality in poetry, popular culture, and the emerging fields of media and communications studies. I argue that Antin's project emerged at a historical moment when voiced extemporaneity and ephemerality were seen as revolutionary alternatives to print culture, while at the same time ubiquitous recording technologies were newly available to capture and circulate those same extemporaneous and putatively ephemeral impulses.

I contextualize the eventual emergence of Antin's talk poetry project within both of the Antins' background in the New York avant-garde poetry and art scenes of the 1950s and 1960s. I argue that Antin formulated his talk genre by drawing on the interrogation of disciplinary

expectations that marked movements from minimalism to conceptualism, and on the

destabilization of authorship offered by collage aesthetics. At the same time, the history of

experimental poetics meant that even as Antin's talks resisted poetry as a disciplinary institution,

they remained consistent with the turn toward performance, voice, and conceptualism in

contemporaneous poetry movements like ethnopoetics, language poetry, and spoken word.

Antin's talk poetry parallels other contemporaneous performance genres across disciplines and

media, from stand-up comedy to feminist life performance, with which Eleanor Antin was

sometimes associated. The chapter makes clear the interdisciplinary affinities that underlie

Antin's talk poetry, despite the conceptual and pragmatic scaffolding of explicitly literary

lineages on which it had historically relied.

I then account for the ways Antin presented the development of his talk poetry genre in

his collection *talking*, which concludes with the first official talk poem, "Talking at Pomona."

The earlier works in the collection, a found text collage work and two semi-improvised domestic

collaborations with Eleanor Antin made for audio tape, suggest the spatial, temporal, relational,

and mediated sources of the talk poem format and help distinguish the aspects of his talk

performances Antin ultimately chose to highlight in formalizing the genre. By examining the

source recordings of his talk performances and comparing them to the transcripts and edited

manuscripts in his archive, I present a clear view of his editorial process for the first time. These

findings illustrate that Antin's textual interventions in preparing his manuscripts were far more

extensive than previously assumed and actually involved a great deal of re-writing, and thus

virtually re-performing, his extemporaneous talk on the page. This leads me to detail a much

more complexly mediated compositional process than Antin or his critics usually presented.

Finally, a synthesis of several accounts and the documentation of an incident in 1978 when an Antin talk performance was met with active resistance from some key members of his audience, chiefly fellow poets, brings to the fore the contentious status of Antin's talk works as poems or performances. This incident presents a moment when the two materially decoupled from one another, allowing performance, usually assigned a transitory and sacrificial role in Antin's practice, to take center stage and call into question both the status of Antin's talk performance as poetry and the status of poetry in Antin's talk performance.

By resisting the material and rhetorical limitations of disciplinary form, while attending to the media by which Antin's works took shape, it is possible to locate an interdisciplinary poetics best understood through performance, as opposed to a poetics primarily sited in its visuality or textuality. Paradoxically, this interdisciplinary poetics depends on deeply disciplinary rhetorics, institutions, and networks of circulation to distinguish and articulate itself. "Performance" in this context means not only a presentational strategy involving embodied presence, though it does mean that, but it also has the important connotation of executing a performative instance or utterance in the Austinian sense. That is, it means literally doing something through verbal utterance, in this case bringing about a poem.[6] Antin's talk poems are speech acts that establish their own status as poetry. By scaffolding itself on the structures of poetry, an ordinary occurrence of talk can avail itself of the critical and discursive apparatus of poetry, just as it can variously do with music, theatre, dance, and so on, to performatively instantiate itself within any given category.

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[6] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: Second Edition*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press, 1975).

Antin's cultural milieu of experimental poets and postmodern artists relied on a rhetoric of post- or anti-disciplinarity, which sought to disengage poetry (and theatre and dance and painting and music) from the formal, aesthetic, experiential markings of discipline. This tendency encompassed a wide range of poetic practices, from various impulses toward a return to orality in the mid-century poetries and poetics of Charles Olson, the Beats, the New York School poets, and the Black Arts Movement, to the neo-Dada performances of the Fluxus group, which deliberately spanned poetry, music, and theatre, to the primitivist attempts at total translation of the ethnopoetics movement, with which Antin was sometimes associated. While Antin was establishing his talk practice, a diverse array of poetic practices privileging performance over text were also coming into being, including the Nuyorican and poetry slam spoken word scenes, the deconstructionist impulses of Language Poetry, which challenged language's capacity to adequately signify, and the evolution within certain sectors of academia from oral interpretation of literature to performance ethnography that characterized one aspect of the development of contemporary performance studies.

These diverse impulses within and beyond the multiethnic, postwar American poetry scene were not unified in their rejection of disciplinary expectations, but they were suggestively linked through their incorporation of the critical and institutional structures that support poetry. These postwar poetries claimed to no longer aspire to highly codified academic standards of training and experience. Instead, poetry was repositioned as an arena free of rulebound literary production. The ordinary, the random, and the non-poetic could be encountered, made strange, and understood *as* poetry through a set of contextual clues that serve to defamiliarize sound and language while refitting the ordinary and the absurd to poetic discourse.

Although many purely textual practices overlapped with Antin's conceptual, procedural, or typographic innovations, the more urgent notion that the poet's position can shift from a voice that finds appropriate expression through poetry to an intelligence that understands itself as constructed by and in dialogue with poetry suggests a shared performative move amongst Antin and his contemporaries. In particular, midcentury poets re-catalyzed orality through compositional concepts such as Olson's "Projective Verse" or Allen Ginsberg's "spontaneous bop prosody," through a cultural format like the poetry reading, and through re-framed approaches to performance practice like Jackson Mac Low's or Antin's own. Orality and its mediation became the mechanism by which poetry repositioned itself in the interdisciplinary, performance-oriented landscape of post-1960s avant-garde art.

Poetry's shift toward orality did not happen in isolation. It related to a larger, gradual move across arts disciplines toward work which questioned the premise of art itself and the expectations of discipline. This constituted a rough "next phase" after the high modernist concern with the essential formal and material elements of disciplinary practices, though it also looked much farther back to the roots of the modernist avant-garde in Europe. A unifying force in the late 1950s and early 1960s was the permissive vanguardism of John Cage and his coterie of friends and students, who asserted (or were often thought to have asserted) that anything could be art so long as it was presented and attended to *as* art. This expansive view of art was itself informed by and intermingled with mischievously nihilistic anti-art tendencies brought to light by renewed interest in the pre-war European avant-garde, where Dada sound poetry and Duschampian games playfully sought to dissolve art as a category, while still relying on its terms. As Daniel Belgrad has argued, filtered through the prosperity and positivity of the post-

war era, with its Cold War rhetoric about liberty and individualism, this era constituted a newly

permissive moment for art making. Everything from the so-called "action painting" of abstract

expressionism to bebop jazz improvisation to the immersive gallery installation-performances

that came to be known as "happenings" eschewed the material and compositional assumptions of

their forms in favor of spontaneous, temporal, and embodied performances that privileged the

action of making over the plastic, textual, or sonic object that *has been made*.[7]

When, in the 1960s, the permissive and individualistic tendencies of late modernist avant-

garde art practice met, and perhaps anticipated, the utopian revolutionary spirit of the burgeoning

1960s counterculture, a new utopian possibility emerged in which it seemed both the walls

between art and life and those between artistic disciplines could be dissolved. More often than

not this dissolution was cast in terms of performance, and as has been frequently observed, took

root in this new aesthetic order as fundamentally contingent and in-between, in the spirit of the

wider 1960s resistance.[8] But disciplinary divisions turned out to be surprisingly more

impermeable than the art/life boundary. By the 1970s, generic performance categories including

performance art, improvised dance, environmental theatre — each as materially related to one

another as to the disciplinary traditions within which they operated — had taken on fairly

independent lives. Even as they pushed against the boundaries of art discourse, these genres

increasingly relied on the very disciplinary institutions and expectations they attempted to

undermine. Antin's talk poetry emerged from this moment, explicitly questioning the categories

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[7] For a full account, see: Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (University Of Chicago Press, 1999).

[8] For the turn to performance in art of this period, see: Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Duke University Press, 1993); RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, Third Edition (Thames & Hudson, 2011); Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (University Of Chicago Press, 1992).

of both art and poetry, while relying on poetry's institutional networks and social and cultural repertoire in order to distinguish Antin as a poet and to make a space within which his work was possible.

Antin therefore made performance works reflecting on the nature of art, using demotic and extemporaneous language, which critiqued the disciplinary expectations of both visual art and literature. Yet he still relied on textual representation and poetic discourse to authenticate and critically "place" his virtualized, partially fictional, text-based version of a past ephemeral performance event. The dual lives of Antin's talk poems as performance and as text require us to conceptualize performance not merely as an additive to poetics at a particular historic moment. They invite readers to understand text in terms of its past as performed action, and they ask live audiences to hear performed language in terms of an alternate present or potential future as text. The fact that the relationship of performance to text is not unique to Antin's experiment, but could be said to define the perennial tension between orality and representation in language itself suggests that, like the conceptual and minimalist artists with whom he associated, his work deforms institutional contexts, audience relationships, and the qualities of underlying media as artistic material.[9]

The membrane between spoken and written language is merely the most evident media divide Antin breached; in fact, his talk poems passed through a number of other such divides in moving from impulse to textual product, all of which I assert must be taken together as part of the piece. Talk, like any raw material, is a substance that, by being subjected to a number of

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[9] The shifting relationships during this period between artist, audience, and object are discussed from different perspectives in: Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013); Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Sayre, *The Object of Performance*.

processes, formed the work, and the work in turn expanded the possibilities of talk's function. From the internal impulses and conversations leading up to the talk event to the printed and published representation of that event on the page, all of it is, in some real way, "talk." Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs concept of "entextualization" is useful here in understanding the linked nature of all the stages of production involved in making an instance of talk into a talk poem. Bauman and Briggs define entextualization as "the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit - a *text* - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting."[10] Understood as a process of entextualization, Antin's talk performances become much more striated, sedimentary works, each accumulating to an apparent whole, made up of mediated, temporally separated, constituent parts.

   In fact, Antin conceptualized talk as secondary medium. He imagined the protean material out of which his talk poems were formed to be embodied, situated thinking, which could be made most immediately available by way of talk.[11] This schema made sense from his subjective position as author/performer, and it can inform reception of his work, but it does not attend to the material, relational, and technical means by which his embodied and situated process of thinking became a recognizable art object in an accessible, shared cultural space. From this perspective I might better define the material in terms of "magnitudes of mediation," passing through states of preparatory experience, embodied thought, relational and physically situated talk, mechanical recording and playback, transcription, editing (including adding and re-writing,) publication, and eventually circulation in first physical form and then through critical

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[10] Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (January 1, 1990): 73. (Emphasis in original.)

[11] David Antin, author interview, June 13, 2013.

and popular reputation.[12] By understanding Antin's work as a process of entextualization through distinct magnitudes of mediation, and by excavating the places where multiple layers of the process are visible at once, it is possible to understand the relationship of Antin's talk poems to his previous work, to performance, to poetic discourse, and to the evolving categories enabled by the use of media and technology to capture, distribute, and identify as art what might otherwise be thought purely ephemeral.

Antin's talk poetry also emerged in a context I am calling a *culture of capture*, which describes the cultural impact of the increasing availability of affordable and easy to use consumer recording technologies in the post-war American context. In part, this reflected a Cold War surveillance culture that enabled new attention to the potential for transmitting and preserving ephemeral speech. Hidden microphones, transistor radios, satellites, phone tapping – all necessitated a new conception of the private utterance as a quasi-public event which could be preserved, displaced, and redeployed as a tool of the security state. At the same time, some of these recording technologies were becoming important tools in the expansion of academic research fields, enabling the incorporation of new sources of "texts," and new sorts of knowledge production, such as the field recordings foundational to ethnographic and folkloric research.

Audio recordings in these contexts became not only a way to document and preserve, but a way to travel, to be present elsewhere, forming the foundation of what Marshall McLuhan would call the Global Village. Recording extended and democratized presence and brought the circumstances of the event itself to bear on the content. A phenomena as seemingly trivial as the

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[12] Thanks to Jacob Smith for the term, which I relate to Richard Schecher's description of "magnitudes of performance": Richard Schechner, "Magnitudes of Performance," *Performance Theory*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Routledge, 1988).

trade in Grateful Dead concert bootlegs in the 1970s demonstrates how profoundly the wide

availability of audio recording shifted perceptions of presence and authenticity. These recordings

provided access not only to different versions of particular compositions, or even to unrepeatable

improvisations, but to some sense of the spatial-temporal event itself. And while value in the

marketplace was attached to clarity of sound and proximity to the original recording, sentimental

value attached to the warp and hiss of individual recordings, to the materiality of the media itself

coming between the listener and the source performance.[13]

Facilitated by the availability of these multiple innovations – inexpensive access to

consumer-friendly recording and playback, and the aesthetic and intellectual developments such

mechanical means of capture allowed – the literal and metaphorical voice of the author/artist

became not only the media by which the aesthetic and informational context of the work, or even

its "style," was brought to bear, but became in itself a literal presence, which extended a remote

time and location into the work itself, sometimes incongruously.[14] As a result, recorded sound --

and recordings of extemporaneous talk in particular -- became available as a found element that

could be incorporated into the multimedia collage art works of the 1960s as decontextualized

media fragments, or could be more sincerely deployed on their own as an authenticator of

individual presence and originality.[15] It was against this backdrop that Antin was able to imagine

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[13] An anecdotal account of this relationship can be found in Nick Paumgarten, "Deadhead," *The New Yorker*, November 19, 2012.

[14] See for example: Mark McGurl, Ch. 4 "Our Phonocentrism: Finding the Voice of the (Minority) Storyteller," *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Jacob Smith, *Spoken Word Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[15] For a survey of vocal recording and its technologies, see: Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (University of California Press, 2008).

talk as an extractable poetic strategy. By relying on the passive nature of audio capture, he could

defer the presence of outside media in his performances in favor of an avowed concern with the

present, turning to the process of mediated entextualization only in retrospect.

The Antins' Art Vocabularies

Antin's talk performance proposed that the art experience could be at once identifiable as such

and detached from established sets of discursive principles or aesthetic expectations. He asserted

that it could be negotiated in the moment, without relying on genre, form, or established

discourse. This is a proposal in line with conventional understandings of the avant-garde as an

expression of the impulse to push at the aesthetic and ideological limits of art. And it is

consistent with the particular claim Antin made in the talk poem *what it means to be avant-garde*

when he equated the avant-garde with an experience of and ability to "deal with" the present. In

this piece, delivered in the context of a conference on the status of the avant-garde at the

University of Iowa in 1981, Antin responded to fellow panelist Richard Schechner, who had

delivered a version of the argument he made in his much-circulated essay "Decline and Fall of

the American Avant-Garde." In that essay, Schechner argues that the avant-garde in America is a

historically bounded period that has now come to an end.[16] Antin also responded to an earlier

incident at the Folger Library in which the literary critic Harold Bloom had apparently stormed

off the stage when Marjorie Perloff delivered a lecture about Antin and John Cage, presumably a

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[16] Richard Schechner, "The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde: Why It Happened and What We Can Do about It," *Performing Arts Journal* 5, no. 2 (1981): 48–63.

version of her book chapter, "'No More Margins': John Cage, David Antin, and the Poetry of Performance."[17]

Antin disavowed connection to either of these figures' views, one a veritable spokesman for the contemporary avant-garde, the other a skeptical voice of institutional literary criticism. Interestingly, he saw Schechner as the conservative voice, framing the avant-garde as a "tradition rather than a discourse," and Bloom as the quasi-avant-gardist with his idea of the anxiety of influence driving innovation. Antin rejected both views, and by implication the notion of the avant-garde as a fixed category. He favored a perspective that takes the avant-garde as a position from which one is able to deal with the present apart from past expectations or anticipations of the future. In the talk poem, he cites as an unlikely example the story of his uncle's sudden and unpredictable death, just when Antin had reconnected with him after many years and was planning to send his aging mother down to Florida to stay with him. It is this understanding of the avant-garde, or perhaps the avant-garde in absence of any other organizing concept, as the site of departure from the anticipated, which Antin brought with him into his performances.[18]

Further advocating the existence of an avant-garde discursive position over an avant-garde understood as a set of historically determined aesthetic categories, the demotic quality of Antin's talk performance suggests that an avant-garde art experience could be possible without the extremity, rupture, or aesthetic refusal usually associated with the historical avant-garde. Its primary stance could be alternative rather than oppositional, at least in the experiential present. However, by employing a program of familiarity rather than shock and disorientation, this

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[17] Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1981).

[18] David Antin, "what it means to be avant-garde," w*hat it means to be avant-garde* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1993), 53.

approach made Antin's attempts at reformulating the compositional strategies of poetry much more susceptible to formal assimilation into the discipline's dominant discourses. Once assimilated, the talk poems became available to de-contextualized media circulation, where qualities originally asserted as avant-garde could be either obscured or associated with other, more overtly formalist, refusals.

Antin's resistance to discipline in his situated talk philosophy disappeared first into his entertaining and relatable performances and then, more enduringly, into the institutionally coherent typographic representation on the page that defines his talk poems for most of his audience. The non-standard format of this typography makes the texts recognizable as poetry even as Antin questioned literary categories and poetic formatting in the talks themselves. This format, which apparently represents a textual score of Antin's spoken performances, ultimately uses typographic design as a means of both asserting and superseding the primacy of his original talk. The performance becomes conceptually essential, but experientially trivial and compositionally marginal. Here Antin's relationship, ideologically, biographically, and geographically, to conceptual and minimalist art is as important to understand as his grounding in oral and experimental poetries. [Fig. 2.1]

Antin worked as an art critic for the decade leading up to his move to San Diego, covering much of what is often thought of as the transition from high modernist experimentation to post-modernism. He wrote some of the earliest essays on Andy Warhol and video art, and championed the work of minimalist sculptors, with whom he was also friends, and later, certain

conceptual artists.[19] The concerns of minimalism and conceptualism also transferred to the talk

poems by way of content, since many of them engage the art conversation and make reference to

specific artists and works. But the presentations of the talks themselves also implicitly made a

minimalist proposition about poetry and performance, and staged a conceptual intervention into

the form that poetry is assumed to take. Antin was particularly sympathetic to those whose work

he felt was undervalued or misunderstood because they did not consistently conform to the

expectations of the disciplinary and ideological milieu they seemed to belong to, and did not

follow the career arc expected of artists from that context, rendering their projects not fully

coherent to critics. For example, he championed Robert Morris, who worked in dance,

minimalist sculpture, and conceptual forms, who Antin felt was often critically dismissed for a

perceived lack of focus or stylistic coherence in his career.[20]

His articulation of two distinct modernist traditions distinguished one concerned with

aesthetic sensibilities from the other, with which he identified, characterized by collage

procedure.[21] He understood his own work as the result of setting a field within which both

deliberate and chance elements could meet in self-composed collage compositions. The idea that

the contextual frame is inextricable from the performative identity of a minimalist work as art is

one of the most essential ideas he extracts from his encounters with minimalism, as he explains

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[19] Many of these essays are collected in David Antin, *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[20] David Antin, "Have Mind, Will Travel," *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). 98-122. Antin's association with Morris also brought him into contact with Yvonne Rainer, Morris's romantic partner and dance collaborator. The Antins both appeared, along with Rainer, in Morris's large-scale dance work *Check* in 1965, which shared a bill with an early version of Rainer's *Parts of Some Sextets*.

[21] "Modernism and Postmodernism: Approaching the Present in Modern American Poetry," *Radical Coherency*, 161–196.

in his later talk poem, *the structuralist*, via two works by Carl Andre.[22] Antin claimed that a

minimalist sculpture such as Andre's *Lever*, which comprised a line of bricks laid end to end

through the middle of the famous 1966 *Primary Structures* show at the Jewish Museum, derived

its status from the intersection of the claim the work was making about sculpture with

expectations provoked by the space and context in which the work appeared – Antin termed this

a collage effect. A later Andre work, meanwhile, which placed boulders around a city square in

Hartford, was rejected by the community for its lack of coherence with its surroundings, an

example of a similar impulse without an intersecting context to hold it in tension.

Explaining both the phenomenon of minimalist sculpture and, self-reflexively, his own

practice, Antin asserted that "a genre is a theater defined by the history of the performances you

remember taking place within it."[23] This put a positive, though not fundamentally different, spin

on art critic Michael Fried's contentious early critique of minimalism as "theatrical" because of

its dependence on the intersection of assertion, time, and space in order to articulate a minimalist

object's status as art.[24] As a particular kind of art, Antin's talk poetry remained rooted in

performance specifically because it required him to "do" his compositional procedure at certain

times, in certain places, employing certain contextualizing signifiers, in order for it to become

poetry, a transition dependent on the same content re-emerging in a new environment. This

situation is perhaps most succinctly evoked by the animating question that opens Antin's first

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[22] David Antin, "the structuralist," *What It Means to Be Avant-Garde* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1993), 157–207.

[23] Ibid., 158–9.

[24] Fried, *Art and Objecthood*.

book of talk poems, *talking* (1970), "if some one came up to you and started talking a poem, how would you know it was a poem."[25]

Like many art critics, and indeed many poets who worked as art critics (including John Ashbery, who handed Antin his "beat" for *Art International* in the mid-1960s), Antin was not only part of an informed press, but part of the art world's institutional infrastructure, serving briefly as educational curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston in the 1960s, and then taking up an appointment in the visual art department (not an English department) at UC San Diego in the 1970s, a time when the university served as a hub of California conceptualism, as well as a center of post-structuralist thought in the US.[26] It was this move, from the embodied, spatial, material interventions of 1960s experimentation to the increasingly ephemeral practices of 1970s conceptualism and life-based performance art, symbolized by the move from New York to California, that came to define the directions of both Antin's career, and the career of his wife, the conceptual and performance artist Eleanor Antin.[27]

While David began his talk poetry project, Eleanor worked with performance, body art, and life performance in a number of ways consistent with, and often commenting upon, the work of other California artists at the time. This reflected both the durational, emotional life performances of artists like Linda Montano, and the cool conceptual tricks of John Balderassi. Like Balderassi's, Eleanor Antin's work is marked as much by its concern with its relationship to art history as it is concerned with its immediate aesthetic impact. *Carving: A Traditional*

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[25] David Antin, *Talking* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1972).

[26] Antin took up his teaching post by way of a job as director of the University Gallery, which Allan Kaprow apparently recommended him for after Kaprow turned down the job.

[27] For an overview, see: Howard N Fox et al., *Eleanor Antin* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1999).

Sculpture, for example, documents the transformation of her body over a month of extreme dieting.[28] Though this work documents an extended body-based life performance, by referencing sculpture and the act of sculpting the piece stages a much different intervention than had it been situated as a purely life process work, or juxtaposed with media images of female beauty. In one of the more striking overlaps, Eleanor Antin's peripatetic character the King of Solano Beach, a homeless wanderer she played in full make-up, sometimes gave extemporaneous talk performances, at least one of which was recorded in a manner not unlike the early stages of her husband's talk poems, a striking "talking back" to the often off stage role she played as a character in her husbands talks.[29]

Antin's background in the art world and his move into the postmodern context of the 1970s, together with his geographical relocation to a less stratified art community, all contributed to the conditions under which it became possible for him to conceive of a *talk poetry*. As with the emphasis on procedural processes common to the contemporary performance, conceptual art, and minimalist sculpture contexts with which Antin aligned his work, the published document that concluded these procedures was as much evidence of the production process as it was an independent object. Thus Antin instrumentalized talk performance as a procedural necessity in the course of literary composition, and conceptually centered it there. The public performances

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[28] Eleanor Antin, "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture | The Art Institute of Chicago," accessed October 1, 2014, http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/144356.

[29] Eleanor Antin, "The Battle of the Bluffs," *Evidence of Movement* (Getty Center Exhibitions), audio file, 1977, accessed October 1, 2014, https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/evidence_movement/audio/index.html. (In an odd personal coincidence, this talk includes a character named "Mr. Murfin.") See also: Huey Copeland et al., *Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's "Selves,"* ed. Emily Liebert (New York: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2014).

Antin gave were performances of authorship: early drafts of an eventual literary product that would come to comprise a textual representation of that original performance event.

Or better: Antin's public performances were the works' author in and of themselves. Antin played an editorial role in the process of their realization, but his authorial presence was notional in comparison to the forces of space, time, and context. This places Antin's talk poems on a continuum with the collaged works made of found texts that characterized his earlier output as a poet in New York, when he often used the textual detritus of everyday life to compose poems that both reflected his environment and communicated his state of mind. Antin also positioned the talk poems as found collages, but found subjectively in time and space, their medium his extemporaneous response to the given conditions. In this way, Antin reified the irreducible intelligence of the occasion of performance. His published talk poems serve as monuments to their past as and in performance, and those performances became conceptual sacrifices to their future documentation on the page.

The talk poems, both as performances that anticipated their eventual life as text, and as texts generated in performance, imply the interdisciplinary and transmedial qualities common to performance and conceptual art. The view that life is comprised of found material available for hybrid aestheticization was typical of the post-war American avant-garde's concerns with temporality, appropriation, and contingency. It conjures both life performances like Linda Monatno's *Mitchell's Death* (1978), in which she chanted a litany of the events around her ex-husband's death while piercing her face with acupuncture needles, and literary transcription projects like Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* (recorded in 1951, and published in 1972) or Andy Warhol's *a, A Novel* (1968), both derived from tape recordings of extemporaneous conversation.

However, given Antin's focus on thinking over talking, on "tuning" himself to particular institutional situations, on accounting for his presence, on using his pieces as a way to work through thorny ideas, and especially on treating the tape recordings and transcriptions of his talks as early drafts of a textual virtualization of his performance yet to come, the innovations and strategies of his talk performances become most apparent by viewing his work in terms of an entire process. This process comprised the life experiences and thought processes that preceded a talk, the situated, spatial, temporal talks he delivered, how they were remembered by his audience, recorded on magnetic tape, transcribed by a third party, edited by Antin, published, circulated, and commented upon. The apparent dual nature of Antin's talk poems – as first ephemeral performances with a future as fixed text, and second as published poems distinguished by their unique process of composition – belied a more complexly networked use of media to entextualize and circulate thought and language harvested at particular situational intersections.

In the 1960s and 1970s art scene, material found or created in one context was often repurposed and reconfigured in another, usually across boundaries of media, discipline, or affiliation. Quotidian materials, including mediated everyday talk, thus became more portable and available to multiple spheres of art making and public culture. These practices came to require artists and/or their institutional interpreters (whom Antin called "art relators") to more overtly define the contextual frame within which they were operating. These external clues directed critical and spectatorial attention and choreographed audience response according to the disciplinary conversation with which the work wished to engage, rather than its material content. Video art, for example, could be understood in terms of performance, or as a dynamic pictorial frame, or placed on a gallery pedestal as a sculptural element, or read as a visualization of poetic

imagery, and so on. Ironically, these recourses to disciplinary conversations in the absence of discipline-specific practices have most frequently been spoken about as interdisciplinary, post-disciplinary, anti-disciplinary, or multi-media work, rhetorical frameworks that ignore the ways that discipline nonetheless becomes the primary signal for how a work should be read and who should be reading it.

Antin's work vivified this paradox. He claimed to only reluctantly call the work poetry because it seemed to him the least dishonest thing to put on the cover of his books, as they are neither fiction nor non-fiction. So designated, the work fell in line with, or perhaps formed, a philosophical take on poetry as a medium that gave shape to the act of thinking as a poetic form, and avoided the limited definition of poetry as a formalist literary genre.[30] Antin meant to be a poet in a way that other poets might not necessarily mean when they say they are poets, or that poetry audiences might not understand when they approach a book of poetry or a poetry reading as such.[31] Antin's talk poems undermined the very category of poetry, while relying on it to contextualize and justify the terms of their deviations from the form.

The idiosyncrasy of Antin's apparently straightforward use of performance comes into view only with poetry as its disciplinary context. In turn, poetry signaled an approach to performance that should be understood as slant, deliberately obscure, or indirect. The work lives, and insists on its ontology, as poetry that just happens to be made of the found material of everyday talk. It is specifically not a performance of everyday talk per se. Antin saw this as precisely what distinguishes him from talk performers in other mediums, such as Gray, Garrison

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[30] David Antin and Charles Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin* (New York City: Granary Books, 2002).

[31] An oft-repeated Antin dictum states: "if robert lowell is a poet i dont want to be a poet   if robert frost is a poet i dont want to be a poet   if socrates was a poet   i'll consider it," Antin, "the death of the hired man," *Radical Coherency*, 273.

Keillor, or Lenny Bruce, who honed a talk craft, wishing to be seen as virtuosic talkers.[32]

However virtuosic or entertaining Antin's talk was, he claimed that his concern was with talking

through his thinking, without regard for the external forms it took on, so long as he was

somehow making his way through what he had to say.[33] By maintaining the critical frame and

institutional background associated with poetry, Antin substituted what might otherwise be

deemed theatrical performance, storytelling, lecture, or stand-up comedy for poetry and provided

the framework through which it could still be recognized as such. John Cage had done something

almost identical in his memoir project *Indeterminacy*, but related it to music through his concern

with time and sound, despite the fact that he was undeniably also relating stories.[34] Ultimately,

Antin advanced a situation in which the experience and detritus of everyday life could substitute

for the material of art, and vice versa, leaving only the scaffolding of critical art discourse and its

various discipline-specific conversations to identify the work as art, and to differentiate the

disciplinary field into which each experiment intervened.

A Pre-History of Talk Poetry

Antin often operated in the context of the visual art world, working in a visual arts department,

publishing in art magazines, and performing at galleries and museums. However, his

performance practice only became possible in the context of a longer history of the oral

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[32] The Bruce comparison is made in: Maria Damon, "Talking Yiddish at the Boundaries," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1991): 14–29; Antin answers it in: Antin and Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin*.

[33] Antin makes this claim repeatedly: Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981); Antin and Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin*; David Antin, author interview, June 13, 2013.

[34] John Cage, "Indeterminacy," *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition* (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

performance of poetry. Antin looked to orality in formulations that embrace poetry as a narrative arm of philosophical inquiry rather than a primarily aesthetic pursuit.[35] He inherited a return to voicedness, often enabled by technology and public institutions, that accompanied poetry throughout the twentieth century, through technological circulation of poetic performance, through vocal experiments with language not possible on the page, and as a metaphorical trope for personal expression in modern lyric poetry.[36]

The earliest examples of the European Avant-garde incorporated performances of poetry that could not be fully represented on the page into its response to a rapidly globalizing and technologizing world**. Dada sound poets and Futurist playwrights and performers embodied a poetic voice, removed from the concern with address that lyricism had virtualized during the previous decades.[37] These vocal experiments detached the physical, sonic elements of language from syntactic meaning, widening the distance between speech and representations of language on the page. Turns to poetic voicedness were tied at once to embodied presence in specific performance venues, such as Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, and to the distributed presence of broadcast and communication technology, which was rapidly changing the sense of access to, and thus implication in, global affairs.[38]

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[35] David Antin, "The Beggar and the King," *Pacific Coast Philology* 30, no. 2 (1995): 143; David Antin, "Wittgenstein among the Poets," *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago Press, 2011): 305.

[36] See for example: Lesley Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to the Present* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop*, 2013.

[37] See: Carrie Noland, *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

[38] Michael Kirby, ed., *Futurist Performance* (PAJ Publications, 2001); Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); RoseLee

These avant-garde poetics also enacted an aesthetic primitivism, born at the height of Europe's commercially driven colonialism, which brought Europeans into contact with artifacts and individuals from non-Western cultures. Among vanguardist European artists, these encounters evoked a romantic notion of primal expressivity in the cultural forms they came to associate, through limited contact and naïve conjecture, with cultures that did not manifest in the same ways as European cultures did. These new poetic forms became entwined with a sense of rebellion against European rationalist aesthetics and the sinister political projects with which those aesthetics, come wartime, became entwined. Spontaneous, embodied, non-syntactical language seemed to tap into this primal expressivity and make poetic voice newly available and portable again. No longer was poetry only about crafting discrete literary objects meant to speak for themselves. The performance poetry of the 20th century's first decades also sought unique and specific sonic and linguistic experiences that marked time and place in a distinct and unified way. This performed poetry simultaneously resisted the dominant means of reproduction, newspapers and printing presses, seeing them as fodder for a corrupt and manipulateable political conversation, while taking advantage of the capacity for new media formats to carry a performance beyond its origin. Even as poetry performance detached itself from the page, the mediatization of voice remained tied to and imprinted with the individuated identity of the speaker and the conditions of utterance, embedding authorial expressivity in the mediated object

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Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*; Steve McCafferey, "Voice in Extremis," *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein, ed. (Oxford University Press, 1998), 162.

in such a way that the performance of the poem became in many cases inextricable from the poem itself.[39]

From these imagined aesthetic origins, 20th century poetry returned again and again to representations of the voice on the page and to voice as a metaphor for a personal poetics.[40] In the context of the post-war American avant-garde at mid-century, an oral poetics emerged in parallel to the improvisatory impulses of bebop jazz and abstract expressionist painting, as well as to the influential approaches to interdisciplinarity and procedural indeterminacy established by John Cage.[41] These cultural tendencies asserted an independence from the strictures of disciplinary traditions or commercial concerns. They eschewed both the compositional aesthetics broadly associated with craft and the requirement for self-justifying meaning and communicative content within the work in favor of various interpretations of "pure" expression or "pure" formalism, supported but not hindered by disciplinary training.

By the late 1950s, the move to orality in poetry was widely associated with the Beat Poets, encompassing a range of literary performance strategies including Allen Ginsberg's live experiments with the compositional possibilities of the poetry reading and Jack Kerouac's various transcription projects, actual and virtual. Ginsberg not only used ordinary parlance interspersed with erudite language in his poetry, but his composition process often depended on performances of in-process poems that could be shaped over time by audience response. Of particular relevance to Antin's process, Ginsberg's collection *The Fall of America: Poems of*

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[39] See for example: Steve McCaffery, "Voice in Extremis"; "Cacophony, Abstraction, and Potentiatlity: The Fate of the Dada sound Poem," Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin, *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound* (University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[40] Noland, *Poetry at Stake*; Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry*.

[41] Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*.

These States 1965-1971, originally published in 1973, included poems drafted verbally using a portable recorder while he was traveling back and forth across the country.[42] These frequently incorporated extemporaneous observations of his environment, musings on the political climate of the country during the Vietnam War, and internal reveries about his friends, intimate encounters, and plans for the future. Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*, on the other hand, while also built on extemporaneous composition using a voice recorder, transferred the authorial act from speaking to transcription. The book includes Kerouac's capture of Neal Cassidy's chatter in literary form. Kerouac transcribed tapes of several long conversations between the two of them and then used the format of that transcription to write a virtualized extension of the conversation, which had never occurred, much as Antin would later add material to talk poems in the style of his transcribed speech.[43]

Perhaps most iconically, Ginsberg famously referred to Kerouac's approach to writing as "spontaneous bop prosody," the improvisational, drug-fueled act of composition by typewriter that mimicked jazz improvisation and produced *On the Road,* among other works.[44] The mythology surrounding Kerouac's compositional style in particular, and the literary and arts context associated with the Beats in general, contributed to a cultural suspicion of overly fussy craft or revision as an intellectualized concealment of primal impulses that could best be accessed through spontaneous and unexamined free expression. This notion of a temporal and

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[42] Allen Ginsberg, *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965-1971* (San Francisco, Calif: City Lights Publishers, 2001).

[43] Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, Reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Bernstein, *Close Listening*.

[44] Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 195.

embodied performance of composition, whether spoken, scrawled, or typed, has become deeply

linked with the era.

Though the Beats set the stage for an embodied, spontaneous, oral poetry to become one

of the aesthetic hallmarks of the 1960s counterculture as a whole, bodily presence and

composition were even more influentially introduced to most poets by Charles Olson's

explanation of poetic composition by field, "Projective Verse," which proposed a somatically

aware poetics based on the breath rather than the line, which could be scored or recorded through

typographical notation.[45] Between Olson's veneration of typing's capacity to accurately

represent speech and Ginsberg's characterization of Kerouac's typing, an image emerges of the

typewriter as a prototypical machine for the entextualization of temporal, embodied material,

what Walter Ong calls a technologically enabled "secondary orality" and Marshal McLuhan

suggests as a key link in his "extensions of man."[46] This constituted an important step toward the

kind of technological recording of spontaneously composed language that would become

available to capture by increasingly passive means at higher levels of fidelity as the century wore

on. It also began to establish a kind of standardized mechanism for the representation of spoken

language on the page. For Olson this was mostly notional, connecting the didactic volubility of

his pedagogical methods to the virtual embodiment of his poetry composition technique.[47]

Both became essential to Antin's eventual compositional process of project.

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[45] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse." *Selected Writings* (New Directions Publishing, 1997), 15-30.

[46] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 123-129; Marshall McLuhan, Ch. 26 "The Typewriter: Into the Age of the Iron Whim," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 258-264.

[47] Alan Golding, "From Pound to Olson: The Avant-Garde Poet as Pedagogue," *Journal of Modern Literature* 34, no. 1 (2010): 86–106, doi:10.2979/jml.2010.34.1.86.

Antin belonged to a generation that followed immediately upon these aesthetic and procedural developments, or what Daniel Belgrad calls a midcentury "culture of spontaneity."[48] He emerged as a literary figure on the Lower East Side poetry scene of the 1960s, where he participated in regular readings, helped run a collectively owned bookshop, and edited and published in independent journals and magazines. These publications were produced quickly and cheaply, and circulated extremely locally, often at the same readings where the pieces they contained had been introduced. As Daniel Kane argues in his study of this milieu, *All Poets Welcome*, the impact of performing a poem in this context could be as strong or stronger than publishing one, and the effects of publication often had the immediacy of performance.[49]

The poetry Antin published during this period often incorporated found materials and borrowed structures that incorporated fragments of his physical and social environment. These early poems reflect an approach consistent with his past as a translator of technical manuals and a graduate student in linguistics, taking language as a ready made and malleable raw material, always in a state of flux. In a note appended to the third section of his multi-part poem, "The Black Plague", a rearrangement of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, he wrote: "About the words, nobody owns them – not Wittgenstein, or the translator, or me – and anyone who wants them is welcome to use them."[50] This view of poetry as the arrangement of found language, whether its spatial rearrangement or sequential re-ordering, extended through most of Antin's poems of the 1960s.

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[48] Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*.

[49] Daniel Kane, "Ch. 2: Oral Poetics on the Lower East Side," *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s,* (University of California Press, 2003), 27-56.

[50] David Antin, *Definitions* (New York: Caterpillar Press, 1967), 38.

Context and typographic arrangement proved key to these projects. The title poem of his 1968 book, *code of flag behavior*, comprised a setting of the military instructions for handling the American flag. Antin contributed nothing to the text except spacing and lineation, but his textual intervention, coupled with the context of the Vietnam War, conveyed a clear political commentary and bestowed an elegiac quality on the text. Antin also anticipated elements of the talk poem's typographic layout in these earlier pieces, including the use of lowercase type and the opening of spaces within the line in place of punctuation to break syntax and to suggest alternate readings through these exaggerated caesurae.[51]

Antin's Lower East Side poetry coterie in the mid-1960s, sometimes referred to as the second generation New York School, continued to push poetry further into intermedial territory, including performance, visual and plastic arts, and media technologies, while still remaining tied to a collective identity and a social and professional network as poets. Their self-designation as poets both specified the tradition within which they were intervening, and kept their scene somewhat, though not entirely, distinct from the similar experimentation occurring amongst the dance, music, theater, and visual artists with whom they sometimes collaborated.[52] This larger milieu included a number of performance-oriented poets, such as Jackson Mac Low, who embodied a discipline-resistant poetics through performance in art and music contexts, and who also crossed into quasi-theatrical performance events like the Happenings and those put on by the artists associated with Fluxus.

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[51] David Antin, *Code of Flag Behavior* (Black Sparrow Press, 1968).

[52] For an account of this wider scene, see: Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Duke University Press, 1993).

Early on, a group of predominantly African-American poets associated with the journal

Umbra also circulated in close proximity to Antin's majority white scene on the Lower East

Side.[53] Many of the *Umbra* poets became associated with the Black Arts Movement and moved

during this period from a nominally integrated downtown scene to a politically and aesthetically

oppositional position uptown, far from the white avant-garde. In this geographical and

ideological separation, the eventual polarized fate of oral performance of poetry became visible.

In this configuration, a tendency toward orality in the poetry coming out of communities of color

came to be seen as authentic, nostalgic, and primarily expressive, while orality in the white

avant-garde, even when it contained highly personal elements, tended to be seen in terms of a

purely conceptual intervention into poetry as a form, driven by an intellectual rather than an

emotional impulse.[54]

In fact, as the language and conceptual poetries that predominated in New York

following Antin's departure embraced performance, the shift was justified as both an alternative

to the assumptions about poetry imposed by the page and as a depersonalizing force, which

substituted the material presence of the poet's voice and body for the affective revelation of her

"soul." This was in contradistinction to the tropes of un-crafted direct emotional expression that

were attached to the performances of artists of color at the same time. This divide remained

when, in the late 1970s, after the dissolution of the Black Arts Movements into other political

and artistic avant-gardes, a more diverse group inclusive of black and Latino poets found their

activities centered again on the Lower East Side, just a few blocks from the seat of the Language

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[53] Writers affiliated with *Umbra* included Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, Tom Dent, Lorenzo Thomas, and Ishmael Reed. Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (University of California Press, 2003), 79–90.

[54] Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance*; Wheeler, *Voicing American Poetry*.

Poetry movement at St. Marks in the Bowery. The Nuyorican spoken word scene straddled the

radical political populism of the Black Arts poets and the performative experimentations of the

downtown avant-garde, but it is rarely spoken of in context of the formal innovations it shares

with the latter, and is instead celebrated for its political populism and community

empowerment.[55] Positive values, to be sure, but ones that too often limited the horizons of

possibility for artists of color to be seen as formal innovators by writing them out of a history

that has been retroactively whitewashed.

This turn to orality across poetry scenes and genres owed a great deal to the presence of

media technologies, avenues of media circulation, and the capacity for passive recording, which

together strengthened the reputational pull of ephemeral and extemporaneous impulses of all

sorts. Jazz improvisation, for example, could only become a respected cultural form through a

disproportionate valuing of liveness, paradoxically enabled by its reproduction in recorded

media. Even something with a more traditionally mediated product like abstract expressionist

painting could not really be separated from the mass media coverage of a figure like Jackson

Pollack in action, even as the canvas itself becomes a conceptually passive recording device for

Pollack's movements.[56] The paralell sense of the recordability of talk and, in turn, a poetics of

captured talk as somehow more authentic, more purely poetic, than literary forms composed on

the page within the recognizable strictures of poetry, made way for the voiced, lived, and

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[55] Daniel Kane opens the door to some of the connections between the Nuyorican scene and The Poetry Project at St. Mark's in his epilogue. Kane, "Epilogue: Bob Holman, The Poetry Project, and the Nuyorican Poets Café," *All Poets Welcome*, 203–8.

[56] See: T. J. Clark, "Ch 7: In Defense of Abstract Expressionism," *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 371–404.

recorded, rather than written, poetry that helped to define American avant-garde performance at mid-century.

These same conditions contributed to the emergence of a field of media studies and information theory that could interrogate and respond to the increasingly mediatized culture. By the time Antin began publishing poetry in the 1960s, concerns with the entwined nature of technology and information had exerted a profound influence on vanguard art practices. In some ways, Antin's talk performances reverse engineer Marshall McLuhan's "extensions of man." If, as McLuhan argues, media technology extends the expressive tendencies of humanity, then, as Walter Ong, building on McLuhan, suggests, it stands to reason that pre-modern expressive tendencies such as orality could be re-centralized as a cultural form in a media-saturated culture of capture. The technological mechanisms of this are first the audio recorder, capable of capturing ephemeral talk on site, then the means of transcription – typewriter, Dictaphone, etc. – and finally the mechanisms of publishing itself, typesetting, offset printing and so on. At some point the source of production and the tool of mediation become confused. McLuhan and Ong imagine these newly available technologies as a set of mechanisms that endow the immediacy of speech with the permanence of text, and which thus avoid the intuitive assumption that impermanence is in fact talk's most salient feature.[57]

Though the mediatized shift toward spoken language as concrete material had an immediate impact on art practices at mid-century, it was in fact non-art contexts that drove the concern with the embodied aesthetics of talk performance. These included cultural anthropology, folklore, musicology, and other ethnographic pursuits wherein the authentic subjectivity of the

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[57] McLuhan, "Ch. 18: The Printed Word: Architect of Nationalism," *Understanding Media*, 155-162; Ong, "Post-Typography: Elecetronics," *Orality and Literacy*, 135-138.

indigenous informant is not purely syntactical, but is also located in the parts of the voice not available to language alone. These social scientific insights are at the root of an understanding of ephemeral and everyday talk as capturable, valuable, and nuanced beyond the words' literal meaning. In the social sciences, recorded voices proved not only a convenient way to collect more data more quickly, but the recordings themselves were seen as essential to an understanding of the subjects and their contexts. Field researchers could *hear* something on those recordings beyond or beneath what the informants were trying to say, in dialects and accents, idiosyncratic phrasing and delivery, and environmental noise.[58]

As technology made live talk increasingly available as a mode of composition, delivery, and circulation within the academy, it also entered the toolbox of the developing counter-cultural project of the 1960s. As with previous avant-gardes, almost all of which were technologically enabled, the experimental artists of the 1960s paradoxically privileged a neo-primitivist ethos of immediacy and authentic expression (achieved in part with the aid of consumer broadcast and recording technologies) over a composed, replicable product like a novel, play, or symphony. This anti-commercial impulse sought to stake out non-commodifiable art space, to cast suspicion on the traditions of print culture and formal literary criticism, and to circumvent institutional tastemakers, in part through the dynamic independent nature of live performance and improvisation.

While this shift had begun in the 1950s as a series of exercises in aesthetic autonomy, given force in no small part through ideological connections with Cold War American ideas of

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[58] Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

freedom, it was to some extent re-politicized in the performance context by new formal approaches like the immersive environmental performances known as Happenings or the occurrence of spoken language and quotidian movement in the early performances of the Judson Dance Theater. Each tended to see human bodies as both compositional material and as highly charged actors in a political sphere defined by the art space. Found images, text fragments, and mass media technologies were often incorporated into these performances to play the role of the shallow, generic, commercial environment the work was ideologically and structurally pushing back against. At the same time, some of those technologies, in the hands of the artists, also became the mechanisms by which the work was formulated and made available as art. That is, media cast as an intrusive and immobile external presence became the figure against which the necessity of extemporaneity could be asserted, while concealed technologies of passive media capture allowed the centralization of extemporaneity within the work.

The aesthetics of the resulting passive documentation, as it came to circulate, often suggested the artist was not implicated in or concerned with the packaging and display of their work, despite the fact that the documentation frequently became the only thing that allowed the work to circulate beyond the live event. Key to the aesthetics that attended the circulation of such documentary material was its informal arrangement, fragmentary and explicitly incomplete representations of live performance and its process, and some sort of metacommentary, in text and/or design, on the inherent limitations of the presentational context and the essential irretrievability of the original event.[60] And despite the thickly mediated support structure that made extemporaneous talk portable, talk itself increasingly laid claim to an honest, non-illusory,

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[60] For example, the popularity of the artist's notebook or scrapbook as a publication format, see: Yvonne Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer : Work 1961 - 73* (Press of he Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974).

and unmediated presentational style that purported to resist the commercialism and impersonal distance of mass media reproduction.

Yet, in much video and sound art of the 1970s and after, and in some live performances, recordings of talk (found, captured, constructed) became a raw sonic material that could be spliced and overlaid with other sounds, or displaced and resituated in an incongruous context as a dynamic collage element. This was the moment when "multimedia" started conjuring images of TV screens, synthesizers, and other mechanisms for capture, playback, and manipulation of the human voice and other sounds. At the same time, recording technologies were becoming as cheaply and easily available as the mimeograph machine, a condition that made the circulation of the human voice arguably more readily available than publishing the same content as text. Once literary art did not have to be text-bound to circulate, the idea of a talk performance genre attending literary production became, in multiple locations more or less simultaneously, possible and productive.

Ethnopoetics, for one, emerged alongside the storied formation of performance studies and performance ethnography from lineages in theatre studies, anthropology, and oral interpretation. Combining the concerns of anthropology and poetics, ethnopoetics asked where the voiced performance ends and the text begins, and endeavored to resituate oral and communal poetries from across cultural contexts within a broader literary history. The new intellectual community that became invested in the hybrid field -- made up of poets, literary scholars, performance scholars, anthropologists, linguists, theorists, and others -- encoded a set of textual and performance practices to inform translation and presentation, and formed a network of

circulation from within its ranks.[61] Ethnopoetic works pushed at the edges of canons and

authorship by proposing the act of gathering, translating or transcribing, and collecting, over and

above the initial compositional event, where one existed, as integral to and constitutive of poetic

creation, categorization, and contextualization.[62]

In this view, not only is found poetry possible, but it is the act of finding itself that makes

poetry possible. In this regard, the relatively bloodless conceptual poetics of late, with Kenneth

Goldsmith as the prime example, advocating copy and paste as the dominant poetic practice of

the 21st century, is really only different in tone from the primitivism of ethnopoetics or the

contextual fetishism of performance ethnography.[63] These practices, which tend to view one

another quite correctly as far apart along racial, political, and philosophical lines, are all

inheritors of the culture of capture in which found language is appropriated or copied through

transcription, collage, cut and paste, or other forms of entextualization, to make a literary product

where there was previously only talk. Counterintuitively, an example often dismissed by many of

these groups, slam poetry, actually adheres more closely to traditional models of literary

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[61] For accounts of the institutional history of Performance Studies: *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*, eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2005); Marvin A. Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2004); Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies an Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2006); for reconsiderations of this history: James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal, *The Rise of Performance Studies: Rethinking Richard Schechner's Broad Spectrum* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Shannon Jackson, *Professing Performance: Theatre in the Academy from Philology to Performativity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); for parallels with ethnopoetics see the proceedings of the first international symposium in *Alcheringa*, New Series, 1976, Vol. 2 No. 2 (Special Issue), *Alcheringa* Archive accessed October 2 2014, http://ethnopoetics.com/9/9.html.

[62] See for example Rothenberg's anthologies: Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, (Albuquerque: Univ of New Mexico Pr, 1991).

[63] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

production, and relies on a sort of virtual extemporaneity to re-enliven, or reverse transcribe, a textually composed piece through memorization and dynamic interpretation in performance.

Though Antin specifically wanted to distance himself from the sense that he was driven by passion or relied on inspiration in the moment, insisting that he generally knew what he wanted to say just not how he was going to say it, he was also uniquely using the instance of talk as the occasion for composition in a way that these earlier and contemporaneous examples of oral poetries did not. Even as his subsequent moves, particularly the virtualization of his performance on the page, drew on the repertoire of previous poetic practices and the approaches introduced in non-art communication and information theory, his talk poems were nonetheless unique in their simultaneous coordination of speech and authorial sanction. In addition to the attempts at comprehensive reconstructions of anthropologically collected source material that characterized the ethnopoetics movement, with which Antin did not identify but was sometimes associated, by the time he was developing his talk poetics in San Diego in the 1970s, similar circumstances were giving birth in the downtown New York poetry scene to the linguistic deconstructions that would characterize language poetry, the practitioners of which Antin was in conversation with, and sometimes at odds.

Language poetry leaned into the paradoxical relationship between spoken and written language, articulating both uniquely vocal poetic modes that could only be realized in performance, and inherently textual poems that resisted being performed. By accentuating that paradox language poetry defined a space in which talk and the textual representation of language began to disambiguate and define distinct spheres, while text and spoken language nonetheless continued to reference one another, sometimes in uncanny ways. Ethnopoetics, meanwhile,

sought to apply a similar insight about the conventional relationship between spoken and written language to an expanded view of what can constitute poetry. This expanded category swept up temporality, rhythm, intonation, polyvocality, and general patterning, as well as culturally relevant sounds and terms that signified non-syntactical original meaning, into a "total" translation of the found poetry that includes its spatial, temporal, sonic, and relational situation. This approach locates poetry in chants, songs and other oral traditions across cultures, suggesting that modern Western text centrism makes only a very small swath of poetry available.[64] This development, like Richard Schechner's more or less contemporaneous conversation with Victor Turner around the founding of performance studies, sprang from a conversation between poet Jerome Rothenberg's deep imagist impulse to see language in material rather than symbolic terms and anthropologist Dennis Tedlock's supposition that the spoken and performed language of his subjects carried more than syntactical information.[65]

While these movements were closely associated with the experimental vanguard, many of their same features were also evident in other popular, or at least populist, talk performance genres that were being codified around the same time. Antin, perhaps more even than Spalding Gray, can be seen as part of a certain loquacious tradition in postwar American popular culture that is probably most identified with the term "talk," this tradition includes mid-century radio

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[64] See the anthologies: Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred, Third Edition: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*, 3rd edition (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Jerome Rothenberg, *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas*, 3rd edition (Barrytown, N.Y: Barrytown/Station Hill Press, 2014).

[65] Presentations on the question "What is Ethnopoetics?" were given by poets and scholars, including Rothenberg, Tedlock, Antin, and Schechner, at the first ethnopoetics symposium hosted by the Center for 20th Century Studies of the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee in April of 1975, and documented for publication in *Alcheringa*, Rothenberg's and Tedlock's journal of ethnopoetics, in 1976: *Alcheringa*, New Series, 1976, Vol. 2 No. 2 (Special Issue).

performances like those of Jean Shepherd, whose extemporaneous on-air storytelling McLuhan referred to as "a new kind of novel,"[66] and Ken Nordine, who took on the Beats' comparison between writing and jazz improvisation with his bebop inspired "Word Jazz." Later still, Joe Frank and Garrison Keillor, with very different aesthetic sensibilities, put popular and idiosyncratic spins on the public radio monologue, culminating with Ira Glass's influential *This American Life*, a show that largely re-set the expectations of what radio talk should sound like – conversational, off the cuff, inquisitive, and curious rather than rehearsed, formal, and authoritative. Similarly, the increasingly monologic nature of stand-up comedy, which moved from gags or jokes toward quasi-theatrical sustained performances starting in the 1950s and 60s with figures like Lenny Bruce, Bob Newhart, Woody Allen, and Dick Gregory, was made possible by radio, television, and LP record albums, which allowed comics to play to a mass audience rather than strictly to the room in a certain nightclub, and to develop routines that did not rely only on immediate punchlines, but allowed comedians to build familiar personae over time that could be called on and referenced intertextually in performance.[67]

These popular instances of talk performance manifested largely as para-literary formats proposing that performance, in this case live talk, not only added something to, but was also inextricably entwined with, the act of composition and the circumstance of delivery. As a result, such instances of talk performance have tended to be categorized under performance or media rubrics, rather than as literature, despite being made from the same linguistic stuff. At the same time, though, they were also implicitly compared favorably with the mastery of language and

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[66] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 265.

[67] Will Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Wayne State University Press, 1997); Smith, *Spoken Word Postwar American Phonograph Cultures*.

narrative control associated with literary authorship. While Jean Shepherd and Garrison Keillor were identified explicitly as media performers of a type newly possible in the mid to late 20th century, the greatest compliment one could pay to their artistry was still nonetheless to compare it to the craft evident in a novel. The accolades and virtuosic reputations granted these artists were based in part on their ability to spontaneously produce something approximating a strategically composed work of literature. At the same time, literary institutions – publishing, academia, mainstream criticism - tended to reject extemporaneous and mediated approaches particularly for their spontaneity and, perhaps even more significantly, for their participation in a new, "cool" media ecology that threatened the "hot" literary one by valorizing immediacy and presence over strategic design and timeless universality.[68]

Though Antin positioned himself professionally in a poetry lineage, he claimed relative indifference to the designation, except in the expanded sense suggested by his frequently reiterated hedge that he would agree to be a poet only if Socrates could be said to be one too.[69] His decision to publish his work as poetry and to circulate himself as a poet, then, relied on his use of rhetorical, associational, and interpersonal links external to his work in order to establish and maintain his identity as a poet. In turn, that identity positioned his talk practice within the realm of literary, rather than performance, art, even before the process of entextualization that lead eventually to his published talk poems had formally begun. What constituted the talk poems as such was not only a hope that his audiences attend to his performances conceptually as poetry, but that they understand experientially the kinds of associations and juxtapositions by which a

[68] McLuhan,"Ch. 2" Media Hot and Cold," *Understanding Media*, 36-45.

[69] David Antin,"the death of the hired man," *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 273.

work becomes poetic, as opposed to narrative in a traditional sense, illustrative, or intentionally entertaining. Although Antin was a performer, his framing of the talk poems distanced his practice from performance traditions, both those centered in dramatic text and those concerned with the body as instrument, even as he remained conceptually preoccupied with those most theatrical issues of time and presence throughout his career. Though the elements and relationships of theatrical performance – embodied speech, spectatorship -- were structurally embedded in his talk poems, his work explicitly resisted the logic of theatricality, with its focus on the centrality of the live event as final product, in favor of its afterlife on the page.

Antin's talks conformed to none of the expected formal signifiers poetry engages, save their construction in language and their concern with address. Instead, they enacted an estranging effect on talk itself, severing it from its ordinary uses and pointing to the strangeness of its appropriated life as poetry. As such, it became also a kind of ethnopoetic operation in which Antin made himself both primitive performer engaged in para-poetic utterance, and academic translator capturing those context-dependent, ritualized utterances from the field collection site of the performance, and then rendering them in a form in which they could circulate and be understood as poetry. By using his own talk as found material, Antin made an important conceptual intervention into poetry itself and its definition.

This coincided with the advent of conceptualism as an approach to art more broadly, a development with which Antin allied himself from the very start of his talk practice in the first talk poem, *Talking at Pomona*, in which he evaluated the propositions of various conceptual art works as part of his talk about the valuation of art. To a large extent he also anticipated the eventual development of conceptualism in poetry, which extended language poetry's interest in

idiosyncratic form to work focused on compositional procedure, specific intellectual processes, and the spatial/temporal situation of the poet, over and above the linguistic content of the product. In recent years, conceptual poetry has come under fire for its depersonalized and often depoliticized approach to appropriating and manipulating language, especially where white poets have seen their positions in relation to politically and racially volatile material as "neutral," a perennial problem encountered in demographically white avant-gardes.[70] Though considerably more nuanced and complex than some of this work, simply because of its content-rich form if nothing else, Antin's talk poems can justifiably be subject to similar criticisms, most frequently and strikingly in his tendency to employ physically or mentally ill women as illustrative figures in his discussion of abstract concepts. Antin's blindness to his own position in making use of these examples, especially in a form which privileges only his voice, is one of the more distasteful elements of his project.

In contrast to conceptualism's deadpan approach, contemporary slam or spoken word poetry has tended to emphasize personal content, even when overtly political, as well as elements unique to performance like rhythm and affect. As a populist take on both language poetry's epi-syntactical interest in rhythm and delivery and ethnopoetics' concern with neo-primitivist total poetry that resists the logic of the page, slam has often been overlooked or, worse, dismissed as a pandering degradation of the form – a popularity contest masquerading as poetry.[71] Though Antin could certainly be subject to some of these same suspicions of performance-based work,

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[70] Alec Wilkinson, "The Poet Who Went Too Far," *The New Yorker*, September 28 2015, accessed September 25, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/05/something-borrowed-wilkinson; Kim Calder, "The Denunciation of Vanessa Place," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 14 2015, accessed September 25, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-denunciation-of-vanessa-place/.

[71] Harold Bloom reliably called it "the death of art." "The Man in the Back Row Has a Question VI," *Paris Review* 154 (spring 2000): 379.

his long history of association with bona fide modernist poetry and its institutions, his "unmarked" status as a straight white male, and his rhetorical positioning of his talk poetry within a highbrow art and literature lineage through the talk poems themselves and their venues, have kept his work at a distance from contemporaneous spoken word. Daniel Kane does some useful work in opening up the possible connections – historical, geographic, and aesthetic – between the language poets at St Marks Church in the Bowery and the Nuyorican Poets Café, where a populist, diverse, performance poetry scene was emerging, but there is a ways to go in understanding and appreciating those comparisons.[72]

Amidst this complex lineage of experimental and populist oral poetries, Antin's work might be said, curiously, to have been both more formally experimental and more narratively accessible than many of his contemporaries. Even the more fluidly textual and extemporaneous work of an interdisciplinary artist like Antin's contemporary Cecilia Vicuña, whose work spans performance, poetry, music, fiber arts, installation, and bookmaking, and suggests even more expansive possibilities than Antin was able to engage in his career, still has not integrated the process of entextualization native to Antin's practice. Her performances include improvisational singing or chanting in relation to, but not determined by, her poetry on the page. Vicuña's practice attends to the location of her performance and the spontaneity she is able to realize there more explicitly than Antin's lecture-like monologues. Yet it is worth pointing out that, unlike my understanding of Antin's talk poetry as comprising a whole system of entextualization, Vicuña's more expansive extemporaneous spoken and sung poetry performances only publicly become text in the editorial hands of another. Poet Rose Alcalá, serving as editor and translator,

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[72] Kane, "Epilogue: Bob Holman, the Poetry Project, and the Nutorican Poets Café," *All Poets Welcome*, 203-208.

assembled *Spit Temple* in 2012, the first collection of typeset transcripts of Vicuña's improvised performances, which she had been doing for decades. Up until then, her published and performed poetry had remained interrelated, but distinct. Though her performances are experientially quite unique, as translated by Alcalá on the page they appear not unlike Antin's talk poems.[73]

Considering the embodied, sonic poetry performances that preceded and emerged alongside Antin's talk poetry, in what follows I would like to resist Antin's resistance to identifying his work with performance as a category. Antin tended to see the talk performances upon which his poetry depended as a notional component of the work overall, only procedurally essential to producing the talk poems. But what can be made of Antin's performance if one were to assume that it does matter to an understanding of his talk poetry, and that it does have something to do with theatre and performance as fields of artistic activity distinct from literature?

I mean to recuperate an understanding of Antin's talk poems as audienced performances in and of themselves, with an ambiguous relationship to their future as text. As the broad pre-history of talk poetry I have traced here suggests, the possibility of viewing an Antin talk poem as primarily a performance event documented through his textual practice, or as a literary form with a history in performance, while both equally plausible, each leave out what made the talk poem formulation unique. That is, the talk poem is a rhetorically and technologically enabled, sustained process in which each procedural stage both uses the material generated in the previous stage, and anticipates the stages to come. At the same time, I have found that Antin was also continuously revising the material his performances generated, so that each stage of the process not only determined the subsequent stages, but those later stages could also inform the redressal

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[73] Cecilia Vicuna, *Spit Temple* (Brooklyn, NY; Berkeley, CA: Ugly Duckling Press, 2012).

of his source material. This meant that the chain of connection was more conceptually than practically important, despite the fact that procedural process was kept rhetorically at the center of the work.

***Talking* before "Talking at Pomona"**

Antin's talk poetry process was defined by a sequence that began with his anticipatory development of the performances through planning and conversation (with his wife Eleanor in particular), followed by the compositional performance at the time and place specified, and the passive recording of that performance by means of audio capture. The audio recording was, of course, constrained sensorially, spatially, and temporally by the limits of the recording technology and the subjective human intervention involved in placing the recorder and turning it off and on, which ultimately framed the piece. This was followed by the playback and transcription of the recording, including the interpretive intervention of the transcriptionist, who filtered out non-linguistic sound and language not uttered by Antin, as well as deciphering wording, deciding when to include errors, stutters, etc. and when to filter them out, and scoring the work spatially on the page to reflect the temporal life of the pieces in performance according to Antin's signature typographic style. The transcript was then subject to Antin's own editorial interventions, which responded not to the original talk or its recording, but instead to the transcribed text, and often altered, re-imagined, or even re-wrote material not included in the original performance. The resultant rendering of his talk was then published in a literary or art journal or a book and was received as an apparently seamless document of the original

performance, its ostensibly unedited, rough typographic aesthetic serving to authenticate it and mark its conceptual and disciplinary audacity.

Key to completing this sequence, Antin's reputation and that of his work circulated among a certain defined community, consisting mostly of experimental poets and scholars, whose past experience with or reputational impressions of Antin informed their reception of his texts within the context of experimental poetry. It is really only possible to understand this process by stepping into its flow and encountering each stage of the process in relation to the one before and in anticipation of the stage to come. As *remembering, recording, representing* demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, by listening to the source recordings alongside the transcripts, manuscripts, and published pieces, it is possible to examine Antin's process from his initial approach to the performance through his editorial re-imagining of the transcript and into its fully entextualized form as a circulating literary object, and to articulate how each stage both determined the next and re-visited the stages that came before.

Antin's talk poetry emerged soon after he headed west to begin a new life in suburban, quasi-rural, San Diego, far removed from the close proximity to the literary, personal, and political community he had been a member of in New York. His first impulses toward a talk-based poetry, before he hit on the lecture-performance format, involved improvised or semi-improvised domestic encounters that included his wife Eleanor and were sent via audiotape back to public readings in New York. These earlier pieces (*The London March* and *in place of a lecture: 3 musics for 2 voices*) virtualized the Antins' presence in their New York community, contrasting the domestic space Antin shared with his wife and son in California with the densely populated, much more public life they had lived and imagined they were still speaking to on the

East Coast. The increasingly wide availability of home audio recording by the early 1970s made it possible for Antin to capture the domestic scene and insert it into a live performance context far away. Eventually, it would also make it possible for Antin to listen to an extemporaneous talk he gave at Pomona College in the car driving home the next day and for Eleanor to identify it potentially as a poem. [74]

Once Antin was established as a professor, and had become recognizable in the literary and art context of Southern California, he was able to move from the domestic sphere to the more public and professionally aligned spaces of galleries, museums, and university lecture halls. There he could build not only on his reputation as an experimental poet, but also on the institutional structures that consecrated his authority. In these contexts, what had been the amused inquiry of a skeptical but curious poetic mind in the domestic dialogues became the authoritative discourse of an "expert" charmingly, if pedantically, explaining things in layman's terms. Thus the ironic approach to knowledge glimpsed in "in place of a lecture: 3 musics for 2 voices," in which Antin ironically interrogated a strange example about the practice of dowsing for water from an old experimental design textbook that Eleanor was reading aloud, was replaced in the formal talk poems with his sincere disquisition on the topics of art and literature. By situating him within those categories and demonstrating that he belonged there, this approach had the advantage of both proposing and exemplifying the premise of Antin's talk poetry. Though Antin might still playfully poke at the basis of knowledge, the stakes of establishing his authority were much higher than they had been in the living room with Eleanor. In the process of emerging into the public, professionally sanctioned sphere, Eleanor was rendered absent as an

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[74] Antin, author interview.

agentive and vocal participant in the formal talk poems, remaining only virtually present as a

figure in Antin's narrative, entirely under Antin's authorial control.[75]

In short, Antin's performance moved from a shared domestic practice to an autocratic

professional one distinguished by his reliance on institutional structures to articulate his work. In

the first stage of his process, when actively engaged with performance, he brought everyday life,

in the form of extemporaneous talk, into the art context. There it could respond to and be molded

by the structures and procedures of the art institution and the disciplinary formations that attend

it, in order to self-consciously become poetry. While this was in line with conceptual poetics and

conceptual art in general, it specifically evoked that subset of performance art labeled "life

performance" that was particularly identified with feminist artists on the west coast in the 1970s,

including Eleanor Antin. Life performance applied the tools and processes of art making to the

processes of life itself, without apparent regard for a resulting product or a presentational

apparatus to support the work. David Antin, by contrast, can be said to have applied life to the

context of art rather than art to the context of life, relying precisely on his access to the

supporting discourses, institutions, and technologies of performance and publishing to

materialize a formal artwork from the quotidian stuff of ordinary life.

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[75] Eleanor's role was not unlike the role in which Spalding Gray cast his girlfriend Renee Shafransky in many of his early monologues. Though Eleanor was in the unique position of also having her own publicly available art practice, including occasionally speaking extemporaneously as a fictional male vagabond who sees himself as a "king." Antin's use of Eleanor related her to a series of virtualized women, relatives and others (a figurative old lady in La Jolla in *Talking at Pomona*, an actual mentally ill aunt in *talking at the boundaries*, Antin's long-lost stepsister in *whos listening out there?*, an anorexic neighbor in the 80 Langdon talk) whose compromised, frail, or absent minds or bodies often served incidentally illustrative purposes in his discussion of unrelated subjects. Eleanor became an example and a source: Antin often related stories in which they both figured, and on more than one occasion Antin would begin a talk poem by relating a conversation he had with "Elly" before the performance. Though she was often pulled into a piece conceptually, it took a crisis like the one I will examine at 80 Langdon Street, in which she intervened when her husband was "heckled," to pull her literally into the action, and even then she spoke as a representative audience member advocating for her right to hear her husband's work, rather than as a collaborator.

(Re-)Writing "Talking at Pomona"

By the end of the editorial process for what became Antin's first talk poem designated as such, "Talking at Pomona," his project had gone from conceptual innovation to iterable format. Drawing on a disciplinary history rooted in poetry and a repertoire of specifically literary practices, Antin was able to posit performance as a radical intervention into poetic practice, while minimizing the actual role of performance itself in determining the composition of his talk poems as they ultimately circulated. Examining Antin's texts and performances together in the archive, I have formulated a framework to look at Antin's talk poems according to their particular combination of qualities, rather than the qualities that they borrow from more narrow disciplinary traditions, in order to articulate themselves as constitutive of a distinct genre that belongs wholly to neither poetry nor performance.

Soon after his move across the country, Antin began the talk poetry practice with which he became most closely identified. In both form and occasion, these works stemmed from the sort of artist talks and guest lectures common in arts institutions and academia. Minimally planning his talks, he began with a title or a broad topic and proceeded in response to that initial idea, the talk's context, and the particular audience he was addressing. He remembered that he first discovered his capacity for extemporaneous address when he was giving a guest talk at Cooper-Union and found that he didn't glance at his note cards once.[76] He decided after that to try giving talks without notes. When asked to speak to art students at Pomona College in 1971, he determined that they might be interested in some thoughts on the discourse situation surrounding contemporary art, and proceeded from there. Though Antin later insisted this talk, at

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[76] Antin, author interview.

the time of its delivery, was not yet a poem, the dematerializing impulse in the art world that he described in the piece now seems inextricable from his eventual assertion of a situationally contingent poetics of discourse to explain his own work, which grew out of the occasion. According to Antin, it was not until the next day, when he and Eleanor put on the tape recording of the talk in their car while driving back to San Diego, that she had the insight to say, "That's a poem."[77] As Antin frequently repeated the story, this would turn out to be the key speech act that transformed a recorded extemporaneous talk into a "poem" and made possible a format Antin would employ for the rest of his career.

However, either because he was so historically rooted in poetry or because he was so aesthetically detached from it, Antin could claim relative indifference about the status of his work as poetry, yet draw on poetry to provide a grounding frame for extemporaneous talk as an art practice. Once talk poetry was established as a creative practice, Antin felt free to affiliate or not with poetry as a disciplinary identity. As he told me, "I realized I could do whatever I wanted to do and I would call them poems if I wanted to and if I didn't want to call them poems I wouldn't."[78] Yet it was Eleanor Antin's spontaneous declaration, drawing on a repertoire of institutional, relational, reputational, contextual, and performative histories, that finally granted Antin the liberty to declare that he "could do whatever [he] wanted to do." In the documentation of Antin's performances, in the editorial preparation of the material, and in the content of the finished pieces, it is now possible to see the talk poem as a form constantly coming into

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[77] Antin and Bernstein, *A Conversation with David Antin*, 44.

[78] Antin, author interview.

existence through serial acts of assertion, rather than as the product of a discrete compositional process.

Antin's non-standard text format, which eschewed punctuation, capitalization, and justified margins, and employed irregular in-line spacing, asserted its textuality as a way to "finish" the live performance. In effect, the idea of performance exceeded the fact of performance on the page. Antin's editorial practices suggest a tendency to simplify and collapse the process of performance, yielding text by both limiting the elements of performance represented on the page to those easily available to textual representation and inserting revised and new material formatted to seamlessly blend with the transcripts, which are intended to textually represent speech. Archival evidence demonstrates that new material, born as text and never performed, was designed not only to add content not included in the talk, but to simulate the idiosyncrasies and inefficiencies of faithfully representing extemporaneous speech on the page. In revising his own talk as text, Antin invented both the signal and the noise. While no one assumes Antin's published talk poems adhered strictly to their original performances, most critics and casual observers do assume his performances exerted control over the scope and shape of the text, within which Antin would then make adjustments.[79] In fact, my research finds that Antin's published talk poems often quite intricately interwove literary simulations of large segments of a talk that never occurred with transcriptions of the audio documentation of a performance that did in order to arrive at a talk poem whose referent was a hybrid of fiction and reality.

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[79] In a typical example, Marjorie Perloff mentions in a footnote that "David Antin has told me that he does, however, make some changes when he transcribes a talk poem on the typewriter." Perloff, "'No More Margins': John Cage, David Antin, and the Poetry of Performance," *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 335. Henry Sayre uniquely discovered an archival recording of Antin describing the extent to which he rewrote some of his talk poems, but this insight was not widely incorporated into critical treatments of Antin. *The Object of Performance*, 209.

By 1972, when he published the book *talking*, which introduced the talk poem format, the source of the found language he had long been using in his work was no longer necessarily originally textual. The volume charts a kind of formal procedural path to "Talking at Pomona," the first of the talk poems. The book begins in the mode of Antin's found text experiments of the 1960s with "the november exercises," in which he collaged language culled from daily newspapers and an English language manual for foreign speakers to form short, syntactically jarring, independent paragraphs and sentences, what some might call "prose poems." Each was marked with the date and time at which they were composed, emphasizing the occasional nature of their composition, as well as the periodical source material. In both the repurposing of found language and the explicit attention to temporality, Antin might have undertaken "the november exercises" anytime in the preceding decade. But by the time he arrived at "in place of a lecture: 3 musics for 2 voices," his work had moved to a more intermedial space.

The latter piece originated as a tape recording of Eleanor reading aloud an eccentric passage from an experimental design textbook that took a farmer's claims about his ability to dowse for water with a whalebone as an example. As Eleanor read, David interrupted with questions that occurred to him while listening and Eleanor responded as best she could while also trying to finish reading the text. Although it appeared to document a single improvised performance, the tape was actually spliced together from several takes to imitate a seamless conversation, even though Antin had been coaching Eleanor and revising his questions between each take. And while the talk poems would later originate in live performances before audiences, "3 musics…" was recorded privately and first "performed" via playback of the tape recording at a reading at St. Mark's in the Bowery in New York. When it was subsequently published in the

"Information Theory" issue of the journal *Aspen,* the text itself bore some resemblance to the

eventual layout of the talk poems. Each of the three "musics" (Eleanor's reading of the text,

David asking questions, Eleanor answering) was represented by a different font style, each

running in their own line so that the text could either stop or continue during an interruption

indicated on another line in order to indicate the temporal relationship between the three.

Working with transcribed speech for the first time, Antin was clearly more self-conscious

about the act of representing extemporaneous talk on the page than he would later become.[80] He

included a prefatory note immediately before the piece describing the relationship between the

source recording and the text score, which served also as a disclaimer about the limits of text's

ability to represent speech:

> this is the score of a controlled improvisation
> that was directly recorded on tape
> the spacings indicate the pace of the
> performance but because of the limited com-
> pressibility of type and the much less limited
> compressibility of speech the notation is
> suggestive rather than literal-the tape
> recorded version of the work was performed
> at St. Mark's in the Bouwerie.[81]

This preface both explained the aim of the poem's typography and acknowledged the necessary

artificiality of its representation of speech, while also authenticating its origin in an actual

domestic improvisation. The poem's preface also finds Antin playing a kind of textual joke by

employing the line breaks most people expect in a poem in his introduction, in contrast to the

non-standard layout of the piece itself.

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[80] Antin, *Talking*, 189.

[81] *Talking,* 36.

Both "in place of a lecture: 3 musics for 2 voices" and the next piece in the book, "The London March," were recorded shortly after the Antins had relocated to San Diego, and both were meant to be played at readings back in New York. Particularly in the latter piece, their feelings of isolation from the social, political, and cultural world of New York clearly motivated the attempt to communicate remotely and make their voices "present" in their former community. The piece finds the Antins at home in suburban San Diego playing cards and listening to a radio report about a large anti-war march planned in London the next day. David half-jokingly suggests that Eleanor wager a large turnout at the march on the hands of solitaire she is playing; this leads them to reminiscence about their own political and social circle back in New York and to contrast that milieu with their new lives at a great remove in California.

Despite the seemingly coincidental association of their memories with the live radio broadcast, Antin apparently typed up the scenario ahead of time and they improvised loosely off of it, recording the whole piece in one take this time. Here the poem left the use of textual sources entirely for a spatially dispersed, temporally synchronized, sonic, and technological media economy, in which the "offstage" (which is to say, not captured in text) radio announcements about London served as the media that the Antins responded to, the tape recording conveyed their voices back across the country to their friends in New York, and Eleanor facetiously sent the energy from her aleatoric game of solitaire across the ocean to impact the anti-war march in London.

In apparently documenting a single, continuous improvisation, as well as in the typographic layout of the published version of this piece, which used the same conventions as "In Place of a Lecture...", "The London March" anticipated the talk poems. However, unlike its

successors, the occasion of the original performance was not a public event in itself, but remained in the domestic realm as source material without a life of its own. The audio documentation and textual representation were displayed publicly as two distinct, ostensibly equally "finished" products whose realization was entwined with one another – Antin spoke about them as scored music – but whose origin in live performance was only virtually available. Though Antin had by that point conceived of talk as a valuable material to work with, he had not yet allowed that the talk performance might hold artistic merit in itself. What the talk performances did do once he took them public, however, was offer Antin an implied audience to address. Antin's address to his audience provided the frame to realize his work and make sense of the poem's content, while the proto-talk poems that lead up to "Talking at Pomona" depended on the situation of overheard dialogue to contextualize the process by which they came into being, and to cast them as unselfconscious found poems.[82]

Considering that versions of the talk poem text format can be seen in earlier pieces, what became his signature typographic approach was apparently already in Antin's repertoire as a means to represent speech on the page before talk performance itself was introduced. The earliest transcription in the archive of "Talking at Pomona," which Antin identified as the first talk poem, already employed the layout that defined his talk poetry, including the absence of capitalization or punctuation and the irregular in-line spacing. Though Antin recalled that he did this first transcription himself, he quickly began to employ UCSD graduate students to transcribe his work. Under this arrangement, the transcriptionists were empowered to set the spatial layout as they typed, according to Antin's broad guidelines, making them influential determining agents

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[82] "The London March," *Talking,* 83 – 142.

in the final presentation of Antin's talk poems. Though Antin made changes to these transcripts,

he did not generally re-type them entirely, meaning that a large portion of any published talk

poem was layed out autonomously by the transcriptionist. Antin even sometimes incorporated

their errors and incorrect attempts to interpret the recording into the final piece. He explained

that he came to see this as a generative part of the compositional process,

> I realized I could let somebody transcribe it and if there were any
> things that were wrong with it, I could check it against the tape, or
> against my memory, which is good enough. And then again also to
> think what difference does it make if they misrepresent it? I'll
> either remember what I said, maybe enough to recognize that this
> is not the way it went, or I won't and I'll remember the way I
> remember and it'll be more – it'll take more invention to fill it, to
> complete it.[83]

This is crucial to an understanding of the talk poetry process: for Antin correcting the transcript

was not only a way to ensure his talk performance was accurately represented, but an occasion to

invent new thoughts and utterances and insert them seamlessly into the record of his past

performance.

Antin understood his primary medium to be neither text nor talk, but the active process of

thinking. From this perspective, text was not to be seen as an assertive mediation of his talk

performance, but as a minimally intrusive means to document and circulate what he was thinking

on that occasion. These works originated as extemporaneous talks not because of some special

feeling Antin had for speech as a medium, but because he considered talk's immediacy and

temporality to be the closest he could come to a form approximating something like the shape of

thinking in public. The purpose of the text, then, was not to encode the rhythm and phrasing of

his performance, though it did nominally do that, so much as it was to clear away conventions

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[83] Antin, author interview.

that proved unnecessary impediments to experiencing talk as unmediated thinking. He believed

that the conventions of poetry, like those of visual art, are the product of a discourse situation

that can be modified over time through innovation and rhetorical intervention to more

appropriately address the circumstance of their production and reception, rather than to merely

reproduce images and information. In Antin's view capitalization and punctuation, for instance,

were not tools to clarify meaning, but obsolete relics of outmoded print technologies:[84]

> Like the idea of indenting or not indenting – all of these are printing decisions. They don't increase the intelligibility of a poem at all. And in the case of printing … for example, when these people got tired of transcribing, they left the mark that they had gone away for lunch or something like that. And these signs didn't tell you what to do. So my sense is this is basically a print technology's representation of itself as responsible and intellectually plausible… I'm looking at them and finding them implausible and so partly my invention was to show that I could generate a text situation that was more sensible.[85]

Antin saw print conventions as merely representations of the now-abandoned processes of past

print technologies, so by re-setting those conventions he could "generate a text situation that was

more sensible" for representing thinking in progress, under the circumstance that recording

technology had come into existence, and given the limitation that thinking itself cannot take

material form.

Though his aim ultimately became to create a presentist poetics concerned with

privileging an active process of thinking rather than a static document of having thought, it

seems likely that talk poetry emerged in response to absence as much as to presence, and to the

way absence could be negotiated in the media landscape of the 1970s. Antin's talk practice often

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[84] Author interview.

[85] Ibid.

had him speaking to another place and time while trying to remain where and when he was. He

eventually settled on "tuning," as one does with a radio dial, with all its associations of long-

distance broadcast and reception, as a metaphor for the generation of his talk poems in

relationship to his audience and the circumstance of his performances.[86] Antin was, in his own

estimation, both transmitter and receiver, and only secondarily "author" or "performer." To

understand this self-positioning, it is useful to look closely at the performance, transcription, and

editorial practices through which the pieces took shape and circulated as the category developed

over time.

Since Antin meant the text only to put the reader into closer proximity to his thinking

process, any thinking that took place in the course of editing or transcribing could be treated as

equally valid to the thinking occasioned by the original talk. Thus the content of the talks were

potentially endlessly revisable, and the pattern of word clusters and spaces on the page, though

by implication representing certain elements of the original delivery, were not necessarily

dictated by actual speech in performance. As he told me:

> I tend to have them read as spaces that are acoustically useful. And
> I also like to play with them. So they may be acoustically useful,
> but that may be too conventional for what I really want to do. And
> I'll play with caesuras, which may not be obvious, but I'll
> sometimes let it deliberately violate the logic of the thing, or the
> logical sequence, in order to make a different phrase break. Which
> is I guess the residue of having been a poet for many years before
> that, and that's what I used to do.[87]

Liberated from strictly documenting the performance, Antin found he could add to, subtract

from, and revise his talk on the page according to his concerns of the moment. At times he could

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[86] David Antin, *Tuning* (New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1984).

[87] Ibid.

even deliberately work against accurately representing his original talk. Although it has generally been assumed that Antin made only minor interventions in adapting the transcripts to finished talk poems, Antin acknowledged, above and elsewhere, that the talk poems actually diverged frequently from their source material.

My own research has located a significant number of occasions when he supplied new or alternate material created whole cloth after the fact. By the end of the transcription process for "Talking at Pomona" he had already effectively detached the form from its reliance on his past performance and created a hybrid product made up of actual and simulated transcription. By denaturing the supposed irreversibility of his talk's temporality in the editing process, Antin was able to present a text that appeared both more continuously extemporaneous than it actually was and more seamlessly controlled than the original talk actually had been, allowing spontaneity and redress to coexist while subsuming any marks left along the way by either error or correction. To take the first and most influential example, the storied tape documenting the original performance at Pomona actually ends abruptly, seemingly mid-sentence, but the transcript continues for another four pages. The last audible phrase, "what making art is about" is followed by two handwritten dots before the text resumes, still typewritten in Antin's talk format, but with wider spacing between words and lines that more closely resembles the manuscript and eventual published versions, as if someone new had taken up the typing. In contrast to the rest of the transcript, the last four pages also include no handwritten corrections.[88] [Fig. 2.2]

This section, which contains a rather ornate simile relating knot tying to art making, and an esoteric historical metaphor about chess, is more erudite and sustained than others, drawing

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[88] David Antin. "Talking at Pomona" transcript, Box 34, Folder 7, David Antin Papers, 27.

on arcane knowledge and maintaining an illustrative metaphor over multiple pages without diverging or switching topics. This stands in contrast to the rest of the talk poem, in which Antin switches topics elliptically and often goes back over his language multiple times for clarity. In both the corrected manuscript and published versions of the poem, this transition from direct transcription to something that may have fallen somewhere between invention and reconstruction is entirely unmarked and unremarked upon, instead it is reabsorbed into the transcript as document. In typographic layout and in the discursive nature of the language, the text is indistinguishable from that derived from actual transcripts. Antin would argue that additions such as these documented his thought process while typing, and so, as a product of his process of entextualization, were no less of a piece with what became the talk poem than anything he said during his talk to the students at Pomona.

However, Antin was clearly forging a new approach that relied not only on his extemporaneous performance, but equally on the possibilities created by passive sound recording technology, the intervention of the transcriptionist, and the opportunity to revise a text before publication in order to deliver a product that was deliberately more complex than it appeared. As a result, and despite Antin's insistence to the contrary, it is necessary to conclude that talk was not only a way to bypass poetry conventions in order to access his thinking, talk was also the label he applied to an aesthetic he wished to establish in order to advance a particular intellectual and professional position within the field of poetry. Rather than breaking down the conventions of poetry, he was establishing a new set of conventions he and others could adhere to while working within a newly defined talk poetry lineage. By the time he had finished correcting the transcription of his talk at Pomona, his typographic format had been established as both a

representational and an aesthetic concern, and he was already revising his first talk poem in the image of the genre it would go on to spawn.[89]

Antin concealed the immediate visual and auditory context of his performances on the page by largely excluding environmental markers or extra-linguistic sound, setting a line that divided live performance from literary production as separate, though interrelated, spheres.[90] He then managed the expectations of both contexts, on their own terms and in relation to one another, in order to position his talk as a new artistic strategy by drawing on the estrangement between the two disciplines. This depended on framing his literary audience's view of the live performance exclusively through its transcription and reproduction, virtualizing the performance on the page while exempting any elements not available to literary form. Meanwhile he justified his extemporaneous presence for his live audiences with the sense of permanence and legitimacy granted by the anticipation of the eventual life of his performance as text. In addition to live performance and print, both new media technologies and new conceptual horizons in cross-disciplinary art making are inextricable form Antin's performance project. As he was developing the talk poetry format, new forms of preservation and circulation, and new aesthetic categories, were becoming possible. In the experimental and vanguardist art practices that developed alongside Antin's, from minimalist sculpture to multimedia performances like those of Nam Jun Paik or Laurie Anderson, new capacities for reproduction and representation became inextricable

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[89] David Antin, "Talking at Pomona" manuscript. Box 35, folder 7, David Antin Papers, 45; David Antin, "Talking at Pomona," *Talking*, 182.

[90] For example, in "Talking at Pomona" Antin referenced "Nick and Rowan" as, on the page, two hypothetical characters in a fictional exchange about a gallery exhibition. In performance, though, the mere mention of these names provoked uproarious laughter, laughter that suggested Nick and Rowan were known presences in the room. Antin, *Talking*, 157; audiotape, Box 79, C6, David Antin Papers.

from the work. This new work, in turn, was wrestling with questions of meaningful human presence in an increasingly technological, de-industrializing social context.

Antin was trying to establish a kind of anti-institutional discourse that emphasized the relational shifts around artistic innovations rather than the innovations themselves. The talk poems, in fact, often functioned as free-form art criticism, exploring the ways that the art situation is enabled by historical discourse and disciplinary context. In "Talking at Pomona" he narrated this particularly through the career of sculpture. Minimalist sculptors applied the material, aesthetics, and even techniques of industrial production to the handmade object, a development that became contentiously entwined with the objects' spatial relationships to thinking, perceiving human presence.[91] This enabled the idea of sculpture to transition from a material articulation of space to a prototypical proposition *about* space that could be carried forward into even more ephemeral realizations of the art situation. In "Talking at Pomona" and many of the subsequent talk poems, Antin narrated this development and relied upon it. He seems to have understood himself, or his talk, as such a propositional object, pushing poetry past its formalist definitions and toward a situationally negotiated position that nonetheless depended on poetry's institutional avenues of reproduction and circulation.

In Antin's estimation, it was not the qualities of the work itself, but its relation to the expectations created by other moves in the work's development that materialized its meaning:

>   youre presented with something which is different
>   from what you intended to be presented with   and the manner in
>   which its different from the thing that you expected is the meaning

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[91] Donald Judd, "Specific Objects," *Arts Yearbook 8* (1965); Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture (Parts 1-4)," *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993); Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

of the work   in a sense   but notice the meaning of the work
only to the degree that it is a modification of the preceding work
that is it modifies the other work in terms of general conditions
imagined to be imposed upon presentation by the preceding history
of art[92]

Meaning, then, is made not by particular artworks but by relationships within the historical art

situation as a whole. Along these lines, "Talking at Pomona" compared the spatial and material

implication of the viewer's positionality and the slight modifications of art historical

expectations offered by minimalist sculpture's propositions to the much broader impact on real

(non-art) human space and its moral dimensions of which conceptual work was capable.[93]

However, Antin's approach was not a tacit endorsement of all conceptual moves. In fact, by

making a distinction between art that uses the art situation and art that produces objects, he

seemed to have been trying to establish a discourse situation to make critical distinctions within

conceptual space. Similarly, his talk poetry might play as merely an audacious proposition about

poetry and performance until such time as there are multiple talk poets working, or perhaps more

to the point, multiple examples of something comparable to Antin's form that could be

marshaled to establish critical criteria for the genre, at which point talk performance would

transition from a propositional intervention into a conventional form, a possible eventuality this

study hopes to help bring about.

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[92] Antin, "Talking at Pomona," *Talking*. 171

[93] Among the works Antin references are Douglas Huebler's "Duration Piece #15" (1970), which called for information leading to the arrest and conviction of a bank robber, with a reward system set up such that the reward was to be paid by the piece's purchaser, with the value lessening gradually over the course of a year; and two Dennis Oppenheim pieces: "Canceled Crop" (1969) in which Oppenheim grew grain in order to withhold it from the market; and "Protection" (1971) in which chained dogs lined the pathway to a museum.

Locating the Poem at 80 Langdon Street

The poetry reading, in its various forms, provides the avenue by which poetry has met embodied performance through much of the 20th century, and indeed much modern and postmodern innovation has been understood as occurring at the level of performance. Performance, though, is entwined with the whole history of poetry and was actually only very briefly out of fashion in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[94] Since its reinvigoration at mid-century, a number of critics have investigated the reading as a particular genre, often figuring it as a hybrid of literature and performance.[95] Others think the public reading narrows, rather than expands, the possibilities of a poem, allowing the performer to overdetermine its outcome.[96]

Theatricality is often at stake in considerations of the poetry reading. Charles Bernstein claims the reading as an anti-theatrical genre that enables the destabilization associated with performance without enabling the embodied or spectacularized treatments of language we associate with theatre.[97] As with many cross-disciplinary comparisons, this overdetermines the minimal requirements for theatricality. I would argue that the form of dramatic performance, in which a textual blueprint is enacted - and almost certainly altered - is legible in the history of the modern reading. Even that most populist and performance oriented of poetic forms, slam,

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[94] Peter Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," in Bernstein, *Close Listening*.

[95] Tyler Hoffman, *American Poetry in Performance: From Walt Whitman to Hip Hop*, 2013; Charles Bernstein, "Introduction," 3-28; Bob Perelman, "Speech Effect: The Talk as Genre," 200-216; Peter Middleton, "The Contemporary Poetry Reading," 262-299, Bernstein, *Close Listening*.

[96] Ron Silliman, "Afterward: Who Speaks: Ventriloquism and the Self in the Poetry Reading," 360-378, Bernstein, *Close Listening*.

[97] Charles Bernstein, "Hearing Voices." in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, *The Sound of Poetry, the Poetry of Sound* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 144

generally relies on what poet and critic Bob Perelman calls the "labor of the prepared text."[98]

Though it constitutes a departure from the anti-theatricality of the poetic mainstream and avant-garde both, as a dramatic encounter between performer and text, slam is not radical at all.

Among contemporary poets, in fact, Antin appears to have been unique in using an event that would normally be a prepared reading or a lecture as a means to generate new work that would come to be called poetry.[99] Rather than the reading liberating the poem from its fixed life on the page, in Antin's case the performance fixed the formless life of a thought expressed under ephemeral circumstances into textual form. The resulting text, then, allowed Antin and his readers to (re)imagine the original event, which seemed to have determined the poem and which the poem served to memorialize and to preserve.[100] Though Antin's talk poetry may have been more contingent on the live event than other poets who invoke orality, his performance itself was less verifiably available to his audiences beyond the source event. In order to distinguish his performance from other sorts of poetry performances and other textual representations of orality, it might be worthwhile to consider an Antin performance apart from its afterlife on the page, as a kind of theatrical event in and of itself.

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[98] Perelman, *Close Listening*.

[99] Though, as I argued earlier, Cecilia Vicuña has long done something quite similar in performance, she has only recently begun publishing a textual record of her performances, and in that case with the authorial assist of an editor.

[100] Purely in terms of textual representation, Antin fell in line with certain modernist tendencies in representing orality on the page. Both Wheeler and Hoffman use the poetry of Langston Hughes as an example in which orality allows the Bakhtinian dialogic, usually associated with the novel, into the life of the poem by employing a virtual chronotope through typographic arrangement on the page, which would of necessity be broken if an attempt were made to actually perform it. Antin's talk poems, on the other hand, seem to invite the reader's voice to approximate the rhythm and pace of Antin's delivery. Wheeler, Ch. 3 "Voice and the Visual Poetry of Langston Hughes," *Voicing American Poetry*; Hoffman, Ch. 3 "'The Black Man Speaks': Langston Hughes, the New Negro, and the Sounds of Citizenship," *American Poetry in Performance*.

The example that introduces this possibility comes from May 13th of 1978, when Antin was invited to present in the Talk Series poet Bob Perelman ran in the San Francisco art space 80 Langdon Street. Despite Antin's anti-formalist claims, in this example the potential for textual realization of a performance became derailed at the moment when his performance departed from its formal scriptedness, which here means not its predetermined content, but the formal expectations that established its relationship to all other Antin talk poems and positioned the performance within its genre. If an Antin talk performance is given shape in part by its future as text, then the performance started to push against its categorical limits at the point at which the potential for future textual representation became difficult, or at least unlikely. At this point the talk poem had to either detach from its life as text and exist solely as a performance event, or proceed according to its own logic, with Antin waiting to "fix" it in the editorial process, as he in fact threatened to do, rewriting the record of the performance so that it could be related to the other talk poems within his print genre, regardless of what actually happened live.

Perelman's series was involved with the concerns of the language poetry movement, and many of the regular participants were invested in a project of denaturing language in pursuit of a truly oppositional and non-commodifed verbal form.[101] At 80 Langdon St., readings, lectures, and informal conversation intermingled, and often proved "first drafts" for more formalized essays that appeared in print later, a circumstance which would seem to create ideal conditions for Antin's talk poetry.[102] However, Antin relied upon upending expectations to articulate his talk performances as a particular sort of poetic refusal, so the focus on talk in the 80 Langdon St.

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[101] See: Daniel Kane, "Ch. 6: Bernadette Mayer and 'Language' in the Poetry Project," *All Poets Welcome,* 187-202; Steve McAffery, "Voice in Extremis," 162-177, Bernstein, *Close Listening*.

[102] Perelman, *Close Listening*.

series actually served to blur the distinction between a familiar house genre of explanatory and exploratory, non-art "talks" running *alongside* poetic practice, and Antin's own ambiguous assertion that talk in and of itself *could be* poetry. It was this potential that was reconfigured when some of the poets in attendance intervened in Antin's performance to question its premises.

Antin's talk did not proceed in the monologic way that most did, but instead was subject to challenges and counter-challenges from those in the room, a number of whom were key figures in the experimental poetry scene. So long as Antin's published poems represented their source performances as uninterrupted monologues, it was possible to understand Antin's process of textual representation as relatively uncomplicated. But examining an instance when members of the audience interrupted the performance, and actively debated its status as poetry, suggests the highly contingent process by which an Antin talk actually became a cultural product that could be recognized as a poem.

The disruption came from key figures in the language poetry movement who were present in the room, chiefly Ron Silliman, and was driven by the makeup of the audience overall, a self-selected group with some stake in the conversation around contemporary poetry, including the linguist George Lakoff and Eleanor Antin. Despite being considered a failed talk poem, or likely because of that failure, the 80 Langdon St. talk has occasioned a number of published considerations from individuals who were present that night. Each of these questioned the ontological status of the performed talk itself, as opposed to Antin's transcription of it, as poetry, and each attempted to take account of the degree to which the interruptions *intervened in* or

assimilated themselves into the piece.[103] These accounts gave a kind of alternate access to a category of performance normally, and normatively, accessed only through its textual representation, which was controlled by Antin.

The three published accounts are all eyewitness, the first and most extensive being Ellen Zweig's "Where is the Piece? An Account of a Talk by David Antin," published as part of the eclectic anthology *The Poetry Reading* edited by Zweig and Stephen Vincent in 1981.[104] Bob Perelman's "Speech Effects: The Talk as Genre," which makes what might be the closest argument in the literature to this chapter's, was published in Charles Bernstein's influential edited volume *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* in 1998, 20 years after the incident. Perelman sees the 80 Langdon St. talk as an occasion to understand the potential for a talk-specific genre uncoupled from literary production, as do I. He devotes a section of the essay to the events at 80 Langdon St., reflecting on both his own role as host and his interpretation of the event after the fact.[105] Antin's own "A Response to Ellen Zweig," published directly after Zweig's essay in the same volume, offers his own account of the incident and its meaning in response to Zweig's claims and in context of his talk project overall.[106] Without a doubt these three essays constitute the most published commentary on a single Antin talk performance

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[103] It is significant that this talk did not result in a published talk poem, though, contra Perelman's claim, it *was* transcribed: Box 42, Folders 5-7, David Antin Papers, 1954-2006, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. Additionally, a recording of the event, streaming via the UPenn sound archive, was until the Getty recently made many of his source recordings available online, one of the relatively few audio documents of an Antin talk poem widely available and publically accessible on the internet. Significantly, the site offers Ron Silliman's recording of the event rather than Antin's own: "PennSound: David Antin," http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Antin.php.

[104] Ellen Zweig, "Where is the Piece? An Account of a Talk by David Antin," Eds. Vincent and Zweig, *The Poetry Reading*, 174-186.

[105] Perelman, *Close Listening,* 200.

[106] David Antin, "A Response to Ellen Zweig," Vincent and Zweig, *The Poetry Reading*, 187.

available. It is useful as an instance in which an Antin talk was overtly taken as part of the category of performance, rather than as a precursor to its textual afterlife.

As her title suggests, Zweig's essay asked where in the room and at what point in the course of the event Antin's talk poem began and ended, and how that was determined within the space and time of the performance event itself. For Zweig, Antin's talk began not when he started speaking, but when he hit on an operational metaphor for his topic, "Figures of Speech and Thought." Zweig sees this search for metaphor as a defining formal feature of Antin's talk poems, without which they would not qualify as part of his genre. But once it was underway, Zweig sees Antin's talk as quite difficult to interrupt. She considers the initial objections from the poets in the first row, though heard by the audience and captured on the tapes, to be trivial since they did not noticeably derail Antin's monologue. This establishes one of the key aspects of Zweig's reading of the performance: a disruption perceptible to the audience could only truly become part of the piece once Antin himself acknowledged and made use of it. Only once the questions and objections from the audience had altered the course of Antin's talk, quite late in the performance, does Zweig understand them to have insinuated themselves into the frame of the piece.

Zweig sees this standoff in terms of power dynamics, an idea that was introduced in the room as well. Antin regained control of the talk in part by introducing narrative suspense, using the story of a young woman with anorexia. This move was challenged by the poets sitting in the front row, who resented his use of suspense to keep their interest. Perelman, the host, tried to redirect Antin back to the stated topic of the talk, "Figures of Speech and Thought." The talk was only "on track," in his terms, when it adhered to its intended subject. While, for Zweig, a formal

literary element signaled that Antin's piece had begun, for Perelman the piece could stop and start depending on its thematic focus. Antin's interlocutors objected to the monologic quality of his performance and, it became clear, to Antin's talk poetry project itself. This conflict, far from emerging spontaneously, had carried over from previous performances and personal correspondence. One of the language poets sitting in the front row in particular, Ron Silliman, had previously argued that Antin's talks were courting a catastrophe that would eventually force his audience to enter, and transform, his piece, an eventuality Silliman was perhaps trying to realize.

Zweig highlights yet another set of interests introduced into the performance by a young man sitting in the third row. According to Zweig, he objected not to Antin's performance but to the objections of the front row poets, who he saw as dominating the conversation and excluding the rest of the room. Zweig understands his interruption as a call for inclusion, which she feels activated the entire space as part of the performance by calling Antin's attention to the rest of the audience. (However, it is also possible to read his objection as a call to return to a more conventional arrangement of the relationship between speaker and audience.) His objection was taken up, adapted, and amplified by Eleanor Antin, who protested that the interruptions were unfairly restricting *her* access to the artwork she had come to hear, that is a talk poem by David Antin. She positioned her dissatisfaction in terms of gender dynamics, blaming the intervening discussion on the assertion of male dominance by the poets in the front row, which usurped her choice to experience the performance as intended, and to which she accused her husband of chauvinistically acquiescing by indulging their objections.[107]

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[107] Zweig, *The Poetry Reading*, 179.

Having proposed a formal means for designating the limits of Antin's poem, one based in performance, Zweig introduced additional possible ways to conceptually "frame" the event, borrowing from frame analysis, sociologist Erving Goffman's influential approach to contextualizing behavior. Her "time" frame positioned the beginning and ending of the talk performance at certain key moments in the course of the event that specific actors were empowered to activate.[108] She proposed that Perelman, as host, and Antin, as performer, were mutually empowered to begin the piece by naming its start, a version of the speech act which first instigated the talk poetry project. This was complicated, though, by the presence of multiple tape recorders placed there by Antin, Perelman, and several members of the audience. Framed from the perspective of the mediated future of Antin's talk, Zweig argued that each recorder had the power to "start" the performance for future audiences when they were turned on. Antin himself suggested, in his prefatory remarks, that the technical need to flip the tapes in order to capture the performance would itself control the structure of that performance. And in fact it was only once Ron Silliman's recorder, the last, was ready to go that Antin said that the talk could begin. These multiple beginnings kept the temporal delineation of what was the poem from what was not the poem ambiguous.

Later, the young man in the third row suggested that the tape recorders were not passive presences, but that they had in fact shaped the experience for him. The recorders made him aware of the social situation, acting as what he called a kind of "negative frame" that required

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[108] Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, vol. ix (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

him to look at the work from outside the situation in order to perceive it.[109] As I interpret this, he meant that the tape recorders placed the frame of his experience in an imagined future, one occupied by the talk's editorial product, rather than locating it in the present experience being shared by those in the room. Thus, the talk's mediated afterlife retroactively imbued the event with the significance of its anticipated representation and reproduction, obscuring access to the experience as an autonomous and ephemeral artwork in the moment.

Similarly, at the end, Zweig points out that Antin's closing remarks both pointed to and extended the work into its future form. Attempting to end the piece over the objections of his audience, Antin shifted into the past tense to refer to what had happened there in the room, already turning back to edit the event and place limits on its parameters even as the live exchange was still occurring. In the process, he strategically blurred the distinction between the live event and its textual representation, promising that his unfinished story about the anorexic woman he knew, which he had deliberately left hanging in performance in order to regain the attention of the room, would be finished in the text revision of his talk. He suggested that the audience should suspend their interest until they were able to read the story in its entirety in print. This instigated his own metacommentary, in which he discussed the ways that the still-occurring talk had already diverged from its generic form, before he rhetorically "ended" the piece for a second time, promising that he would change it on the page to conform to the talk poetry genre.

Negotiating between the perceived failures of the live event and the correctives promised by the editorial process, Antin both maintained and deferred authorship. From Antin's

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[109] Zweig, *The Poetry Reading*, 181.

perspective, the struggle for control between his interlocutors and himself that Zweig perceived

did not apply since it existed entirely within a frame he had authored and could ultimately alter.

In a personal response he sent to Zweig, he asserted that he had maintained far more control over

what occurred than he seemed to, even claiming that his own tape recording of the talk somehow

included only the "floor talk that I more or less deliberately allowed to penetrate the piece, or

prepared or provoked…"[110] Though it is unlikely Antin could actually control which sounds his

recorder captured, the point seems to have been that the location of potential poetic material was

determined not by the event, but by his eventual selective interventions in its transcript during his

editorial process.

Zweig also entertained a spatially delineated, quasi-theatrical frame for the performance.

She even diagrammed the makeshift proscenium that defined Antin's performance space, and

analyzed the successive extensions of the 'playing' area from Antin's 'stage' to the first row to

the whole space over the course of the performance. [Fig. 2.3] Zweig argued that once an area

had been activated as '*in*' the piece, usually by Antin explicitly acknowledging something

occurring there, that space could only be deactivated and exit the piece through audience

dispersal. Ultimately, though, Zweig saw control of the piece not in terms of time or space, but

according to a kind of free-floating and often contested ability to focus attention, in which the

frame was defined by the direction of the observing participants' awareness.[111] Unlike the

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[110] Zweig, *The Poetry Reading*, 186.

[111] Zweig, *The Poetry Reading,* 186. This is true of extralinguistic sound in Antin's talk poems as well. A sound, whether it is laughter in the room or a train outside of it (both of which can be heard on the "Talking at Pomona" recording,) must be verbally hailed by Antin in order to be visibly "present" in the published talk poem. "Talking at Pomona," 1972, audio cassette, C6, David Antin Papers. This framing of multi-directional attention is familiar in contemporaneous experimental theatre and para-theatrical activity such as environmental theatre or happenings, in which the theatrical frame is defined not by spatial design or dramatic content, but by the direction of the observing

immersive performance environments of the 1960s avant-garde in which individual experiences might differ greatly from person to person, Zweig understood Antin's piece to require that the direction of attention be collectively experienced and measurably impactful on the direction the performance took. She saw certain events that garnered her own attention in the room, but failed to explicitly intervene in the active discourse, as still "outside" the piece. For example, a beer bottle that toppled over on the floor near her and is audible on her recording, but was not used by Antin in his talk, remained "outside" the piece in her estimation. This kept power located with Antin and his ability to verbally hail anything he found significant, reinforcing his focus on verbal language over other non-linguistic sounds, and affirming his premise that the poetics of his talk poetry required something to enter into his conscious thought and come back out as language in order to become part of his composition.

Perelman, in his account, goes further than Zweig, implying that since the talk did not become a published piece, it was diverted from the status of an artwork entirely. Like Zweig, he wonders where the work began and ended, but he expands on Zweig's concerns by including the entire lineage of poetry and its attendant discourses in the stakes of Antin's talk. His concern is less with where and when in the room the performance occurred, as it is with in context of what broader field Antin's work should be located – in performance, on the page, or in the expanded negotiations of the literary field itself, which the talk poems themselves advance. In this last case, Antin's work would be not a single discrete piece, but would author and subsume all the

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participants' attention, resulting in a heterogeneous set of experiences that ultimately cannot be re-assimilated into a coherent whole. Richard Schechner, "Selective Inattention: A Traditional Way of Spectating Now Part of the Avant-Garde," *Performing Arts Journal* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1976): 8–19; Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (Dutton, 1965); Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (University of California Press, 2003); Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (University of Michigan Press, 2008).

disruptions and reconsiderations of poetry it causes, including Perelman's own essay. By way of

advocating a contextual understanding of how Antin's talks became poems, Perelman also takes

some of the blame for the contentious event on his own shoulders, suggesting that if he had

better prefaced and explicated Antin's talk practice to the room, it might not have been

challenged so readily.[112]

The incident at 80 Langdon St. brought the crisis of simultaneously experiencing and

accounting for Antin's talk process to the fore. Antin's wish seems to have been that the field of

the work be unconstrained by formal concerns or genealogical antecedents, but at the same time

he recognized that it was only by relating to pre-existent formal categories and spatial-temporal

limits that the kind of focused attention he was in search of could be paid to the work itself. In

his published response to Zweig he argued that there was not a struggle for control as Zweig and

Perelman experienced it, but that 80 Langdon's participatory atmosphere supported a collegial

conversation that built upon prior conversations which were not, and could not have been, known

to Zweig or the rest of the audience. Antin wrote that he had been carrying on prior

conversations with his primary interrogator amongst the first-row poets, Ron Silliman, as well as

the young man in the third row, whom Zweig had assumed was a stranger, not to mention his

ongoing dialogue with Eleanor, his wife. Antin claimed that each of these conversations

extended into the space through his conscious thought process and was deliberately activated by

his oblique references to them during the performance. From Antin's perspective the work of the

piece was to illustrate and comment upon the limitations of a formalist approach, which he did

by cuing specific formal objections that he was familiar with as a strategic part of the

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[112] Bob Perelman, *Close Listening,* 207.

development of his argument. In this conception, Antin saw himself appropriating the objections of his colleagues and employing them as found material within the frame of his talk.

He objected to Zweig's characterization of his talk as improvised, insisting on the craft and pre-meditation that made it possible, and in particular on the fact that the piece was addressed to the specific people in the room, rather than to a general audience. In this sense, he recast both his performance and the interruptions as more or less predetermined. Antin was deliberatley making a case about discourse in poetry and the problems of democratic participation in art directly to the language poets in the first row, he claimed, and they they were making a case in turn for contention, participation, and fragmentation. In this scenario, the apparent "outsiders" further back in the room merely saw Antin's interlocutors as getting in the way of the work proceeding, and that what Zweig understood as empowerment of the audience was actually a collective move toward a normalizing counterforce that would permit a conventional performer-audience relationship to be maintained.

He also insisted that the story of the anorexic woman was not interrupted, as Zweig believed, but that he strategically withheld it and could have marshaled the audience's curiosity to regain control of their attention had that been his aim, as he claimed at the end of his talk. Instead, Antin insisted that his aim was to provoke the objections of the poets specifically in order to demonstrate how unproductive such interventions turn out to be. What Zweig missed, he claimed, was the relationship between the content of the piece and the behavior of the participants, which is where he located the incision of his skillful interventions.[113] However, the fact that the talk was never published as a talk poem, and that Antin can repeatedly be heard on

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[113] Antin, "A Response to Ellen Zweig," *The Poetry Reading*, 187

the tapes promising to "fix" the talk in the editorial process, suggests Antin's premeditated control over the piece was not as absolute as he suggested. Or else, it suggests that he conceived of the performance and the (never-realized) poem, and therefore all of his talk pieces, as two related, but distinct works, that each involve different disciplinary strategies – one tied to performance, the other to the literary page.

Much of Antin's career was dependent on walking a line between presenting his thinking through talking in the moment as uninflected by formal concerns, and the need to make a claim on his work specifically as strategically formed art. He suffused his talks with awareness of his credentials, the institutional contexts that endorsed him, the networks of artists and poets he was part of, and his extensive knowledge of contemporary art and its controversies, while also maintaining the ironic distance of a mere observer who happened to find himself in the position of speaker and was merely trying to find his way through his response to the conditions under which the performance was occurring. At the same time, it was also important for him to make clear that he was in control, maneuvering a strategically determined discourse and resisting formal constraints as he went along. In this way, the talk poem format proved an ideal platform for him to explore his own thinking, display his discursive virtuosity, and fiddle with the results to create a more strategically determined version of the event, which both concretizes his control and virtualizes his extemporaneity. It is only through accounts of an apparently derailed performance like the one at 80 Langdon Street, or the kind of comparative archival work I have been able to do with his recordings, transcripts, and edited manuscripts, that Antin's apparently seamless talk poems become dislocated in time and space, uncovering the multiple locations and occasions at which they occurred, the selective orientation they required, and the multi-

directional temporalities that were necessary to their authentication as unified and coherent

works.

CHAPTER 3
YVONNE RAINER: TALK STRUCTURE AND EDITORIAL NEGOTIATION

Introduction: *Dance Fractions for the West Coast*

It is April of 1969 and Yvonne Rainer, the "high priestess of the avant-garde," has brought her

ad-hoc company of dancers from New York to a studio at KQED, the San Francisco public

television station.[1] They are there to film a version of *Performance Fractions for the West Coast*,

which is itself a combination of two performance formats she had presented over the previous

months, *Performance Demonstration* and *Rose Fractions*.[2] Together, these represent a new

approach to choreographing a dance work. Rather than creating new movement sequences,

Rainer has been organizing pre-existing dance material in idiosyncratic arrangements alongside

film, images, text, and lecture. By design, she involves both her regular professional company

and local non-professional dancers, in this case a group she has been working with in advance of

an upcoming performance at Mills College in Oakland.

This amateur group joins Rainer and her New York dancers in the studio. Twenty or so

performers stand in a line. But it seems the camera has caught them unprepared. Rainer's voice

can be heard, urging them, "Would you try and make it a performance as much as possible and

try not to talk, etc." She can be heard off-screen, chatting with the crew, adjusting sound levels,

as if the performance was not quite ready to start when the cameras switched on. A title appears,

floating across the shot of the television studio: "*Dance Fractions for the West Coast*" followed

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[1] "The art of a high-priestess of dance, Yvonne Rainer," The Province (Vancouver, BC), March 28, 1969, Box 40, Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers, 2013, bulk 1959-2013, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

[2] This description is based on a viewing of a videotape of this program, "Dance Fractions for the West Coast," 1969, VHS, 51 min, V104, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

by "Yvonne Rainer." Perhaps because the eclectic material does not necessarily signal its status as dance, and because some disciplinary signifier is needed to orient the audience at home, the word "performance" usually in the title of this work has been replaced by the more clarifying "dance."

Strange, incongruous juxtapositions immediately ensue, a dancer lies on her side as cartoon sounds and the theme from *The Pink Panther* play on the soundtrack. The movie music links to a recorded lecture by Rainer, playing over the multimedia scene, which extols the virtue of movie music's strategic mediocrity, its ability to accompany without overwhelming the image. The tools of the TV studio allow Rainer to introduce not only images and physical objects, but live camera effects on top of her usual material. A transparent purple square floats suddenly across the scene. Then a series of slides are projected in the studio showing dancers climbing and descending a set of stairs, a document of a section called "Stairs" from an earlier dance of Rainer's. This is followed by Rainer's live, off-screen voice again, cuing the crew: "Okay, lights up, doors open. That's it, Nancy, the light up after." She goes on like this, talking, arranging, correcting, anticipating the next thing that will happen. Though the performers are familiar with their activities, they wait on her word. The timing and nature of their execution is contingent upon Rainer's instructions, and sometimes her corrections of her own instructions.

She directs a group of dancers moving books to move into a straight line, but then apologizes and corrects herself. She asks them to make themselves more present, encouraging them to talk loudly to one another instead of whispering. She tries placing a dancer in two positions and then decides "It's the wrong thing," before announcing: "When they get here we'll do the whole thing over." Deliberately confusing the performance with its own rehearsal, she

suggests the performance has not even started. The control room overlays colored shapes and patterns across the images. Rainer herself finally enters the screen with a notebook, giving directions. As if in an early rehearsal, she speaks in the subjunctive, telling dancers what they "would be" doing, explaining where certain set pieces "would be," imagining a future realization while relying on past knowledge and experience. At the same time the images begin to linger, one shot superimposed over the next, as if the performance is both accumulating and overwriting its own record.

Rainer, apparently spontaneously, asks for a Kleenex, but it turns out to be a lead-in to her deadpan recitation of a monologue cribbed from Lenny Bruce's stand-up routine about what a dirty word "snot" is. The picture starts flipping, as if the broadcast cannot quite be stabilized, while images of Bruce's dead body, the war in Vietnam, middle American suburbia, and more incongruous projected images flash by in the background. Translucent colored shapes appear on the screen, a camera effect, as Rainer instructs her dancers to leave and how to do it. The camera then finds her alone in the studio, in a more familiar pose, dancing her signature choreographic work, *Trio A*, in silence until the Chamber Brothers' lush cover of *In The Midnight Hour* comes on. She is joined by eight dancers who follow along with her, as if in a dance class, while others sit around the periphery and watch. The dance, which is known for its uninflected, task-like style, looks rhythmic, dancerly, energized when accompanied by the music, though the quality of the movement is not changed. As the music ends, Rainer turns informally to the group. Some laughter is audible as the image fades.

This is the sole complete filmed example of Rainer's choreographic strategies at this point in her career, when diverse materials were coming together in pieces that she collaged live

in front of her audience, articulating her authorial presence through verbal instructions to her dancers in the moment. These works were made from the material of her past dances, her own writing, and cultural detritus she collected around herself, knit together by her conversational speculation and instruction, which imagined future possibilities for the material and the dancers even as she assembled provisional versions on the spot. These performances were always in the process of being realized, always coming into being, and never quite manifest.

This chapter traces Rainer's use of negotiation, verbal signaling, and dialogic talk structures in her experimental performances of the late 1960s and early 1970s, variously called "format," "collage," or "composite" works. These performances were assembled from diverse material organized according to sets of rules and agreements that allowed the work to come into being in the moment, without any single author, while also acknowledging the impossibility and paradoxical promise of reaching a final version of any performance work. I argue that Rainer's creative practice between 1968 and 1972 offers an example of an artist whose work had largely relinquished its disciplinary form and its identity as a series of discrete works. Rainer herself had become ambivalent about her authorial position, but found a way, through talk and other forms of in situ negotiation, to materialize the performance event as a tenuous shared phenomena in real time and space. By displaying her authorial control, Rainer was able to bracket it, as one peg holding the performance in tension, and realize a performance of collective art making, deliberately textured by collective art making's difficulties.

Ultimately, the possibilities these performances represented would take diverse disciplinary paths, into non-hierarchical collective dance improvisation at one extreme, and into the highly edited and organized technology of filmmaking at the other. The collage performances

themselves, though, remained largely undocumented, and have not been widely seen or known, especially in comparison to other, earlier aspects of Rainer's career. This chapter attempts to recover what remains of these pieces, along with something of the potential glimpsed and diverted in these works for contingent, negotiated, intermedial collective creation that could encompass both extemporaneity and structure, at the edge of disciplinary coherence.

Dance Contingencies

While Spalding Gray's monologues built a space for extemporaneity from the tension between his live presence and the fixed media objects he employed, and David Antin's talk pieces used passive capture via audio recording and active editorial intervention to textually approximate the ephemerality of speech, talk itself constitutes the mediated intervention in Yvonne Rainer's multifaceted career. From the beginning, Rainer was constructing dances at intersections, experimenting with intermediality and loose, evolving structures to increasingly emphasize the contingency of her choreographic forms and formats. Though she only occasionally employed the kind of monologic single-voiced address that defined Gray's and Antin's practices over the first decade of her dance career, Rainer introduced an increasingly dialogic approach that I refer to, for the purposes of this chapter, as a "talk structure." This involved the use of talk in various forms, or other dialogic signaling systems, to make works that relied on both the extemporaneity of in-the-moment negotiation and decision-making, and on the rule-bound, though nonetheless open-ended, systems by which potential structures could be realized.

Surveying Rainer's career from her first choreographic work in the early 1960s through her decision to move into filmmaking a decade later, a through line of talk and talk structures

emerges. These ranged from rehearsed or recorded talk as a choreographic overlay against which ephemeral live action operated, and through which the disciplinary orthodoxies of dance (principally around the use of musical scores) could be called into question, to the dialogic structures of rule-based pieces that incorporated free play using sets of premade movement "vocabularies" and generalizable "grammatical structures" to construct indeterminate choreographic sequences, whether technically making use of talk or not. Ultimately, talk became the submerged mechanism by which fixed movement and visual sequences could be arranged, negotiated, and called into being in the moment in performance in a way that allowed a work to be both authored by Rainer and never finished or fully determined.

From the start, Rainer's practice was concerned with the material impact of language. The Judson Dance Theater, of which she was a founding member, was concerned with re-situating everyday activities as dance. As such, it considered speech another ordinary somatic activity. Amongst the Judson dancers, Rainer in particular used live and recorded speech to trigger dance activity, to offer interior monologue alongside movement, and to voice found, written, and transcribed texts in ways that de-emphasized their content or aesthetic qualities and instead foregrounded speaking them aloud as a temporal and embodied activity, often relying on the very incongruous distance between the movement and the language to signal the purely formal nature of both. In these works, the text functioned as a structural obstruction and as an experiential encounter, something that took on a performative life quite apart from its literal meaning. I see this as a kind of language-as-choreography in which language is treated as a gestalt – unsummarizable and entirely necessary – to be learned and re-performed in every

particular without necessarily trying to represent or reproduce the contours of the language's

literal, and literary, meaning.

Alongside her use of talk as a material presence within her pieces, Rainer developed a

submerged and instrumentalized understanding of spoken language as a tool of organization and

coordination, an understanding born of the experiential aesthetics of rehearsal. By employing the

language of rehearsal in performance, she was able to expose the underlying dynamics of spoken

language otherwise meant to disappear or remain invisible to audiences in performance. These

included the language of direction, instruction, and negotiation familiar to any performing artist

from the rehearsal room. This use of language was perhaps more dancerly than choreographic, it

merged with, animated, and reacted to movement in the moment, drawing on extant movement

material rather than dictating or conceptually mapping movement in advance. While

choreographic language remains present as an inscribed schema that can be revisited and studied

apart from its realization in movement, this kind of contingent, dancerly vocabulary, drawn from

the kinetic and gestural ecology of dance in process, becomes as ephemeral as dance movement

itself. Or, more to the point, it becomes as ephemeral as extemporaneous conversation, and as apt

to slip away.

By making her performances contingent upon this transactional language, Rainer was

able, at least briefly, to make work that remained coherent and distinct as art performances, and

what's more, proved rehearsable and replicable, while remaining fundamentally ephemeral and

contingent upon occasion and negotiation in the moment. This is, in many ways, the impulse that

characterizes much of the American Avant-garde across disciplines, from action painting and

happenings to the Artaud and Grotowski-influenced immersive performances of The Living

Theatre's mid-to-late 1960s iterations. While many of those earlier performances, as well as the later examples of Gray and Antin already considered, ultimately succumbed to the fossilizing influences of disciplinary expectations and circulatable media, while still laying claim to a radical contingency, Rainer's project came to suggest the incompatibility of truly extemporaneous performance with the permanence of media formations. On the one hand, the collage performances lead to Rainer's own shift into filmmaking, a media format and disciplinary identity in which collage action is presupposed. On the other hand, those same performances lead, in the careers of the dancers she collaborated with, to wholly improvisational, and eventually largely unaudienced, participatory performance forms that pushed at the expectations of concert dance as a discipline.

As recent work on failure in performance suggests, it is often where a performance breaks down, gives up, or gives way that its utopian possibilities can be best articulated.[3] Through the various productive aporia that cluster around the end of Rainer's (first) dance career, the elusive possibility and promise of a truly post-disciplinary, contingent, and unrepeatable language-based performance emerges. This includes the traces of her late dance strategies found in her move into filmmaking in the early 1970s, where her editorial interventions could be at once silent, highly visible, and physical (as in cutting film negatives.)[4] At the same time, she preserved the materialized use of language from her earlier performances through the non-dance lecture performances she presented occasionally during the years of her

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[3] See: Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

[4] This chapter will deal briefly only with Rainer's first feature, *The Lives of Performers* (1972). Though that film and her follow-up *Film About a Woman Who…* (1974) continued to reference live performance, her subsequent films were increasingly steeped in self-conscious film language.

filmmaking career and after.[5] This relationship to text spoken aloud reemerged in and came to

characterize the work she has made since her return to dance in the 1990s, which often involves

Rainer reading text from loose pages on a microphone.[6] Outside of Rainer's own practice, but

very much a result of her intermedial performance formats in and around 1970, the increasingly

non-linguistic development of dance improvisation amongst the members of Grand Union, the

company that Rainer and her dancers formed at the end of her initial dance career, also gave

birth, through company member Steve Paxton, to contact improvisation, a form concerned with

ephemerality and physical presence above all else.

Through each of these traces, it is possible to see how the performances with which this

chapter is concerned, covering a very brief window of a few years in the late 1960s and early

1970s, best identify the promise of the post-1960s avant-garde to rewrite the rules of art

performance events as something other than machines for self-classification. Instead, they open

contingency, deliberate media resistance, and chiefly extemporaneity as legitimate art-making

strategies despite the difficulty inherent in circulating, preserving, or even remembering them. In

what follows, this chapter traces Rainer's use of talk and what I call talk structures --

choreographic rule sets controlled in performance by dialogic signaling and negotiation, verbal

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[5] Despite formal similarities to Gray's and Antin's work, these are largely beyond the purview of this chapter, though I will deal very briefly at the end with her lecture performance *Woman and the Body* as a good example of Rainer interacting dialogically with both found text and with an audience member, while subjecting both interactions to preset rules that limit the possible outcomes. La Jolla Museum of Art, 1998, VHS, b108 V39-40, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[6] Recent dance pieces like *Spiraling Down* (2008), *Assisted Living: Good Sports 2* (2011), and *Assisted Living: Do You Have Any Money* (2013) variously include text read aloud by Rainer with a handheld microphone, pre-recorded voice over, and dancers stepping aside to a podium to read textual material on mike. These dances also have involved space structured improvisation and the collection and rearrangement of elements from Rainer's earlier dances, both objects and choreographic material, onstage. I will treat these works briefly in the Epilogue.

or otherwise -- from her Judson era dance work forward, leading up to the fully contingent format performances of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In particular, this chapter looks at the organizational logics of the three evening-length works she made during the mid-1960s. In these works, I find talk used as choreographic material, incongruous score, and mechanism to negotiate choices within rule-based play, keeping her performance work always in flux. Following these systemic and integrated uses of talk and talk structures, the chapter then investigates the role of extemporaneity in processes of instruction and negotiation that Rainer employed to materialize her own role as author within the works she began making around 1968. These began as presentational formats for her choreographic repertoire, combined with found textual, visual, and musical material, which came to incorporate rehearsal processes into the performances themselves. Performances of rehearsal, in turn, gave way to ever loosening structures of on-stage negotiations between Rainer and her dancers over the organization and content of her dances. The use of talk in these pieces increasingly modeled cinematic editing techniques that would allow Rainer to take unfinished segments of performance and weave them into a structural whole, while at the same time inviting contentious push-back from her performers who wanted a more indeterminate and non-hierarchical version of Rainer's in-the-moment creation. The chapter then narrates how these opposing desires pulled Rainer and her collaborators in two different directions, toward group improvisation and eventually entirely process based work in the case of the dancers, and, in the case of Rainer, into a filmmaking career by way of the multimedia collage performances upon which her films were initially based.

Talking Making

The performances Rainer began presenting around 1968 constituted a series of multimedia performance events as instances of a new performance format. These were distinguished from the Judson dance concerts she had been part of during the first years of the 1960s *and* from the three evening length works she had made over the previous 5 years. These new intermedial performance formats were made up of material drawn *from* those earlier periods of her career, along with projected films and images, and recorded and spoken text. The arrangement of the material varied from presentation to presentation, as did the titles of the pieces, which often combined some version of "Demonstration," "Fraction," or "Composite" with the location where the event took place – *Connecticut Composite, Rose Fractions* (presented at the Billy Rose Theater), *Performance Fractions for the West Coast*.

Rainer first broke with her prior approaches by incorporating teaching and rehearsal into the performance itself, which changed from one presentation to the next, according to her "concerns of the moment," as one promotional brochure put it; eventually she was also sequencing the pieces live onstage.[7] This soon led to a situation in which her dancers wanted to spontaneously contribute their own material in performance and follow their own impulses about the arrangement of compositional units in the moment. Perhaps because of the relative longevity and reputation of Rainer and her colleagues' subsequent activities, or perhaps because they were often made up of material culled from earlier dances Rainer had presented elsewhere, or maybe simply because they were not sufficiently documented or sufficiently recognizable as dance works, the fluctuating set of intermedial pieces made between 1968 and 1972 have been given

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[7] "Performance Demonstration #1" brochure, Box 22 Folder 10, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

far less critical attention than both Rainer's better known earlier work as a choreographer and the later, more fully spontaneous, work of her collaborators that came out of the performance demonstrations.[8] I would argue, though, that the inclusion of extemporaneous negotiation and live arrangement of performance material constitutes a model of improvisation different from the idealized image of liberatory spontaneous creation based in shared intuition that practitioners have sometimes asserted. Rainer's collage performances incorporated the labor and difficulty involved realizing the performances themselves, centralizing the messy process of explicit communication and surfacing the underlying tension, negotiation, and structural frameworks that scholarly analyses have uncovered beneath the seemingly utopian or purely intuitive surfaces of improvisational performance processes of all sorts.[9]

Though Rainer was, arguably, centralizing her authorial presence even more explicitly than Antin or Gray in her collage performances, their transitional and transactional elements dropped away, leaving behind only the ready-made objects whose arrangements were being negotiated. Pursuing some sense of Rainer's collage performances in action, I am left to ask how to think about performances that leave so much evidence of their content, but so little sense of

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[8] Rainer is included prominently in accounts of Judson Dance Theatre in the early 1960s, especially in the work of Sally Banes: Sally Banes, *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theatre, 1962–1964* (Duke University Press Books, 1993); Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Wesleyan University Press, 1980); Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Duke University Press, 1993); other work from the 1960s is included in Catherine Wood, *Yvonne Rainer: The Mind Is a Muscle* (London: Afterall Books, 2007); Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (The MIT Press, 2008), the latter of which does include a chapter on the format performances; and the after-effect of Judson dance are tracked by Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2007); two books survey Rainer's film career: *Yvonne Rainer, The Films of Yvonne Rainer* (Indiana University Press, 1989); *Yvonne Rainer, A Woman Who--: Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (JHU Press, 1999); Rainer's own *Yvonne Rainer, Yvonne Rainer : Work 1961 - 73* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974); and Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (The MIT Press, 2006) provide the best glimpses into her career through the period on which this chapter focuses.

[9] See especially: Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*, 1st ed. (Wesleyan, 2002); Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, 1 edition (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

their sequential and relational form? I take the traces that remain and the transactions that remain absent as, together, purposefully temporal and temporary events that nonetheless reverberate across time and disciplinary context by foregrounding the interpersonal and conversational material that underlies collective art making. Rainer materialized authorship in these works specifically in order to call the power and labor dynamics of authorial control into question. The evidence suggests a deep ambivalence on her part about her authorial position, one that relates to the performances of authorship in the theatre and literary cases this study puts her work beside, but that is much more interested in interrogating, and possibly dissolving, the nature of that authorial position than either Gray's or Antin's projects ultimately turned out to be.

Rainer's use of talk appears quite different, aesthetically and procedurally, from Gray's or Antin's, but in fact she anticipated their use of talk to signal and summon in-the-moment contingent acts of extemporaneous creation that prioritized the performance event over its mediated trace. While Antin and Gray used secondary media formats that were closely entwined with their disciplinary identities to entextualize and circulate, and thus monetize, their ephemeral utterances, Rainer's background in dance was nominally already predicated on ephemerality. Seeking to reify her compositional impulses in the wake of their loosening by her uneasy membership in Grand Union, Rainer uniquely turned to a new disciplinary identity, that of filmmaker, in order to choose a replicable and circulatable future for her work. In many ways her move into filmmaking by way of performance represents a trajectory familiar from the other cases in this study, concretizing and formalizing volatile impulses that originally responded to the circumstances and possibilities of a performance in its given place and time without scaling up or down or delaying the temporal urgency of the particular hybrids and juxtapositions

produced by the unique situation. But by changing disciplinary tracks in the process, Rainer left open the potential embedded in her late performance experiments without subsuming that contingent responsiveness under the shadow of a slickly mediated and widely circulating recorded remnant of same, as have Gray and to a certain extent Antin.

Rainer Finds Her Voice

Rainer was one of the key figures in what is known as the Judson Dance Theater (JDT), a self-defined group of dancers granted access to rehearsal and performance space rent-free at Judson Church on Washington Square Park in Manhattan under the inclusive theological philosophy of pastor Howard Moody. JDT operated as a cohesive entity under that identity roughly between 1962-64, though some of those same dancers and others continued to use spaces at Judson Church throughout the 1960s, and beyond, sometimes appropriating the JDT name for their work. The group initially emerged from a dance composition course taught by the composer Robert Dunn at Merce Cunningham's studio, located in the Living Theater's building at 6th Avenue and 14th street in Manhattan.[10] This course was based on John Cage's influential music composition course at the New School, which included many individuals who would themselves become key figures in the downtown avant-garde of the 1960s**,** including Dunn himself.[11] Dunn imported some of Cage's vital ideas about compositional strategies, including his use of indeterminacy and chance procedures in scoring his compositions, often allowing for multiple possible outcomes in performance.

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[10] Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 22.

[11] Other students included key figures associated with Fluxus and the Happenings: Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, Jackson Mac Low, Al Hansen, and George Brecht.

Like Cage's music and the choreographic work of his partner Merce Cunningham, with whom many of the Judson dancers trained and danced, Judson dance came to be identified with the chance procedures by which many of the works were structured. The dancers distinguished themselves from Cunningham's approach through the incorporation of ordinary, quotidian movement, activities, and costumes, so that the delineation between dance and ordinary action began to blur. Though the Judson dancers were initially all trained dancers, they employed anti-spectacular, uninflected, everyday activity presented as dance without drawing strict presentational or aesthetic boundaries around the work. The aim of this, in part, was to deliberately suggest the de-skilled, ostensibly democratic status of their work, and to imply that anyone could perform the work they were creating, indeed that anyone could create it if they wanted, using the template of daily life.

It is easy to see a corollary for JDT's procedural aesthetics in Cage's use of found sound, randomly tuned radios or, most famously, the environmental sounds allowed in by the silence of the pianist in his *4'33"*, and Cage's influence was frequently acknowledged (Cunningham sometimes called the Judson dancers "John's children" rather than his own). Nonetheless, JDT meant to diverge from Cunningham's approach, despite the use of chance procedure and indeterminacy in composition his work shared with Cage's. The Judson dancers saw Cunningham building on the work of Martha Graham and other key figures in American modern dance from the first half of the century by incorporating the physical vocabulary of traditional concert dance into his deconstructed chance compositions, with only occasional intrusion of ordinary activity. Rainer and her colleagues understood Cunningham's contribution to dance language to be his breaking down of dance vocabulary into its component parts. Using his tools

of chance and deconstruction, and adding their own approach to generating dance material out of ordinary elements, they hoped push beyond Cunningham's deconstruction to build a new dance vocabulary.[12]

When non-dancers did begin participating in the Judson dance activities, it turned out not to be novices to modernist aesthetics who were drawn in, but visual artists familiar with JDT's approach, including Robert Rauschenberg, an associate of Cage and Cunningham's, and Rainer's on-and-off lover Robert Morris. These artists represented a turn in gallery art not unlike JDT's take on Cunningham's dance aesthetics, from the medium-specificity of mid-century modernist abstraction to found and collaged materials and minimalist, non-representational, and non-decorative objects. They joined in initially as designers of lighting and of sculptural objects that could be placed in the spaces where JDT performed to choreographically intersect with and impact the dances. But Rauschenberg, Morris, and others also participated as performers and even choreographers of their own works. Much as Cage and Cunningham collaborated with one another and with artists who designed costumes and set pieces for Cunningham's shows semi-autonomously, these collaborations put the innovations of the Judson Dance Theatre into direct dialogue with new developments in painting and sculpture. These performance innovations were

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[12] This understanding of JDT's inheritance from and contribution to modern dance, which comes by way of Sally Banes, who was not present in the early 1960s and based her accounts largely on her own observations of post-Judson dance in the 1970s and on the perspectives of the dancers themselves through interviews and their own archives at that time. Banes's framing of Judson dance has been challenged from a broader historical and geographical perspective, most notably by Susan Manning in her 1987 response to the re-issue of Banes' *Terpsichore in Sneakers* and in the exchange between Manning and Banes that followed in the pages of *TDR*, in which Manning argued that Banes's Americanist and post-1960 bias caused her to ignore many antecedents in transnational modern dance through the 20th century, particularly in interwar Germany. I include Banes's representation of the dancers' understanding of their own narratives at the end of the 1970s as a way to understand their prevailing thinking at the time, and to trace the roots of Rainer's move toward incorporating diverse materials in her own work. I make no claim on the broader historical veracity of Banes's view or the enduring accounts of individual JDT dancers. Susan Manning, "Modernist Dogma and Post-Modern Rhetoric: A Response to Sally Banes' *'Terpsichore in Sneakers*,'" ed. Sally Banes, *TDR* (1988-) 32, no. 4 (1988): 32–39, doi:10.2307/1145886.

similarly pushing back at the most basic expectations of their disciplines to claim an aesthetic that was at once less individually expressive and rarefied, and more embodied, material, and plucked from everyday physical and gestural vocabularies.

If Rainer and her contemporaries in the Judson Dance Theater are best known for making ordinary action into dance, Rainer might be said to have distinguished herself in particular among them by also making dance into ordinary action. She has long been interested in the task-like nature of dance in and as itself, and has often employed choreographies that resist both expressiveness and gratuitous displays of virtuosity in favor of putting one thing after another: patterns, structures, rules, systems. Dance for Rainer became a process, a way of working and working through. Echoing her contemporaries and friends among the minimalist sculptors, dance became only and essentially the body moving. At the same time she moved, very early on, beyond the attention to chance procedure as a strategy for making choreographic sequences and turned to incorporating the innately imbalanced power dynamic inherent in authoring any performance into her work itself, both acknowledging her own authorial intransigence and subjectivity and leaving unresolved, and perhaps irresolvable, the shape of the performance itself.

While first taking Dunn's composition course in 1961, Rainer wrote in a letter to her brother and sister-in-law that Dunn "was not equipped or inclined to explore movement content; his sole interest was structure, how to put dances together from related or unrelated fragments of material."[13] This ethos informed many of the early Judson choreographers, including Rainer, who drew on borrowed structural model, the score to Cage's *Fontana Mix* in particular, to compose

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[13] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 204.

her earliest dances using systems of chance procedure. Though Rainer quickly lost interest in chance operation, she maintained her interest in structure as equal to or greater than dance content. This interest threaded through the rest of her career, in which the controlling element structuring the dance often merged with or competed for its position alongside the movement as the central element of the dance itself. Rainer made both the constitutive elements and the structure rigid systems that actively came together, or were laid on top of one another, in her pieces at the moment of performance. The piece was then both generated in the moment by the performance, and negotiated within the structures that pre-existed the performance event.

Talk played a role in these constructions from nearly the beginning of her career. Only the second dance she choreographed, *The Bells*, which premiered on a program of works coming out of the earliest configuration of Dunn's class at The Living Theatre's space in July of 1961, included Rainer repeating, "I told you everything would be all right, Harry" while "twiddling her fingers before her face, having her right hand 'collide' with her nose, turning about with fingers flitting like insects about her head,"[14] and improvising "in a staccato, rhythmic movement style while saying 'the lewd fat bells of Manhattan.'"[15] This use of talk as an idiosyncratic element of the dance itself, rather than its controlling function, would characterize talk in these earliest dances in general. Or, as Rainer herself put it, "The dance was repetitive with many changes in frontal orientation."[16]

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[14] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 58.

[15] Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 18.

[16] Rainer, *Work 1961-1973*, 285.

The lack of evident purpose or connection between these elements made disapproving newspaper critic Lillian Moore "feel infinitely sad."[17] In contrast, Jill Johnston, writing in the *Village Voice*, found something innovative in Rainer's tendency toward repetition, which she related to the repetition of language toward a kind of objective materiality that can be found in Gertrude Stein's writings.[18] Though the choreography of Rainer and her cohort paradoxically came to be retroactively labeled "post-modern" in the 1980s, it reflected what has usually been termed the modernist notion that art need only be about its own category. And like Stein's writings, it divided opinions along the lines of the expectation that dance (or literature) should be "about" something.

Voice and language played some role as an element of nearly all of Rainer's earliest compositions from 1961, including *The Bells, Satie for Two,* and *Three Seascapes*. But once Rainer turned away from purely chance procedure, talk also frequently came to serve a controlling function within her works, governing the unfolding of the pieces themselves and keeping impressionistic interpretation at bay via logocentric interruption. In the subsequent examples, talk is key to the undecidabilty of her work, that is the quality that keeps the shape and meaning of the work in flux, contingent upon its time-based encounter with an audience.[19] In Rainer's work of the 1960s, talk became embedded within the works as an authored system of structural controls through which the composition could shift or be shifted at certain pre-

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[17] Lillian Moore, "Rainer-Herko Dance Recital Presented," *NY Herald Tribune*, March 6, 1962, Box 40 Folder 2, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[18] Jill Johnston, "Fresh Winds," *Village Voic*e, March 15, 1962, Box 40 Folder 2, Ibid.

[19] For Henry Sayre's adaptation of the Derridean concept of "undecidability" as an alternative to "indeterminacy" see: Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (University Of Chicago Press, 1992), xiii.

determined junctures according to certain pre-determined parameters. Or else talk was layered on top of movement through recordings or recitation that functioned as ambiguous units of meaning with ambiguous points of reference in ways which demonstrably, and often self-consciously, shifted the focus and associations attending the choreography for the audience, intriguingly if sometimes inexplicably. In short, talk became the intervening, interrupting, contingent, quotidian, personal and impersonal force by which Rainer's materialized dances addressed and responded to their individual instances of performance.

Rainer identifies her 1962 piece *Ordinary Dance* as her earliest use of "continuous verbal material." It included a monologue remembering all the addresses where she and her family had lived while she was growing up in San Francisco, as well as the names of her grade school teachers. As in Spalding Gray's Rhode Island Trilogy, and *Rumstick Road* in particular, which centered on a particular house on a particular street where he grew up, the rather inert and indifferent information of street numbers and house locations was equated with an autobiographical account; Rainer repeatedly referred to the monologue she delivered as a "story" despite its disjointed, list-like qualities, though for her it doubtless conjured a submerged life narrative. Yet Rainer also seemed to be making fun of the conceit that she was really revealing or sharing anything. As Gray's contingent early performances demonstrate, personal association offered without frame as public autobiography can sound a lot like chance procedure (and what else might a list of one's addresses be, anyway?) The apparent randomness of Rainer's list pointed to her monologue as no more and no less meaningful accompaniment than instrumental music. She even diverted into repeated themes and lyrical flourishes that strained against

abstractly representing the atmosphere of actual places before collapsing back into her neutral

list-making:

> 1941-1942. The story gets denser around here. 1-2-3-4-5.
> MacDonald, Barret, Myers, King, Myers, McCarthy, Kermoian,
> Pepina. 5-6-7-8-9. I'm not going to be able to talk for awhile.
>
> Uh. Let's see. Panhandle, early morning. Uh, let's see. Panhandle,
> early morning. White, white, white. Uh, let's see. Panhandle,
> early morning. White, white, white. White, whaat, whaat, whaat.
> Whack whack whack, whack whack whack, whack whack
> WHACK! Oh yea, I forgot to mention Detner.
>
> It's going to get cosmic any minute now. Yes. Here it comes:
> Roosevelt. Gravel and Industry. But not for long. September,
> 1952. Pierce St…[20]

Though the dance was set and the monologue written out and memorized, it suggests a

process piece in which the work is formed before the audience's eyes, with Rainer actively trying

to call up and remember a set of now-irrelevant facts from her life. As in Antin's editorial work

after his performances, Rainer relied on strategic repetition, stalling, and misfired syntax to shore

up the "ordinariness" of how she was saying what she was saying. Rainer ironically cast herself

as an anxious author trying to succeed at manifesting the art's alleged transcendence, promising

"it's going to get cosmic any minute now," as if her repetition of these mundane details might

suddenly add up to something more than just an ordinary list. This juxtaposition between her

"ordinary" material and its imminently "cosmic" potential poked fun at the supposed status of

dance in relation to ordinary movement and of poetry in relation to ordinary language. In these

terms, the title is provocative – if dance is, by definition, extraordinary movement, can there

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[20] Rainer, "Monologue for 'Ordinary Dance' (1962)," Box 21 Folder 16, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

actually be such a thing as an ordinary dance? Can transcendent dance movement be made

ordinary only through the application of ordinary language?

Rainer's concrete presence – as the speaker and the mover – competed with the

fragmentary, recalled past from which she herself was ostensibly absent in the work, offering

language as the only possible bridge and the most apparent obstacle to connect the two. And

though *Ordinary Dance* represents something like the monologic form that "talk performance"

takes elsewhere in this study (including talk performance's emphasis on the momentary and

contingent act of thinking of and composing the words on the spot, and then embedding that

contingency in the aesthetics of the work) it was nonetheless only one step along the way.

Through most of the 1960s, spoken language was introduced into Rainer's performances in

potentially contradictory fits and starts, which both resisted and embraced talk as a means to

strategically intercept and communicate action and meaning, on the one hand, and as an

indeterminate sound phenomenon espousing a Cagean take on "musical" accompaniment, on the

other.

Terrain

Having established her dance career as a member of JDT, Rainer became increasingly ambitious

through the middle part of the 1960s. Between 1963 and 1968 she made three evening-length

works that came to define the style and approach for which she has become best known. She

often premiered sections of these works as discrete dances on concert programs, before

combining them into integrated full-length compositions. This phase of her career was

inaugurated by *Terrain*, her first evening length work, which premiered at Judson Church in

April of 1963. *Terrain* consisted of five independent sections, each composed of mechanisms of moveable and combinatory material, which, at the time, pushed on the settled definition of dance as a category. *Terrain* incorporated talk primarily as incongruous accompanying material plucked from her environment and re-applied to dance material. However, it also featured the first examples of what I am calling "talk structures," or rule-based systems by which the outcome of indeterminate dance sequences could be determined by negotiated, dialogic piecing together of dance possibilities governed by Rainer's preferences and concerns. These sequences were realized not through Rainer's direct authorship, but by her authoring the movement style sheet that dictated the grammatical rules according to which the dance could be pieced together in the moment.

Working with the diagonal cross, a staple of dance classes, the first section, "Diagonal," involved a game of pre-set crosses which could be executed according to a variety of possible structures imposed on the movement in the moment – namely ten crosses, each assigned a number, to be executed by 1-6 performers at a time, and four crosses, each assigned a letter, to be done by one or two performers. Rainer explained: "Basically the section proceeded through the calling of a single number or letter. Whoever was in the group in which the signal was called was obliged to execute the given movement with the group.… While waiting for a signal you could 'mill' quietly or stand still. If two signals were called simultaneously, you followed whichever one you heard more clearly."[21] Although essentially a matter of efficiency, the single letter or numerical speech acts that prompted and arranged the various "moves" in the "Diagonal" game

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[21] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 14.

modeled verbal communication and materialized some of the power structures that otherwise remain subterranean in performances of apparently "free play."

As in her later collage performances, which the "Diagonal" section of *Terrain* resembles in its most elemental form, Rainer also incorporated several ways in which the authorial logic of the structure could be resisted into the structure itself. Some, such as a performer merely calling a letter or number and recruiting a nearby performer into their new "group," allowed for the authorial role to spontaneously shift according to individual initiatives. But other, notably non-verbal, power transfers involved risk and possible penalties. If a dancer chose to execute an un-called movement on their own, for instance, they were banished to the "out-of-bounds" area until "picked up" by a group. Or if a performer chose to switch directions and follow another group, they could only get away with it if others joined them, otherwise they would also be sent out of bounds. The notion this implied, that resistance to the dictated structure was both a possible and anticipated part of the dance *and* nonetheless constituted a deviation from Rainer's intentions in each individual instance (to the extent that a kind of punishment or corrective had been incorporated into the piece to both illustrate the infraction and to limit the temptation to indulge it) reflects the uniquely dialogical nature of Rainer's approach.

By holding onto authorial control while incorporating voices of dissent *as* voices of dissent (not as collaborators), Rainer moved toward a sense of the inevitable contingency of performance. Contingency might be the biggest source of unspoken anxiety for workers in the performing arts – both "authors" of various sorts (playwrights, directors, choreographers) and performers charged with executing an authorial vision. The fear that someone will forget or fail or simply refuse to do the piece as written and rehearsed and instead do it some other way or not

do it at all underlies all planned live performance. But Rainer assumed this would happen and, rather than trying to smooth it over or prevent it, invited it, actively incorporating the conflict between authorial intent and performer impulse into her piece, without resolving it. She made her performances into a space for conflict and negotiation, incorporating the possibility of rule breaking into the rules, and inviting playfulness, in the sense of following, testing, and breaking the rules into the game without stopping play. Beyond Banes vision of "democracy's body," this was a vision of democracy in the sense of contentious, conflictual, working-through; not an idealized representation of democracy, but a realistic one.

Not only did Rainer incorporate the possibility of rule-breaking into her plans for "Diagonal," but she allowed for "Diagonal" to come into direct conflict with another game, "Passing and Jostling," which did not have its own demarcated section of the larger piece, but coexisted as a separate, unmarked, subset of the "Diagonal" section. "Passing and Jostling" allowed free movement within the given space, but dictated the terms for intersecting with others – one could pass at a right angle in front of another dancer or jostle them with a shoulder while passing (which would activate a still performer). However, if a dancer playing "Passing and Jostling" was jostled not by another dancer who had left "Diagonal" to play "Passing and Jostling," which one could choose to do at any time, but by a dancer still playing "Diagonal," the dancer playing "Passing and Jostling" would be re-incorporated into "Diagonal," and vice versa. Rather than establishing a harmonious co-existence for the two systems, Rainer established this meta-rule contingent upon two sets of players both adhering to the conflicting rules of their own games and acquiescing to the controlling set of rules shared by both groups, between which they could move freely anyway, making the rules themselves part of the choreographic material.

After "Diagonal" and following "Duets," a section in which Rainer and Trisha Brown wordlessly posed in lingerie in imitation of both ballet dancers and pin-up models, the next occurrence of talk in *Terrain* came in the third section, called "Solos." The "Solos" section involved five solos, each performed by two different dancers in indeterminate order, sometimes overlapping within certain restrictions. Two of these solos, "Spencer Holst No. 1" and "Spencer Holst No. 2," included short essays by the downtown New York writer Holst, recited by the dancer while performing a set of actions otherwise identical between the two pieces. By giving the two iterations different names as two distinct dances, Rainer elevated the spoken text from variable accompaniment to choreographic significance. Significantly, Rainer also made a rule that only one of the Spencer Holst solos could be performed at once, to ensure the content of the essays was heard.[22] While it is tempting to understand text as a conceptual intervention in dance, Rainer's use of the Holst material asserted it was also a material presence.

Holst was himself an interesting figure in language-based performance in the 1960s, an associate of Antin and Jackson MacLow and frequent presence at the Living Theater, where he often read and sold his self-published books (no doubt where Rainer encountered him during Robert Dunn's composition class or after). His short, absurdist, fable-like stories and story fragments often read as aphoristic prose poems, which he was known for his readings of in particular. A 2001 *New York Times* obituary said he "gained his reputation partly from his own readings of his stories. He was a big-eyed man and read the magical tales with an air of constant wonderment." In the same obituary, the poet Hugh Seidman said, "it was impossible to get his voice out of your head, impossible not to hear it each time you read one of his fables." John

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[22] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 18.

Hollander, another poet, characterized his work as bound up with its performance: "These are routines -- something like fictions, something like jokes -- of a stand-up tragic. Transcriptions of a spoken voice, their cadences linger beyond laughter."[23] Rainer had no doubt encountered Holst as a performer of his own material, but by choosing to have the dancers speak his words rather than playing a recording, or having Holst himself read them (he was not well known beyond downtown Manhattan and might well have been available,) she was asserting that embodied recitation could be more than merely accompaniment, it could be embedded in, even be in control of, the dance itself.[24]

The next segment of the evening was called "Play," which again dipped into Rainer's engagement with rule-based structures that could be "played"-- in other words, individual games, or units controlled by game logic, in which the sequence was not defined by choreographic specifications (although in some cases these did exist) but by certain interactions between elements of the performance that triggered certain units in certain sequences, and by the successful completion or interruption of these sequences according to the rules by which they were composed. As in "Diagonal," vocal "calls" of the title of the movement unit the initiator – or "caller" – wanted to play, along with the names of the performers the caller wanted to join her, could trigger certain sequences, specifically those which required other dancers, while others happened according to personal initiative and that game's independent rules. Key to this was the

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[23] Harvey Shapiro, "Spencer Holst, 75, Writer and Teller of Fables," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2001, http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/05/arts/spencer-holst-75-writer-and-teller-of-fables.html.

[24] Holst's would-be archivist, Wendy Freeman, in an account of her attempt to posthumously catalogue and place his papers, suggests that modes of performance even formed his concept of the book, "As emphysema began to make breathing difficult, Holst took to enlisting another reader… to trade off sentences with him when he performed the piece. From this new kind of collaboration sprung Holst's concept of a "doublebook", a book that would be issued in two volumes for two readers, to be read aloud." Wendy Freedman, "Appendix 1: Spencer Holst Papers," Quicksilver 1.2, accessed March 25, 2017, https://academics.utep.edu/Default.aspx?tabid=58496.

idea that multiple rule-based activities could be occurring simultaneously in the same playing space without impacting one another, but that their interaction was also governed by a distinct set of shared rules. However, anything not prescribed or proscribed by the rules or by any set choreography, including the order in which the pieces were performed, was, by definition, up for grabs in terms of performer initiative. In other words, through this loose set of rules and defaults, Rainer's dancers were able to negotiate sequences and combinations amongst themselves in the moment without any advance plan.

Rainer refused to assert her authority to sequence the work overall; in fact, even where she had explicit preferences about how the work should be sequenced that she freely shared, she did not insist on those sequences. Rainer wrote: "there were several combinations suggested by me that we became sufficiently familiar with in rehearsal so as to go smoothly from one unit to another without interruption by stopping or calling out new signals – such as 'Game' could be followed by 'Stop' could be followed by 'Jump' could be followed by 'Rest'."[25] But that did not mean they *would* follow in that order. Sally Banes, picking up on Rainer's use of the conditional, wrote: "Rainer suggested, but did not insist, that these three units in this order could follow 'Ball'."[26]

"Ball" itself operated on a complex set of rules of calling and overriding calls to create contingent collaged choreographic sequences. Each of the six performers had a distinct *ball* sequence with which their name was associated, though all performers learned all six sequences. A performer could initiate "Ball" by calling for a ball from the "supplier" (originally Alex Hay in

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[25] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 22.

[26] Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 115.

the Judson Church balcony). Once the red rubber ball had been thrown down, the caller could perform any of the six activities, or call out the names of other dancers in order to arrange a sequence of "Ball" performances on the spot. However, since Trisha Brown's *ball* sequence had to be executed by everyone, it overrode everyone else's ball activity if called or initiated by anyone. The "Ball" unit also controlled the duration of the "Play" section as a whole, since it could not be over until all 50 balls had been tossed down from the supplier in the balcony.

However it had been executed, "Play" ended with a sequence entitled "Love" that might seem more traditionally dramatic or theatrical. In "Love," Rainer and dancer William Davis assumed a series of interlocked intimate poses based on Hindu erotic sculpture, moving between them with a fluidity that anticipated contact improvisation, the participatory movement form that *Terrain* cast member Steve Paxton would establish about a decade later. Hovering somewhere between irony and sincerity, the "duet was accompanied by an irregularly timed dialogue consisting of variations on 'I love you,' such as 'why don't you love me?', 'I've always loved you,' 'say you love me,' etc."[27] Rainer and Davis both mocked and embodied the declarations and entreaties two lovers make in order to shore up their love, both silly and indispensible in the face of the amorphous forms intimate bodily connection takes. The final section, "Bach," set 67 individual movements drawn from the piece to the second part of Bach's *Ich habe genug*, which played while the whole group performed their actions traveling in a column from stage right to stage left and back again. After the contentious and contingent sequences which had gone before, *Terrain* finished in a rare moment of unity, with an ostensibly dance-appropriate musical score.

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[27] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 40.

One of the key chroniclers of the Judson Dance era, Jill Johnston, in a two-part

appreciation of Rainer for the *Village Voice* written in the wake of *Room Service*, the dance

Rainer made immediately after the premier of *Terrain*, made clear the rule-based nature of

Rainer's choreographic "game." Johnston articulated Rainer's particular mix of the collage

strategies of her contemporaries in the plastic arts with a materialized process within the piece

concerned with demonstrating how language and dance do and do not influence one another.

Though this had not yet been articulated as a performance of rehearsal as Rainer would

characterize her later performances, Johnston noted the rules for on-the-ground decision-making

by using calls and signals and, in particular, the increased freedom given to the individual

dancers in the performance.

> …the total event is like stringing beads, or putting panels together, the ways some painters do. Integration is a matter of stylistic consistency. Pacing may be important in sustaining interest. For Miss Rainer the pacing results from a combination of her own set phrases, which have great qualitative variety, and the indeterminate continuity of those phrases arising from a method which permits the dancers to choose the sequence of those phrases and the space in which he will perform them. However, since "Dance for Three People and Six Arms" of last year, Miss Rainer has elaborated this method to include signals and ground rules, thereby adding the freedom of "calling the play," so to speak, and imposing the restriction of obeying the signal.[28]

Johnston tacked her understanding of Rainer's approach to her early association with Merce

Cunningham, who influenced her work possibly more than anyone, and his use of chance

procedure. She deftly identified the ways Rainer's practice diverged from her predecessor by

allowing indeterminacy into the performance itself, not just into the method by which the

performance was composed. Ultimately, Johnston argued, the performance was not determined

by chance or by will, but was determined within the performance event itself by the egos and

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[28] Jill Johnston, "Yvonne Rainer I," *Village Voice*, May 23, 1963, Box 40 Folder 3, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

personalities present, working according to the rules by which Rainer allowed the performance to be structured:

> Cunningham's procedure…. is to set all the components of the dance – the movements and their situation in space and time – by the use of charts representing a large number of possibilities of those components, and tossing coins to determine, at each step, which possibility should occur. Miss Rainer, on the other hand, makes certain choices to begin with and transposes the chance operation into the actual performance of the dance. Chance here becomes improvisatory. The total method is a combination of set materials with directives for the free spontaneous use of that material, limited by rules which further enhance or restrict the freedom of the performer.[29]

What Johnston describes as Rainer's "total method" established an incipient strategy of allowing a performance to proceed without a planned arrangement while still enabling Rainer to exert the discipline of her exacting authorial control over its outcome. Rainer would make use of this approach in her work throughout the 1960s, and it would ultimately become the organizing structure of her collage pieces nearly a decade later.

Parts of Some Sextets

Though there was no talk in Rainer's shorter piece *Room Service*, which she premiered in the fall of 1963, it did take up the notions of variable game logic and internal control that had been given voice by the "calls" in the earlier piece, this time through a "follow the leader game" in which action was dictated by one of three performers each leading one of three groups on an exploration of the stage. Here another element entered in the form of sculptural elements by the artist Charles Ross (who also performed in the work), which he placed around the space in different configurations, thus setting a spatial parameter and physically exerting yet another

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[29] Jill Johnston, *Village Voice*, May 23, 1963.

governing rule the performers had to work within and respond to in the dance. The impact of this choreographic variable manifested in response to conditions of resistance and the dancers' attempts to execute emergent choreography "correctly." Among these actions, carrying furniture, and mattresses in specific, came up organically and provided a key turning point toward the "actual" actions that would inform the evening-length *Parts of Some Sextets.*[30]

Parts of Some Sextets premiered in 1965 and represented another shift for Rainer. She had become interested in choreography that was somehow oblique and removed from audience apprehension – "something completely visible at all times, but also very difficult to follow and get involved with."[31] Her vision for the piece, which depended on having a larger than usual number of dancers performing diverse activities simultaneously, was partly inspired by the scale and visual density of *Check*, a dance for 40+ people that her then-partner, the artist Robert Morris, had premiered while they were in Stockholm, and which eventually appeared in its American version on the same program as a preliminary version of *Parts of Some Sextets.*[32] Rainer drew on Morris's scale and, more broadly, on the experimentation with space, time, and audience attention that characterized much contemporaneous performance, but within the disciplinary frame of concert dance. Theatrical and para-theatrical performances in the 1960s like the Happenings and the work of the Living Theatre often pushed at spectatorial boundaries by surrounding the audience or asking them to navigate an environment. Rainer sought to

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[30] Banes, *Democracy's Body*, 175–78.

[31] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 47.

[32] This performance included David and Eleanor Antin, as well as the performance scholar Michael Kirby and others as performers. Antin and Morris were close associates, Antin discussed Morris frequently in his talk poems and, much later, wrote an extensive critical appreciation of his career. David Antin, "Have Mind, Will Travel," *Radical Coherency: Selected Essays on Art and Literature, 1966 to 2005* (University of Chicago Press, 2011). 98-122.

reinstall those same types of disorienting activities back into traditional frontal performance spaces, with "traditional" spectatorial relationships.

Parts of Some Sextets pushed Rainer's choreographic approach farther toward her developing task-like approach to dance as a process to be witnessed at a remove, rather than as a sensual experience designed to communicate specific information or ideas. For this work, she drew on a particular activity that had come up in *Room Service*: carrying mattresses up the aisle of the theatre and onto the stage, which she felt was "…so self-contained an act as to require no artistic tampering or justification." She even experimented with moving other furniture and found it "definitely not satisfying," asking: "Was the difficulty in the nature of the materials? Could it be that a living room couch is not as 'plastic' as a mattress?" She "(d)ecided to stick to mattresses."[33] The continuity of objects and activities accruing significance through repetition across performances would become central to her approach to making work, with mattresses, pillows, and chairs accumulating and remaining in her pieces for years, up until today, as a kind of material archive available for her to work with and endlessly rearrange.

Emphasizing contingent, repetitive, variable patterning over fresh dance material, Rainer created 31 movement "possibilities" for the performance that "resorted to two devices that I have used consistently since my earliest dances: repetition and interruption."

> In the context of this new piece, both factors were to produce a
> 'chunky' continuity, repetition making the eye jump back and forth
> in time and possibly establishing more strongly the differences in
> the movement material – especially the 'dancey' stuff – that some
> of the movement episodes were simply small fragments used
> randomly and some were elaborate sequences made from
> consecutive phrases. Interruption would also function to disrupt the

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[33] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 45.

> continuity and prevent prolonged involvement with any one
> image.[34]

She made a grid chart with the 31 possible activities running down the left-hand side and 84 30-second intervals marked across the top, "each indicating the juncture of a given piece of material with a given interval in time. The physical space of the dance – where the material would take place – was to be decided by necessity and whim as rehearsals progressed."[35] As in many of her previous dances, certain elements within the structure were left open to choice, impulse, and direction of participating performers. Each square of the grid indicated whether or not the given action would take place during that 30-second interval, how many people would execute it, and who they would be. A given activity might continue for more than one 30 second interval, though if it continued for more than two there would usually be a change in personnel, but *something* would change across the entire situation every 30 seconds.

In order to rehearse this complex and rigidly structured choreography without needing to "set" it in a conventional sense, Rainer recorded a tape to be played in rehearsal of herself saying "change" at 30 second intervals. This stood in for the recordings Rainer would ultimately use of her reading entries from the diary of William Bentley, the late-18th and early-19th century Episcopalian minister whose diary entry about an elephant on public display had been included in Rainer's 1964 piece *At my Body's House*. The Bentley diary provided the timed cues in performance through set cue words, so it became necessary for the performers to switch their cues from Rainer's voice intoning "change" at regular intervals, to certain words occurring at 30-second intervals within the diary entry recordings. Though the internal function of the language

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[34] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 47.

[35] Ibid.

in the piece actually remained purely structural, that fact was concealed by the character and

quality of the diary recordings, which closely recounted the mundane details of life in Bentley's

community, with bits of the wider cultural situation bleeding in at the edges. According to Carrie

Lambert-Beatty's description, "It tells us who died, what building burned, where Bentley

strolled, with whom he ate, who came to him for counsel, who owed him money, to whom he

owed. In Bentley's diary Rainer had a veritable catalog of the everyday."[36] The everyday was, of

course, the very material with which she was working.

As Lambert-Beatty argues, the time-keeping function of the recorded text – it's temporal

structure and the technological means of its delivery -- took precedence over both the meaning of

the text and the sound of the words: "In effect, the time of the tape technology overwrote both

textual and lived time, as Bentley's language and the quotidian sequence of his days were

processed through the standardized time identified in the 1960s as the time of capitalist

modernity."[37] Rather than seeing the work as an unedited stream of "just one thing after the

other," as many critics had, Lambert-Beatty argues that, "The idea that what was missing from

Parts of Some Sextets was the *edit* is reminiscent of film scholars' accounts of the move early in

the history of film from 'actualities,' or short depictions of single events…. to narratives

produced through montage."[38] This idea might also evoke Richard Schechner's concept of the

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[36] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 99.

[37] Lambert-Beatty, 93.

[38] Emphasis in original. Lambert-Beatty, 106–7.

"actual" as an event or element of a performance which plays out as itself not as a strategically crafted representation of, or abstract response to, something else.[39]

Lambert-Beatty argues further that, "The attentional structure of *Parts of Some Sextets* depends on this: that though full of cuts, it was without montage…. It had no correlate for the editorial process that allows film to go beyond the 'real time' of the moving bodies or scenes it depicts, but it did stack those actualities together in a sequence."[40] This reading anticipates not only Rainer's move to filmmaking, but the proto-cinematic centralizing of editorial intervention in the collage works of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which transitioned her from dance to film.

It was from this position of aesthetic and procedural refusal that *Parts of Some Sextets* occasioned Rainer's most widely circulated piece of writing, which has come to be known as the "No Manifesto," but in fact appeared originally as a paragraph in an essay about making this particular piece. The oft-quoted passage laid out her growing resistance to the expectations of dance performance as a visual, mimetic, or cathartic spectacle:

> NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic
> and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendence 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.[41]

Rainer continues to lament that this "manifesto" has been interpreted as her overall statement on her work, or dance as a whole, rather than a specific expression of her approach to the conditions

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[39] Richard Schechner, "Actuals," *Performance Theory*, Rev. and expanded ed (New York: Routledge, 1988). 35-67.

[40] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 106-07.

[41] Yvonne Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965," *The Tulane Drama Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 168–78, doi:10.2307/1125242.

and aesthetics of this piece in particular.[42] From Rainer's perspective, in other words, she was

making a statement about what she was doing rather than what she believed. Indeed, perhaps

even more telling – and more radical -- than the things Rainer was negating, was her sense of the

piece threading a needle between dramatic theatre, non-verbal movement performance, and

immersive experience, and her affirmative acceptance of the piece's difficulty, even

unpleasantness, in order to choose to remain in-process and disciplinarily ambiguous:

> The challenge might be defined as how to move in the spaces
> between theatrical bloat with its burden of dramatic psychological
> "meaning" – and – the imagery and atmosphere of the non-
> dramatic, non-verbal theater (i.e., dancing and some "happenings)
> – and – theater of spectator participation and/or assault. I like to
> think *Parts of Some Sextets* worked somewhere in these spaces…
> Its repetition of actions, its length, its relentless recitation, its
> inconsequential ebb and flow all combined to produce an effect of
> nothing happening. The dance "went nowhere," did not develop,
> progressed as though on a treadmill or like a 10-ton truck stuck on
> a hill: it shifts gears, groans, sweats, farts, but doesn't move an
> inch.[43]

Certainly the question of whether or not she had gotten anywhere was on the minds of

critics, a number of whom felt she had not only failed to make a good dance, but failed to make a

dance at all. A hostile critic for the *Hartford Courant*, responding to the premier of the piece

there in what he thought was a hip patois appropriate to the performance's pretense, actually

grasped something of the piece's deliberate futility, writing,

> Were you with it when they lugged piles of mattresses around the
> stage, and balanced crullers on their backs, and somebody howled

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[42] Rainer wrote in her memoir: "The only reason I am resurrecting it here is to put it in context as a provocation that originated in a particular piece of work. It was never meant to be prescriptive for all choreographers...", *Feelings Are Facts*, 264.

[43] Rainer, "Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' Performed at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965."

> like a dog offstage, and the house lights went on and off, and
> somebody else read on and on from the journals of Rev. William
> Bentley, ex-Salem 1792? If you were, then you know something I
> don't know… you ought to look professional as you go about the
> stage. You ought to make what you do look authoritative, even if
> nobody knows what you are authorizing… a work should look and
> feel made, even if you only use crazy-putty to make it.[44]

Even Rainer's usual champion, Jill Johnston, found the piece difficult to watch, though perhaps

existentially edifying for that difficulty. She wondered,

> How long would you listen to the Reverend Bentley's pedestrian
> observations before you flaked out or began to daydream or
> excused yourself or told the good man to take a powder? On the
> other hand, why not…? … Existentially, why not anything?
> Nothing matters, not too much anyway, because everything
> matters, equally.[45]

Rainer's move to work with ordinary, uninflected, fixed material within defined sets of rules may

represent a first move away from the perceived permissiveness and excess of early 1960s avant-

garde performances like the Happenings, a corollary perhaps to the shift from the exuberance of

abstract expressionist painting to the contained austerity of minimalist sculpture during the same

period. In these terms, what Johnston described might fairly be called a non-happening – a

performance that asserts that no part is any more important than any other part, where the

orderliness and structure that organizes the work takes precedence over the sensual and

experiential content of the work itself. Though talk's role in the piece turned out to be mostly a

time-keeping one, asserting the repetitive inertia of the source material, the shift of focus toward

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[44] Theodore H. Parker, "Were You With It At the Avery?" *Hartford Courant*, March 7, 1965, Box 40 Folder 5, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[45] Jill Johnston, *Village Voice*, n.d., Box 40 Folder 5, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

the editorial structure by which the performance was occasioned established the ground upon which Rainer would continue to build her use of talk as procedural intervention.

The Mind is a Muscle

After two years of development during which sections of the work appeared on various concert programs, *The Mind is a Muscle (MIAM)* officially premiered in 1968. It was the last full-length work of new, purpose-built material Rainer would make during the 1960s. In many ways, it staged an arrival at a kind of choreographic détente, obliquely allowing back in the sort of set, settled staging that Rainer's variable game structures had previously pushed back against. Rainer designed the aesthetics of variability and contingency into the largely predetermined piece, chiefly by piecing together disparate, apparently incongruous elements into a compositional whole. Though talk had largely been filtered out from the dance sequences themselves, her use of interstitial recorded audio, a projected film sequence, visual interruption via material interventions in the set, and the temporal, spatial, and aesthetic fragmentation of the playing space, which allowed diverse and uncoordinated parallel activities to exist within a single visual field, anticipated the pieced together, intermedial nature of the next phase of her work.

　　Carriage Discreteness, Rainer's self-described "disastrous" entry into the famous *9 Evenings* series of art and technology, which I argue below marks the beginning of this next phase, actually preceded the premier of *MIAM*, though the material for the latter had been in development for some time. But between the two, Rainer had undoubtedly begun moving decisively toward film and media, toward collaged retrospective reconfiguration, and toward an aesthetic that not only allowed process into the piece, but centralized the messy, improvised,

dialogic nature of collective work. With *MIAM*, Rainer had reached the apotheosis of her old

way of working and had begun to experiment with what would come next.

As Jill Johnston wrote in her *Village Voice* review, describing the trajectory from

Rainer's idiosyncratic earliest work to the more quotidian and aesthetically neutral coding of the

key sequence in *MIAM*, "Trio A," which has become her most widely known work:

> In the early days of the Judson movement Rainer generated
> excitement chiefly as an original eccentric with a powerful
> personal projection. As early as '64 she began to reevaluate her
> situation to begin moving away from accessible forms by purging
> the work of idiosyncratic (emotion-laden) gesture and dynamically
> varied movement. "Trio A" was the first fully realized expression
> of a new position. The shift is most emphatically toward neutrality:
> toward the matter-of-fact "doing" of a thing rather than the
> "performing" of a thing, toward a "work-like rather than an
> exhibition-like presentation," toward a removal of seductive
> involvement with an audience.[46]

Via ordinary action Rainer materialized an ordinary dance that was nothing other than itself: a

series of specified movements. By treating no movement as more important than or dependent

upon any other movement, Rainer created the condition for the variation that she might have

imposed on earlier work through mimesis, game structure, and indeterminacy. Johnston

described *MIAM's* development as follows, "The work began in '65 as a little snowball (4 ½

minutes called "Trio A") which was slowly pushed over familiar and unfamiliar territory to its

present state as a huge ball containing the history of its journey. The process was accretive rather

than protean."[47] *The Mind is a Muscle* was built on variations of Trio A's choreographic

sequence and its style of methodical, non-expressive, task-like movements accumulating one

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[46] Jill Johnston, "Rainer's Muscle," *Village Voice*, April 18, 1968, Box 22 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[47] Ibid.

after another, interspersed with audio recordings of talk and of music played as interludes sequentially separated from the dance, though nonetheless embedded in the piece.

This version grew to an hour and forty-five minutes with intermission. It began with a recording of a fragmented conversation between Lucinda Childs and William Davis discussing a film they had just seen, a version of an actual conversation Rainer and Morris had recorded after seeing the 1964 Bernardo Bertolucci film *Prima della Rivoluzione* (Before the Revolution). This was followed by the first iteration of "Trio A" in the piece, featuring three men (Davis, Steve Paxton and David Gordon) performing the sequence in a simultaneous but non-synchronized way in front of a wall of reflective Mylar, the first of several incongruously grandiose scenic elements introduced into the 'just as it is' aesthetic of the dance. Deborah Jowitt described this aesthetic in terms of process rather than demonstration, "The movements are difficult, intricate even, but they are performed with an uninflected kind of energy. The object seems to be to accomplish the movement, not to display it."[48]

The Mylar abruptly disappeared midway through "Trio B," which followed "Trio A" with three women (Becky Arnold, Gay Delanghe, and Barbara Lloyd) executing a series of runs in unison, a contrast to the even pace and asynchronicity of "Trio A." They occasionally tread on bubble wrap or rubber placed around the performance space, which made noise when underfoot. This was followed by a different sort of noise, music from *Dial M for Murder* by Dimitri Tiomkin, the first of several pieces of movie music that served as interludes along with the spoken text. These perhaps reflected Rainer's coming move into filmmaking, as well as the

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[48] Deborah Jowitt, "Expanbded Muscle," *Village Voice*, April 18, 1968, Box 40 Folder 14, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

exiling of musical accompaniment and dramatic material, which traditionally structured concert

dance, from the dance itself to these interstitial moments.

The next sequence, "Mat," Rainer identified as "a continuation of the 'Trio A' aesthetic:

two people doing the same sequence out of synch"[49] using a foam rubber mat and a barbell,

performed by Davis and Arnold.[50] "Mat" was followed by "Stairs," in which Rainer, Paxton, and

Gordon performed on and around a moveable set of stairs. Peter Moore's photographs of this

sequence would figure prominently in Rainer's later collage performances as onstage

projections. Then came another interlude of movie music, this time Henry Mancini's *The Pink*

Panther, which introduced "Act," a complex system of rule-based, indeterminate, and negotiated

activities, which nonetheless resisted expression or development, similar to the "Play" section of

Terrain or all of *Parts of Some Sextets*. These were executed on gymnastics and acrobatic

equipment (mats, swings), while on the other side of the stage a vaudevillian juggler and slight of

hand artist, Harry De Dio, brought in just for this section, performed his act, requiring the

audience to divide attention between a somewhat overdetermined piece of "entertainment" and

Rainer's austere, shifting ecology of task-based movement. Together with *Carriage*

Discreetness, this marked a shift into what Carrie Lambert-Beatty has called a "split-screen

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[49] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 79.

[50] This section had been performed on its own the previous year while Rainer was hospitalized with a severe gastrointestinal illness. For that performance, the movement was accompanied by a recording of Rainer reading a letter from the doctor in Denver who had diagnosed her to a surgeon in New York, describing her illness in medical terms. Rainer said, "It was using autobiography as a 'found' object without any stylistic transformation." *Work: 1961-1973,* 79.

performance mode," a proto-cinematic sense that the performance frame constitutes a visual plane within which images and actions can be collaged [51]

While Lambert-Beatty retroactively understands *The Mind is a Muscle* as anticipatory of Rainer's mediated future, Rainer herself saw it as a response to, and refusal of, the media environment of the late 1960s in which she found herself. Disavowing a political ideology for the work specifically as a response to the global political climate, she wrote in her program note that the apparent apolitical stance of the piece "…is a reflection of a state of mind that reacts with horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV – not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterwards as after a bad Western. My body remains the enduring reality."[52] Rainer ends her note by asserting that her own physical presence is the enduring reality which must contend with a world in which painfully divergent events coexist and, thanks to broadcast media, are often placed into close proximity to one another, even when thousands of miles separate them. She understood this in terms of a turn away from the indifference of media structures, while Lambert-Beatty, with the perspective of time, sees that Rainer was in fact turning toward media in a fundamental way. Her body became the site of a highly subjective collage procedure, in which the disparate images conveyed by mass media uneasily coexisted, just as her audience each had to make sense of the side-by-side juxtaposition of Harry De Dio's nightclub act with her dancers' systematic choreography.

By removing the content of the Vietnam War in "Act," Rainer was addressing the underlying media and spectatorial structure through which performers and audience must deal

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[51] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 215.

[52] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 71.

with both a front-facing nightclub act and a desultory series of task-based, internally negotiated tableau, oriented away from audience apprehension or enjoyment. Despite Rainer's demurral, this sort of mediated structure for a multi-channel collage performance has been understood as fundamentally entwined with the political and social situation as expressed in avant-garde aesthetics throughout the 20th century. Whether that is the mixture of radio signals, telegraphs, and newspapers turning up in Dada college art of the late 1910s and early 1920s, or the exuberant, excessive media and mass market aesthetics of her colleagues and contemporaries making the Happenings, collage performance has persisted as a response to media environments entrenched in militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and other historical inequities.

This interest in non-synchronous, aesthetically and spatially divergent, collectively negotiated activity, and its limits, would inform much of the rest of Rainer's dance career during the 1960s and 70s. Lambert-Beatty points to *Untitled Work for 40 people*, a dance event that same year for NYU students which took over two large rooms of the student union with an indeterminate arrangement of activities – some drawn from MIAM itself – structured by a set of oblique pre-determined rules.[53] Here the asynchronous simultaneity extended not only to diverse activities, but also to mutually exclusive spaces between which the audience and performers, if they could distinguish themselves from each other, were free to move. The result was a unified piece, made by virtue of the "enduring reality" of each participant's body, the same enduring reality that prevented any one body from experiencing the entire piece.

The strategy of dividing audience attention between activities which fade in or out carried over from what was supposed to be a much more controlled version of this approach in her

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[53] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 215; Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 307.

forward-looking piece *Carriage Discreteness*, about which more below. In that performance,

Rainer externally controlled what was happening onstage via remote technological intervention,

through which she maintained separate and indeterminately arranged areas and aspects of focus

that switched around without the dancers' prior knowledge. In the performances that then

followed *Carriage Discreteness*, which I will turn to next, Rainer materialized this editorial

intervention through contingent onstage talk. Conceiving "Act" late in the process of finalizing

MIAM, Rainer herself began to articulate the trajectory she was on in notes she made after the

troubled presentations of *Carriage Discreteness* as part of the Art and Technology *9 Evenings*

series,

> 'Something is always happening—separated by momentary stillness – but only one thing at a time. It is like Carriage Discreetness. In the latter the hand of God changed the hugely dispersed configuration into a slightly different configuration. In Act the participants themselves rearrange the configuration, always returning to positions of neutrality, i.e., quietly observing a central focal point while at ease, but perfectly still, in a standing, sitting, or lying down posture, from which they can observe the rest of the configuration. Instructions are given improvisationally by each in a pre-set order to the rest of the group while the "instructor" remains perfectly immobile. Eye movements are essential in order to maintain a look of attentiveness rather than self-absorption. This section is about changes in a configuration rather than about movement. The changes are made with quiet efficiency.' Hand signals were given to the stage manager when an 'instructor' wanted the level of the swings changed. It took a while to figure out in rehearsal what this section was about… After repeated and disagreeable vetoing of the groups efforts at fulfilling my instructions, it finally dawned on me that I did not want intermittent movement 'invention' but changes in static relationships of objects and people, which brought it into the realm of 'tableau' and 'task' rather than 'dance.'[54]

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[54] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 83.

That "repeated and disagreeable vetoing" is what Rainer would bring into the performance itself in her subsequent work by way of both increasingly rigid and pre-set sections of movement (or "static relationships of objects and people") and increasingly unrehearsed and freely enacted verbal negotiation onstage.

In her notes she wrote: "…expand the focus away from the personal psychological confrontation with the performer. The performer is the residue from an obsolescent art-form – theater. How to use the performer as a medium rather than persona?"[55] One response, as in *Terrain*, was to keep the dancers onstage throughout, milling about, resting, watching and decidedly not performing. The dancers became inert material that remained nonetheless part of the piece as a whole even while not being instrumentalized to express some specific thing or execute some specific task, they merely maintained their presence throughout as potential performers, not yet in motion.

By removing both the content and the structure that would easily indicate a demarcated category of dance, Rainer stood on the verge of opening her work up to interpretations that de-emphasized discipline, or even took up her work on behalf of a discipline with which she herself might not identify. As Frederick Castle wrote approvingly in *Art News* at the time, "A show by Yvonne Rainer is a demonstration of modern art. It is not 'dancing.' It is not 'theater.' It is not 'painting' or 'sculpture' or 'cinema' or 'poetry' or 'happenings.'"[56] I would argue that Rainer's performances of this era were events in which the possibility of each of those forms could be presented and deferred, turning the focus of the work back on itself. Stripped of its disciplinary

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[55] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 106.

[56] Frederick Castle, "To Go To Show Them," *ARTnews* 37, June 1968, Box 22 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

framework and a finalized form, Rainer's work turned to the examination of its own process of becoming – the work not as a piece documenting its own making, but as a piece in the process of being made that will never be finished, perhaps as medium-specific as live performance can get. Don McDonough thought he was expressing exasperation with Rainer, whose other work he admired, when he wrote in the *NYT*, "'*Mind*' has been subjected to constant revision. The current version is the third I've seen and it definitely leaves the impression that it will never be really finished."[57] But his jibe proved oddly prescient.

Carriage Discreteness

The possibilities presented by the spatial and conceptual bifurcation seen in "Act" developed alongside Rainer's experimentation with technological intervention in *Carriage Discreteness*, which was staged as part of the *9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering* series of collaborations between artists and Bell Laboratory engineers presented at the 69th Regiment Armory in October of 1966. In *Carriage Discreteness*, Rainer began to materialize the act of authorship through control and decision-making, and especially the implication of potential variability. The performance manifested not a given design but a contingent set of possibilities that existed at the intersection of a singular intervening intelligence communicating from offstage with the dancing bodies onstage and a series of randomized autonomous interventions under the control of neither Rainer nor her performers.

    Carriage Discreteness introduced to Rainer's repertoire live, improvised control of the particular composition of diverse available materials, gathered from other, pre-existing

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[57] Don McDonough, "Miss Rainer Offers 'Mind is a Muscle'," *New York Times*, April 12, 1968, Box 22 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

performances and outside media (film, photography) and available to Rainer as a list of pre-set

but not pre-arranged elements to choose from. This would characterize her approach in the

collage works to come, as well, except here her control over the sequence of the performance

was to be executed remotely, outside the awareness of the audience. At the same time, a

randomized computer system was set up to control lights, film, audio, projections, and other

media elements kept deliberately outside of Rainer's, or the dancers', control. In a program note,

Rainer explained the concept:

> A dance consisting of two separate but parallel (simultaneous)
> continuities and two separate (but equal) control systems.
> 1. Performer continuity controlled by me from a place remote
>   from the performing area where at the moment of
>   performance I decide the action and placement of people
>   and objects and communicate those decisions to the 10-odd
>   performers via walkie-talkie.
> 2. Event continuity controlled by TEEM (theater electronic
>   environmental modular system) in its memory capacity.
>   This part consists of sequential events that include movie
>   fragments, slide projections, light changes, a tape-recorded
>   conversation; and automated movement of a balloon,
>   Plexiglas globe, Lucite rod (illuminated), black-lit material,
>   garbage pail, tin can, collapsible wood partition; and cued
>   movement of a man in a swing and 4 people in the
>   audience, 2 of them making sounds through bull horns.[58]

Rainer characterized her role in the performance in a note she sent during planning stages to

Billy Klüver, the engineer who orchestrated the *9 Evenings* series and the organization behind it,

Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.): "I am trying to graduate from choreographer to

field marshal!"[59] Rainer seems to have later re-thought this position, writing in her memoir,

"Why couldn't I have allowed the performers to move the objects in any way they pleased? After

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[58] "9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering," Box 21, Folder 22, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[59] Rainer, letter to Billy Klüver, 31 Aug 1966, Box 21 Folder 22, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

all, the piece was about 'the idea of effort and finding precise ways in which effort can be made evident or not.' But no, I had to exercise my controlling directorial hand."[60] This tension between her desire for control and her wish to display the performers negotiating with her material in real time would animate her subsequent work, and ultimately transform it beyond recognition.

In her role of "field marshal" she was not concerned with generating new material, but in generating new relationships between material, which included movement sequences she was developing for *MIAM*, film and projections from previous performances, set pieces and objects she had used before, the recorded movie conversation that featured as an "interlude" in *MIAM*, and new sculptural elements developed by minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, who also performed in the work, and by Per Biorn, the Bell Lab engineer she was paired with, that intervened and exerted their own limiting control over the performance possibilities. Out of this approach Rainer began piecing together the shifting collage strategies of her subsequent performances, specifically by beginning to insert herself as conductor, in both senses of the word, between component parts. With this performance, Rainer was intervening live into the presentation of her choreographic material, though she was still doing so from the traditional authorial position offstage, using remote radio wristwatches, even as the performance and its composition came into greater temporal proximity.

Though Rainer was still focused on the alterations she was making from offstage, critic Lucy Lippard spotted something choreographically significant in the relationship of the movement to Rainer's verbal instructions that Rainer had not yet spotted herself, the impact of her physical, specifically vocal, directorial presence on the quality of the dancers' movement:

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[60] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 275.

"The movement was unhurried, relaxed (though the tension necessary to listen to the radios belied this somewhat.)"[61] Eventually, Rainer would be inserting herself physically into her presentations, making her presence and influence known as she directed from amidst her performers in a series of performance events that brought into the performance what *Carriage Discreteness* had kept deliberately offstage.

In the end, Rainer regarded *Carriage Discreteness* as a "fiasco."[62] Both the walkie-talkies she was using to communicate with the dancers and the pre-programmed electronic events malfunctioned. The dancers did indeed end up moving the objects around the stage at random, an outcome Rainer found much more displeasing in practice than she eventually would in retroactive principle. The piece was scheduled on two consecutive nights of the series and, as it happened, Rainer was hospitalized with severe abdominal distress after a lamb chop dinner at Max's Kansas City following the first performance. Robert Morris took the controls for the second night, which went more smoothly in her absence. But Rainer was already turning her attention back to the lower-tech eclecticism of *MIAM,* which had been performed in its first version earlier that year, and which shared some material with *Carriage Discreteness.* The work Rainer would devote herself to in the years after *The Mind is a Muscle*, however, would continue to play between the impulses *Carriage Discreteness* introduced – to direct and control the action as it happens and to allow the process of performance to play out unhindered, with unanticipated results.

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[61] Lucy R. Lippard, "Total Theatre?" *Art International*, Jan 20, 1967, v.XI, I, p. 39, Box 21 Folder 23, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[62] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 275.

Performance Demonstrations

The impulse toward a contingent performance format through which she could both control and respond to the construction of the performance event in the moment, which Rainer first explored – and thought fell flat – in *Carriage Discreteness*, re-emerged in the fall of 1968. As she moved from an imperial position in the balcony to a visible and vocalized position onstage in what became increasingly variable collage performances, she brought the act of authorship into temporal and spatial proximity to the performance. Rainer described the first of her new pieces, which she labeled *Performance Demonstration*, as an amalgam of "fragments from old work plus slides, sound, and whatever new movement ideas engaged me." She "also began to think about the teaching process itself as a possible form of performance. During *Performance Demonstration* at the Performing Arts Library at Lincoln Center in the fall of 1968, I began to teach Becky Arnold *Trio A* while fifteen people executed various tasks around us…"[63] Key to this new format was Rainer's presence onstage, in contact and communication with the dancers and the material being revisited and arranged. By increasingly subordinating the rules and expectations of rehearsed and polished dance performance to the potential of in-the-moment instruction and curation, Rainer was paradoxically foregrounding her own authority. Though her collaborators and her audience often wanted to read the move as a release from the traditional strictures of the dance process, Rainer used it to reify her role as author by centralizing and materializing her control in the piece itself.

In her book on Rainer in the visual and media culture of the 1960s, Carrie Lambert-Beatty parses a photograph of this first performance by Peter Moore in which the live

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[63] Rainer, *Feelings are Facts*, 313.

performance blurs, in the flat image, with a series of photographs documenting the Stairs section of *MIAM*, projected on the upstage wall. Lambert-Beatty sees in this image the means "to slip performance away from its present tense and reveal it split and suspended – and…at the same time, to demonstrate the resistance of the live to the need to manage it…"[64] This is an apt description of the nature of Rainer's relationship to the past and the present in these performances given Lambert-Beatty's focus on the complex ways the archival residue of Rainer's past performances remains in the pieces, and her visual analysis of the tangled after-images this meeting of past and present leaves behind. But I am concerned with precisely that which disappears in these works, the instructional talk through which Rainer communicated her thoughts, organized her material, and negotiated with her performers. It was the reliance on Rainer's presence and on-the-spot decision making that ensured these performances were always contingent on the particular arrangement of material – performers and other media – in place and in the moment.

Lambert-Beatty refers to the shifting set of overlapping performances Rainer presented in the late 1960s and early 1970s as "format performances," reflecting Rainer's distinction that she was no longer making discrete "pieces," but rather developing formats for teaching, demonstrating, showing, and explaining her work as particular occasions arose, rather than after the work was "finished." Lambert-Beatty quotes from a letter to dance artist and presenter Maida Withers, who was trying to organize a program of Rainer's dance, "I work (and think) fairly continuously with a cut-off point being a performance date rather than an idea of 'completion.' Thus the nature of the performance is strongly determined by each particular situation *at the*

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[64] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 125.

moment of performance.[65] I will also use "collage" and "composite" performances, the latter of which Rainer herself employed, as similarly useful terms. They each evoke the collage tendencies in the wider avant-garde milieu from which Rainer emerged, and perhaps more importantly refer to the embodied action of piecing together disparate elements into an emergent whole. Just as collage depends on physically compiling diverse materials into a composite whole that nonetheless continues to make evident its means of construction, I focus on the embodied, materialized work Rainer was herself doing, and making seen, to piece together these performances.

Building on Lambert-Beatty's argument that the collage performances replicated modes of media viewership, I argue that these performances constituted a proto-cinematic impulse to cut together diverse, pre-existing elements, to play with space and with time, to mark and reference the position of the viewer and the space between the viewer and the work, and to experiment with presenting concurrent activities both simultaneously and as mutually exclusive events through spatial and temporal separation.[66] By leading up to Rainer's subsequent career as a filmmaker, which took up her impulse for cutting together temporal units in a disciplinarily coherent context, this chapter seeks to recover another, unrealized set of possibilities for a live performance format dependent on the negotiated structures shared by the rehearsal and the editing rooms, yet made visible to an audience in real time.

In the first iteration of *Performance Demonstration #1* in September of 1968, Rainer's concern was with a Brechtian (or perhaps Cagean/Cunninghamesque) separation of the diverse

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[65] Letter to Maida Withers, 29 September 1970. Qtd in: Lambert-Beatt*y, Being Watched*, 202. (Emphasis in original.)

[66] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched,* 214–29.

elements within the work (i.e., claiming space for dance apart from dramatic material or musical accompaniment), which was still a set, though eclectic, sequence of material at this point. Rainer, though, was already using spoken language to draw attention to her changeable authority and the provisional nature of the performance instance. The live performance was accompanied by a recording of Rainer delivering a lecture. Though recorded, it began by drawing attention to its own contingency in relationship to that particular performance event, "This tape has been made for this particular occasion. It concerns omissions from this presentation as well as recent reflections about my work. For another occasion the verbal material would most likely be different – both in content and placement within the demonstration."[67] She went on to detail a film she planned to include but had not yet shot, and a female performer she intended to add to a duet later in the piece. As the lecture played, the dancers performed "Mat," a section of *MIAM*, which gave way to the sequential still slides of the "Stairs" segment from the same piece.

While the film of a volleyball rolling she had used in *MIAM* was projected and Rainer and Becky Arnold performed a running piece, Rainer's pre-recorded voice addressed, in an ironic way, her dislike of music accompaniment in dance. Performing various humorous deformations of the word music over the course of the talk in an exaggeratedly self-serious tone, she explained "I want my dancing to be the superstar and refuse to share the limelight with any form of collaboration or co-existence. *Muzak* does not accompany paintings in a gallery nor does it encroach on the dialogue in a stage play." She acknowledged that movie music is deeply entwined with the art form it accompanies, but argued that movie music triumphs where it is most self-consciously mediocre and cliché, and that modern dance failed to develop in tandem

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[67] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 110.

with the form's masters of mediocrity and cliché like Dmitri Tiomkin or Henry Mancini. Instead, she proposed "*Meesik*-to-sit-and-wait-by. A juxtaposition in time with visual elements rather than a superimposition. Thereby whatever images the *meezake* evokes need not be 'applied' to the dance." Rainer's explanation not only footnoted the relationship between music and movement in *Performance Demonstration #1*, but also retroactively reframed the appearance of the theme from *The Pink Panther* in a *MIAM* interlude. By commenting on and reconfiguring material from past performances in her new format, Rainer was also remaking those past works.[68]

Her mock-indignant call for a separation of elements modeled on movie music was emphasized by a selection of Tiomkin's music. This was almost immediately undermined, though, by the sonically rich, psychedelic cover of Wilson Pickett's "In the Midnight Hour" by the Chambers Brothers, which played over Steve Paxton, stripped to the waist, performing a virtuosic version of *Trio A*. This stirring juxtaposition instantly countered every claim Rainer had made about the place of music in her work. She would continue to pair the Chambers Brothers recording with versions of *Trio A* for many years after, often placing it side-by-side with accompanied versions. When the song ran out, Rainer's *Trio A* lecture began playing, describing the contents of the dance as contrasted with the disciplinary expectation of dance in general,

> …this particular kind of display with its emphasis on nuance and skilled accomplishment, its accessibility to comparison and interpretation, its involvement with connoisseurship, its introversion, narcissism and self-congratulatoriness has finally in this decade exhausted itself, closed back on itself, and perpetuates itself solely by consuming its own tail. The alternatives that were explored now are obvious: stand, walk, run, eat, carry bricks, show movies, or move or be moved by some-thing rather than oneself. Some of the early activity in the area of self-movement utilized

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[68] Rainer, "Music lecture," audiotape, Box 101.b R7, Yvonne Rainer Papers. Source text reprinted in *Work: 1961-1973* includes internal quotations.

> games, found movement (walking, running, etc.) and people with
> no previous training.[69]

Even as Paxton's virtuosity gave way to an untrained performer executing the piece, Rainer insisted, "action can best be focused on through the submerging of the personality, so ideally one is not even oneself, one is a neutral doer," an idea the two very differently disciplined bodies performing the same sequence of movements implicitly called into question. Finally, Becky Arnold began her own, third rendition of *Trio A*, except this time Rainer intervened to correct her, showing and semi-privately explaining the dance to her in front of the audience and in amongst the other dancers. In the middle of this, 20 performers rushed across the stage, moving at random around the lesson Rainer was giving Arnold before leaving the stage just as abruptly

Based on two drafts of the sequence for this performance that Rainer had typed up in advance of the Lincoln Center library performance, she had initially labeled this event a "Lecture Demonstration." This was a reference to an explanatory format employed by earlier modern dancers such as Martha Graham and José Limón to deconstruct their work for an audience, which relied on an expected relationship between verbal explanation (lecture) and physical example (demonstration). Before the first presentation, though, Rainer evidently switched the title to *Performance Demonstration*, which blurred the line between its constituent parts by emphasizing the performance event to the point of redundancy.[70] A "performance demonstration," it would seem, must be a performance that demonstrates something, which one might assume to be what a performance always does. In this case, what it demonstrated was apparently performance itself. Rainer took the circumstances and assumptions of performance as

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[69] Rainer, "Trio A lecture," audiotape, Box 101.b R7, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[70] Rainer, "cue sheet, Lecture Demonstration #1 & #2," Box 22 Folder 10, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

the starting point for a work meant to bring the process of making a performance out into the light. Rainer's impulse was to both expose and shore up her authorial role in her own work, not neither a sense of excessive confidence in what she was doing, nor from a wish to efface her own authorship through exposure, but rather from a sense that the act of authoring was not only what made the work possible, but that it was itself the work. The complete work, that is, could not exist if it had to rely on separating out the labor and negotiation of making from presenting the finished product; they had to go together.

When *Performance Demonstration #1* next appeared under that title the following spring of 1969, in a performance at Pratt Institute, it opened with the "lecture on muciz" and the slides of the "Stair" section of MIAM, followed by the Tiomkin music accompanying "Two Trios," a modified version of the running dance in the Lincoln Center version. This was followed by the *Trio A* lecture alongside a film of *Trio A* being performed, and a new element, a public rehearsal for what Rainer was calling "Continuous Project – Altered Daily," a title she'd borrowed from a variable installation work by Robert Morris to describe her own highly contingent experiment with the performance of rehearsal. This was introduced via a new lecture on tape, itself focused on rehearsal as a structuring logic for her performance:

> This piece might be called 'in progress' in that it continues to be
> re-arranged and added to. Nevertheless it is ready for performance.
> In fact, by the second rehearsal it was ready for performance. The
> idea of process is not a new idea in art. Duchamp and others 30
> years ago revealed aspects of the work process in the completed
> product. Since rehearsals consume more than 10 times as much
> time as the actual performance, it seems obvious that the rehearsal
> itself presents a new area of focus: my role of boss-lady to my
> people-material, the 'people-material' as responding human
> beings, the tentativeness of decision making, the revelation or lack
> of revelation of the boss's thought process. I myself after many
> years of making dances and using people have had to become more

sensitive to the peculiar nature of the rehearsal, – partly as a result of being oppressed by guilt, but also as a reaction to the domination of formal dance concerns and the conflict inherent in using people to define these concerns. The weight and ascendancy of my own authority have come to oppress me. As an artist I continue to experience the exhilaration of my own obsessive images which in turn provide their own reasons for realization. It is just lately that I have come to question the accepted exclusion in performance of the interactions that lead to that realization. Such interactions are sometimes implied but rarely are focused on. To do so in a performance situation presents problems that perhaps are insurmountable at the present time; for instance how much of what is seen would actually take place with the spectators not present? The strain of acting in a so-called 'normal' fashion, that is as though the spectators are absent, or 'nearly' as though they are, absent continues to be real. It is in this area of realness that the problem seems vital and conducive to renewed efforts toward revelation.[71]

Rainer then followed this rehearsal section by teaching *Trio A* to another person while 30 or so others watched and followed along. First, her instructions were the only soundtrack, then the Chambers Brothers score accompanied the dance.

Rainer would identify the Pratt *Demonstration*, and presumably the performance of rehearsal which constituted the major addition to the piece since the fall, as the moment "that I became conscious of the exhilarating implications of this new mode of performance…" explaining,

I envisioned an ongoing process with six performers that would encompass a gamut of activities performed along a continuum of imperfection and polish and that would drastically change its shape with each performance. What was beginning to interest me was the possibility of producing spontaneous behavior within a formal setting… Not fully rehearsing material meant that we would have

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[71] Rainer, "Rehearsal Lecture," audiotape, Box 101.b R7, Yvonne Rainer Papers; Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 109. Text is transcribed from archival audio, but uses punctuation from Rainer's book as guide, however in the book small changes have been made, for instance on the tape she says rehearsals consume "10 times" as much time as performance, while in the text she claims "30 times."

> to talk about it during the performance itself. Our ad hoc
> interactions would be seen beside more conventionally polished
> material.[72]

Rainer's interest in juxtaposition was on display; she was neither interested in codifying a highly

skilled and precisely choreographed display, nor with opening up the performance to the kind of

supposedly democratic movement for which Judson dance is sometimes credited. Instead, she

aspired to a format that would ensure that both approaches and more could co-exist and, most

importantly, shift from performance to performance through face-to-face conversation, dancers

negotiating and re-negotiating the performance at each moment and at each presentation. This

would be the ethos that would inform Rainer's collage performances going forward, eventually

resulting in the performance of rehearsal, *Continuous Project-Altered Daily*, first introduced as

merely one performance possibility in *Performance Demonstration #1*, subsuming the format

entirely.

Rose Fractions

In between these two *Performance Demonstrations*, Rainer made an attempt to stretch her new

approach to format even farther. In early 1969 Rainer was invited to participate in a dance series

produced on Broadway with funding from the Ford Foundation that loosely grouped together

four choreographers (Rainer, Twyla Tharp, Meredith Monk, and Don Redlich) under the banner

of avant-garde dance. Perhaps because of this setting and the usual tendency for dance in such a

context to be presented as part of a concert program, Rainer borrowed the modular form of the

dance concert to construct a second composite piece, *Rose Fractions*, named for the Billy Rose

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[72] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 317–18.

Theater where it was presented. Structuring the piece along the lines of a dance program enabled

the incorporation of pre-existing dances, both shorter sequences like the variations of *Trio A* seen

in *Performance Demonstration #1*, and longer multi-part works, into her "rambling

construction(s)."[73] These included a distinct three-part dance work Rainer originally made at

Goddard College in Vermont, *North East Passing*, and even a piece by another choreographer

invited by Rainer, Deborah Hay's *26 Variations on 8 Activities for 13 People plus Beginning

and Ending*, within the structure of *Rose Fractions* as a whole.

Encompassing distinct pieces under the umbrella of a single composite work effectively

re-envisioned the limits of what can constitute a dance piece, blurring the line between a

performance as a discrete work of art and the presentational format by which an audience

encounters that work.[74] Usually a curatorial exercise external to the work itself, the evening's

frame expanded to include the arrangement of its component parts, making that arrangement into

a choreographic intervention in its own right. Marking the Broadway venue in addition to the

dance concert legacy, the evening played with the expectations of frontally-oriented, spectacular

theatrical presentation as much as it did the choreographic expectations of the dance studio.

Rainer described it as a:

> ...huge, sprawling piece incorporating nine non-professionals, five
> professionals, film, slides, swaths of paper and rubber, books,
> fluorescent lights, a monologue a la Lenny Bruce (*On Snot*), an
> aspic fish on an aluminum platter, 'People Walls' and other formal
> configurations, packages, *Trio A* done by five non-professionals
> and then by five professionals to *In the Midnight Hour,* the

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[73] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 116.

[74] Interestingly, Gray and Lecompte did something similar in *Point Judith – an epilog*, the addenda to *Three Places in Rhode Island*, which included a naturalistic play, *Rig*, by a different playwright, Jim Strahs, in the middle of the piece. David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 134–43.

premiere of Deborah Hay's *26 Variations on 8 Activities for 13 People plus Beginning and Ending,* and my own *North East Passing…*[75]

Many of these elements, including objects, actions, images, spoken material, films, dance sequences and more, appeared in the program in two columns as an ostensibly equalized list describing the contents of *Rose Fractions* Section I, preceded by the remark "Elements in this section include the following (not listed in the order in which they appear)".[76]

Though the arrangement of this material could change from performance to performance while remaining legitimately able to be described as the same piece, each performance sequence was preset according to a formal, overlapping, and intermedial parody of sorts of a theatrical experience, complete with an overture, lights fading up and down, curtains opening and closing repeatedly, stage sets assembled and disassembled, films projected, lines read, and stories told.[77] Rainer wrote that, "The difference between this leviathan and *The Mind is a Muscle* lay in the rambling construction of *Fractions* and its constant turning over of the material, in contrast to the thorough and somewhat didactic investigations in each section of *Muscle.*"[78] The start of a slippage, it seems, between the tight constructions of her mid-decade work, however unconventional that work might have been, and the loosening of boundaries, both disciplinary and structural, in these new works.

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[75] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 114.

[76] Rose Fractions program, Box 22 Folder 12, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[77] Rose Fractions cue sheet, *Work: 1961-1973*, 118.

[78] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 114.

Nonetheless, *Rose Fractions* is probably best remembered for its inclusion of a

pornographic film on the second and final night of the performance (Rainer had held off showing

the film on the first night for fear of having the subsequent performance canceled entirely):

> Picture this (from the spectator's point of view): To the right of the
> proscenium arch is a film of two nude figures – Steve and Becky –
> executing simple maneuvers with a large white balloon in a white
> living room… To the left of the proscenium arch is a projection of
> a heterosexual "blue movie" – a scratchy print, probably shot in the
> 1940s – that looks "dirty" in every sense, down to the man's dirty
> fingernails. Downstage is a row of a dozen people facing the
> audience and moving their ribcages laterally back and forth. At
> stage right are three performers… doing something I don't
> remember while I stand at a microphone and recite Lenny Bruce's
> *On Snot,* which begins, 'I'm going to tell you the dirtiest word
> you've ever heard onstage…'[79]

Though the film was cut off by a house manager, Rainer was determined that,

> If only for a few minutes duration, the audience would be exposed
> to these contrasting functions and representations that, when seen
> together, might turn the notion of obscenity on its head. Secretion,
> movement, nudity, and play, from the everyday to the contrived
> and hilarious. In this context the moving ribcages became as
> 'obscene' as the pornographic display, the porn as funny as the
> *Snot* recitation.[80]

This equalization of material might characterize many of Rainer's creative choices throughout

her career, from the "Play" section of *Terrain* to the design of *Parts of Some Sextets* to the "Act"

section of *The Mind is a Muscle* to the conception of *Carriage Discreetness*. The pornographic

film merely tested that on the extreme end, implying that anything could take the place of

anything else in her ever-changing performance amalgams.

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[79] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 315–16.

[80] Ibid.

Not surprisingly, the explicit film caused a minor uproar, though one predicated on a critical pose of boredom and indifference that unwittingly mirrored Rainer's egalitarian approach to her materials. This was ignited by Clive Barnes's review that ran under the headline "Blue Movies? Ho Hum" in the *New York Times* of February 16th, in which he took the Ford Foundation to task for their irresponsible sponsorship, by way of funding the season of modern dance of which the performance was a part, of Rainer's display of a dirty movie for which, "there was no artistic justification." Describing Rainer's work as "hysterical studies in boredom" for the "lunatic fringe," Barnes, who had once admired Rainer's work, grudgingly lamented her fall from grace,

> Miss Rainer used to be a rather interesting dancer. What I saw of her Billy Rose program –I left early as what I had seen was both excruciatingly boring and insulting – leads me to think that she has copped out. I presume she would consider herself a 'minimal artist.' And that, I suppose, just about sums her up. Minimal.[81]

These accusations, that Rainer's approach at this point in her career was both boring and did not qualify as dance, would return again and again. It was perhaps Rainer's turn away from even the trappings of dramatic unity, much more than her use of a pornographic film, which made her work stand out as what Barnes called, in a follow-up column. "non-dance and self-indulgence."[82] While her earlier work pushed back on assumptions about what dance is and could be, Rainer's multimedia collage performances repositioned dance as an art-making strategy different only in its particulars from other art-making strategies, and suggested that it is the art-making strategy

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[81] Clive Barnes, "Blue Movies? Ho Hum," *NY Times*, February 16, 1969, Box 40 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[82] Clive Barnes, "Critic's Concern--And Ford's," *NY Times*, March 2, 1969, Box 40 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

overall, with its emphasis on arrangement and the shared process of making, and not an ostensibly finished product, that matters.

This may actually have been a feature of Barnes's objection when he tried to add insult to injury by directly equating *Rose Fractions* with the allegedly anti-theatrical impulses of minimalist sculpture. His objection seems to have been not that she had abandoned taste or decency, but that she had abandoned the reference point and requirements of her discipline. Ironically, this pejorative use of minimalism as anti-theatrical flipped the script on art critic Michael Fried's critique of minimalism in his influential essay "Art and Objecthood," in which he equated minimalist sculpture's scale and dependence on spectators' spatial relationship to the sculptural object with an idiosyncratic definition of theatricality tied to space and embodiment, which he took as a betrayal of the elements that defined sculpture as a discipline.[83] This likewise seems to have been the critical difference Barnes saw between what Rainer was doing, which he rejected as "non-dance," and the contemporaneous experimental theatre that he championed, which remained recognizably theatrical no matter how outrageous it became. Barnes opined, "that while the American experimental theatre is alive and active, experimental dance is … languishing. There is little avant-garde dance as interesting as, say, Richard Schechner's Performance Group, or the Becks and their Living Theater."[84] The collage works did not really intervene into dance, per se – there was, after all, room for perfectly coherent and recognizable dance pieces to remain whole right in the middle of *Rose Fractions* – rather, in what amounted to a truly avant-garde move, Rainer was intervening into the art format itself. The

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[83] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood." *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[84] Clive Barnes, "Blue Movies? Ho Hum," *NY Times*, February 16, 1969.

transdisciplianrity of Rainer's work during this period is precisely what made it incoherent as dance, and so important as art.

Critic Marcia B. Siegel, writing in *New York* magazine, dismissed the furor around Rainer's use of the pornographic film in similar terms, comparing what Siegel took to be her anti-theatricality unfavorably to Merce Cunningham's innovations of the previous decade, "Cunningham-like, she makes many things happen at the same time, but she has gone beyond Cunningham by saying that none of these things are important; one is as neutral as the other, be it pornography or play, or a Lenny Bruce lecture on snot…. The effect of all this is, of course, boring, and Rainer knows it."[85] The implication seems to be that Rainer's collection of seemingly disconnected material into a single performance occasion renders that material deadly, or boring, or possibly both. A critic for the northern New Jersey paper *The Jersey Journal* found her apparently disorganized performances to fall short of the qualifications for vitality, in particularly harsh terms, "In Miss Rainer's work … there is no life. There is not even a warm, comforting grave; there are carrion birds which tear the flesh from the body and distribute it at random." He described *Rose Fractions* as "… her own private pseudomasochistic death wish fantasies, plus castration cannibalism, defemminization (whatever the word for that may be)," and advised his readers, "… Don't go."[86]

Many critics did not even necessarily know that they were attending a unified evening of performance, referring to only the first section as *Rose Fractions* and, in some cases (including Barnes's) openly acknowledging that they left before the end of the performance, likely under

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[85] Marcia B. Siegel, "Smut and Other Diversions," *New York*, n.d., Box 40 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[86] Patrick O'Connor, "There's No Life in Miss Rainer's Work," *The Jersey Journal*, February 7, 1969, Box 40 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

the assumption that the fourth part of the evening, listed in the program as *Trio A, or The Mind is a Muscle*, *Part I,* would be a repeat of what they had seen the year before. No doubt this was informed in no small part by the fact that the first intermission of the evening was followed by Deborah Hay's *26 Variations on 8 Activities for 13 People plus Beginning and Ending.* By premiering Hay's dance in the middle of *Rose Fractions,* Rainer was asserting that the structure and arrangement of the piece superseded its content, while conversely yielding a slice of her own choreographic showcase to another's work. This tension would continue to characterize Rainer's work during this period, in which she was repeatedly ceding her authorial prerogative over performance material while at the same time maintaining control of the ways in which she was yielding that authority. So, despite the fact that Rainer did not author Hay's piece, her structuring of the evening as a single event ensured that she did author its presence in *Rose Fractions*.

Similarly, she incorporated her own bounded and more conventionally choreographed work, *North East Passing*, which had been commissioned while she was in residence at Goddard College the previous fall, into the evening as a discreet element nonetheless representing her own presence within the arrangement of the piece. Of the movement authored by Rainer, only this section likely resembled what might be expected onstage at a dance concert. The final section featured her signature work *Trio A,* but it was performed without music by a mix of professionals and non-professionals, only giving way to the familiarity of musical accompaniment with the return of the Chamber Brothers' "In The Midnight Hour" in the very last moments. This all had the effect of both promising a conventional dance concert and thwarting the expectation that format set up. As a reviewer for *Dance Magazine*, lamenting Rainer's move from dance artist to transdisciplinary artist, put it, "I'd gladly give up a whole evening of Yvonne Rainer, purveyor of

improvisation for the unskilled, and Yvonne Rainer, purveyor of films for the voyeur-mitt-culture, in return for just three minutes of Rainer, the dancer."[87]

Connecticut Composite and the Transition to *Continuous Project – Altered Daily*

As Rainer established her new ways of working, she was pushing her status as dance artist or choreographer farther to the margins, while at the same time negotiating a relationship to the disciplinary and professional expectations of dance. The brochure Rainer's booking agents created to promote *Performance Demonstration #1* had to address the volatility of the format, warning that the presentation "will vary according to Miss Rainer's concerns of the moment," and negotiating Rainer's conflicted relationship with dance itself, quoting her:

> The choices in my work are predicated…on an ongoing
> argument with, love of, and contempt for dancing. If my
> rage at the impoverishment of ideas, narcissism, and
> disguised sexual exhibitionism of most dancing can be
> considered puritanical moralizing, it is also true that I love
> the body…[88]

But this attempt to commercially package Rainer's new performance approach also had to respond to her rapidly changing description of her own work. The rehearsal section of *Performance Demonstration #1*, dubbed *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* after an installation work by Robert Morris, which Rainer had added to the spring 1969 *Demonstration* at Pratt, continued to occupy more and more of Rainer's consciousness and stage time in her subsequent performances. The *Performance Fractions for the West Coast* tour immediately followed the Pratt *Demonstration* that spring, during which Rainer incorporated large groups of untrained

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[87] "Yvonne Rainer with Group," *Dance Magazine*, April 1969, Box 40 Folder 16, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[88] "Performance Demonstration #1" brochure, Box 22 Folder 10. Yvonne Rainer Papers.

performers recruited from the local community into performances at an art gallery in Vancouver, BC, a disused theater in downtown LA, at Mills College in Oakland and, as detailed in the opening of this chapter, in an adaptation for Bay Area public television. As that description suggested, with more untrained dancers and more variable material, Rainer became more actively involved in coordinating the performance as it happened.

Over the course of appearances at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign later that spring, the University of Missouri-Kansas City and Amherst College that fall, and crucially during a two-week summer residency at Connecticut College, *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* (*CP-AD*) would become the focus of Rainer's performances and eventually come to encompass them entirely. A program for the appearance in Urbana-Champaign, only a month after the West Coast performances, already referred to the whole evening as "Continuous Project: Altered Daily," which at that time still described the discrete "performance of rehearsal" section she had included in the Pratt performance.[89] After experimenting with a formally and procedurally varied constellation of material borrowed from *Performance Demonstration, Rose Fractions, Performance Fractions for the West Coast* and elsewhere in the spatially dispersed *Connecticut Composite* that summer, which included a bounded *CP-AD* iteration alongside recorded media and performances by non-professional and student dancers, Rainer came to attach the title *CP-AD* to all subsequent arrangements of her material over the next six months or so. By that fall she was writing to her booking agent, New York Review Presentations, to inform them that

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[89] The only difference from the eventual title being the use of a colon rather than the more ambiguous dash she would settle on. UIUC program, May 8 & 10, 1969, Box 37 Folder 19, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

"*Performance Demonstration #1* is now called *Continuous Project-Altered Daily,*" for which a brochure with nearly identical information was also produced.[90]

The processes of making, displaying, promoting, preserving, and researching *CP-AD* each replicate one another, with the promise and impossibility of a set form imposing itself between the event itself and the spectator/interlocutor. Rainer observed that it was her "first large dance not documented by some form of notation." Instead of a score or blueprint, she noted that, "What remains are some elaborate program notes, a list of designated components, a description of the component *Group Hoist*, three letters to the group, and a film of a rehearsal at Connecticut College made by Michael Fajans in 1969."[91] This catalogue proved prescient. Certainly an obstacle to this investigation, and a contributing factor to the relative lack of consideration these works have received heretofore, is the relative paucity of researchable material available. The best record has generally been Rainer's 1974 monograph bidding farewell to her dance career, the now out of print quasi-scrapbook publication *Work 1961-73*. Rainer's archive at the Getty Research Institute has more recently made the source documents for that book available again, introducing additional material that was not originally included. And though I have spent significant time in this archive, it has been difficult to get a sense of these performances as lived, variable events, even where it is possible to catalogue the elements which made them up.[92]

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[90] Rainer, correspondence re: "Continuous Project-Altered Daily," Box 22 Folder 14; "Programs 1970-71," Box 37 Folder 20. Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[91] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 125.

[92] The video of *Dance Fractions for the West Coast* from KQED TV in San Francisco, which offers a baseline glimpse of the format, is the one exception: *Dance Fractions for the West Coast*, 1969, VHS, 51 min. V104. Yvonne Rainer Papers.

I take the trace material that *does* remain and the transactions that *remain absent* as, together, evidence of these events as purposefully temporary arrangements of that material, which deliberately foregrounded the interpersonal and conversational dynamics upon which collective art making is contingent. The very acts of verbal communication that Rainer relied upon, and which held the works together, are what have dissipated. That is, *what* Rainer arranged, taught, or explained can be preserved, but it proves remarkably difficult to hold onto the act of negotiating, teaching, or explaining. This connective action can best be characterized in terms of the slippery materiality of talk. Rainer used talk to materially impact the performance pieces she arranged and presented, but the talk itself disappears from the record.

Even beyond Antin's talk poems and Gray's early monologues, both of which incorporated mechanisms to ensure each performance was unique to its occasion and to communicate that fact to the present and future audience, Rainer's collage performances emphasized the event as the occasion of authorship in which the act of arrangement, presentation, and display superseded the particular content of the performance's constituent, subordinate works. Rainer points to each performance as a unique instance of this new way of making and presenting art; for example, she shifts the name she gives to individual presentations to both mark them off as unique occurrences and often to refer to the location where the event took place.[93] This strategy resembles, and may have even been partially inspired by, Merce Cunningham's "Events," unique arrangements of fragments from his repertoire often presented in museums or other unconventional settings, which date to a performance in Vienna in 1964.

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[93] For example: Rose Fractions at the Billy Rose Theater, Performance Fractions for the West Coast in San Francisco, Connecticut Composite at Connecticut College. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (The MIT Press, 2008), 202–3.

Like Rainer's collage piece, Cunningham's Events often bore the name of the place where they were presented. However, Cunningham's combinatory arrangements present seamless collages of diverse dance material performed continuously in a predetermined, even if situationally unique, order.[94] Rainer's approach foregrounds not only the collection of diverse sources and the contingency of the performance on place and time, but pivotally centralizes the act of piecing together and sequencing the work, the ever-shifting dynamics of choreography in different states of preparation, and the interpersonal communication required to coordinate these processes.

Rainer was intentionally exposing the process of composition and embodied negotiation between herself as director/choreographer and the performers; a relationship conceptually normalized in the performing arts, yet fraught with underacknowledged power dynamics and communication challenges. Her interventions illustrated that the work happens in physical, temporal, verbal encounters, which she wished to position inside the performance as a means of exposing the labor and structures of power at work in the processes of interpersonal communication that underlie ostensibly finished performances. In this way, Rainer intervened in an understanding of dance as a strategically designed, self-contained form by enacting volatile and ephemeral instances of unrepeatable knowledge transfer within the work. What she was authoring was not a dance or even a method of dancing, but a means of constructing and presenting performance as one continuous process that does not succumb to conventional distinctions between *a work* and *making* a work.

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[94] For more on the Cunningham Events see: Jack Anderson, "Dances About Everything and Dances About Some Things," 95-100; and Merce Cunningham, "A Collaborative Process Between Music and Dance," 143-44; Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *Merce Cunningham: Dancing in Space and Time* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

As the construction of *CP-AD* moved more fully into the moment in performance, Rainer and her performers found that anything "pre-set" about these presentations came to seem more and more arbitrary,

> Basically, *CP-AD* was constructed of interchangeable units of material, some very elaborate and requiring the whole group, other units being solos, duets, and trios that could be executed at any time. Some units could be performed by an indeterminate number of people. The sequence of events – unlike that of *The Mind is a Muscle* – was determined by the participants during the performance itself.[95]

Rainer's role in the performance continued to change as more space was made, or demanded, for the will of others. She would eventually become only one conducting node in a network of performing agents who could nimbly invent and rearrange the work in conversation with one another live and in the moment, always allowing the pattern to shift, and deferring the expectation of set form to the structure of the idiosyncratic presentational format.

By the time she and her performers were working with the initial iterations of *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* as an independent piece, a number of changeable elements had been incorporated into the work and been made available as raw material to everyone in the performance. These Rainer introduced as pre-made "chunks" that could be inserted into the set material by any performer at will.[96] Once a space was cleared for anyone, not just Rainer, to intervene in the sequence of the performance, it became possible and necessary for genuine invention and negotiation to occur in response to the changes being made onstage. It turned out to be the very spaces these encounters opened between the performers that eventually led to a

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[95] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 319.

[96] "Chunks & Insertables," Box 133, Folder 12. Yvonne Rainer Papers.

fundamental conflict over authorial privilege. Rainer found herself negotiating structures of democratic process and egalitarian encounter that pushed her beyond her "demonstrations" of authorship to a confrontation with the possibility of letting singular authorship go entirely.

At first this was achieved spatially and, in line with the 1960s vogue for immersive performances like the Happenings, the audience was given the agency to move from space to space and so from performance activity to performance activity on their own schedule according to their own interests. Though this strategy would return in the "definitive" version of *CP-AD* performed at the Whitney in early 1970, Rainer first employed it at Connecticut College during her 1969 summer residency. That event, *Connecticut Composite,* included a map and a schedule that allowed the audience to navigate half a dozen spaces in which different performance activities, many of which represented deconstructed elements of *Performance Demonstration* and *Rose Fractions*, were happening simultaneously. As in *Performance Demonstration*, *CP-AD* occupied only one space at specific moments during the evening and involved only her core company of performers.

Connecticut Composite as a whole involved about 80 students recruited during her two weeks teaching in the school's summer program performing alongside Rainer's own company in one of several rooms filled with their choreographic fragments and multimedia material. "Audience Piece" (since performed as "Pillow/Chair") involved students performing a characteristically complex sequence of simple actions with a pillow and a chair to Ike and Tina Turner singing "River Deep, Mountain High" in a large gymnasium. Audience members were invited into the center of the action to sit on chairs in amongst the performers (expecting comic results, Rainer dedicated this section to The Marx Brothers.) In another space, 20 students

executed Rainer's "People Plan" and "People Wall," in which groups of performers moved in unison according to certain pre-determined formations. Yet another space featured an ongoing relay performance of *Trio A*, while next door in one direction audience members could listen to the recorded lectures that had been paired with performances in prior arrangements of Rainer's materials, and in the other direction watch a sequence of short films that had been shown in earlier collage performances.[97] Rather than combining these elements as a way to make them comment upon one another, as she had done previously, Rainer trusted that, as she had written in her program note for *The Mind is a Muscle*, her audiences' bodies would remain the only "enduring reality." Individual performer and audience experience united the variety of activities between the rooms through the array of spatial and temporal relationships the physical and conceptual design of the event enabled.

Negotiating *Continuous Project—Altered Daily*

The spatial dynamics of the piece ranged, it could be said, even more widely than the multiple rooms of *Connecticut Composite* when Rainer began using mail correspondence to communicate performance plans to two of her performers, Steve Paxton and Barbara Lloyd, who had left New York to teach at the University of Illinois and so were not able to take part in regular rehearsals. In effect, her direction spread across the country as she introduced them to new material separately from the other performers. When developed separately in this way, the embodied encounter acquired a quality of "spontaneity" (despite her having "directed" all parts

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[97] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 215; Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 126-7.

of it) that surprised Rainer with the possibilities embedded in allowing that encounter to operate outside her direct control, while still being indirectly guided by her expectations.[98]

Once she had begun to relax her strictly pedagogical and directorial role in favor of allowing in a certain, initially strictly limited, amount of individual spontaneity, Rainer had to contend with the degree of spontaneity and shared authorship she was willing to incorporate into the work. With this, her own understanding of her role in the performance became increasingly ambiguous; she both sought to maintain control and to give it up. Though it "seemed a moral imperative to form a democratic social structure," she feared that "once one allowed people's spontaneous expression and responses and opinions to affect one's own creative process… then the die was cast; there was no 'turning back' to the old conventions of directorship."[99]

In advance of the Kansas City performance in the fall of 1969, Rainer sent instructions to Steve Paxton and Barbara Lloyd in Urbana-Champaign, where they were teaching. Paxton had not been in Connecticut and neither of them had been in rehearsals since, so instructions were necessary to both re-incorporate Paxton into *CP-AD* and shift things around in the rest of the piece accordingly. This depended less on artistic preferences than on the practical distribution of extant knowledge and available time within the performance. Lloyd was told she would be taking David Gordon's place in a duet he had done with Rainer, whose part would presumably be taken by Paxton, but that Lloyd would "learn it in performance," a pragmatic, labor-saving

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[98] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 322.

[99] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 128.

reason for the performance of rehearsal. Lloyd, meanwhile, was to teach her solo with the pillow to Paxton if time allowed, but also be prepared to perform it herself if necessary.[100]

Rainer appeared here as a performance manager as much as a director or choreographer realizing her aesthetic vision. She was allowing not only the creative process of the rehearsal but also the bureaucratic process of efficiently managing schedules and the amount of time available to choreograph the work alongside her creative sensibility. In so doing, she was able to both claim an idiosyncratic conceptual approach, and release – or at least transfer to the performance itself – the authoritarian tyranny of her voice as the primary artist. Instructing Paxton to replace her "whenever possible" in the performance, she vaguely predicted her range of possible onstage activities once liberated from choreographed movement along a spectrum that stretched from presence and control to absence and surrender. She imagined that when not dancing she would be, "randomly monologuing, directing, watching, disappearing, participating" resulting in an "incredible amount of unaccounted-for possibilities."[101]

Indeed, Rainer recalled the "euphoria" of that Kansas City performance, which suggested to her new possibilities for the incorporation of spontaneity. When Rainer spotted Lloyd wearing an elaborate costume consisting of "feathered wings, a lion's tail, a global hemisphere, a 'hunch-back'" that had been constructed for the performance, but was left available as an optional "body adjunct," and so not always employed, they experienced a mutual moment of rupture and joyful abandon. Rainer "…burst out laughing. She met my eye and also began roaring with laughter… Never, I repeat, never had I seen anyone – or experienced myself – laughing so heartily during a

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[100] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 146.

[101] Ibid.

dance performance. It was an unbelievable release and high."[102] This moment represented for

Rainer the viability of spontaneity as a mode of performance, and though it introduced itself

joyfully, it carried with it a heavy moral weight: "What happened was both fascinating and

painful… as I vacillated between opening up options and closing them down."[103] She understood

that allowing spontaneity into her performances meant that anything could happen, but also that

nothing could be undone.

Rainer wanted to be able to experience, and respond to, new impulses and material in the

moment like her dancers, but to do so she had to let go of some of her identity as author. In a

letter addressed to Lloyd, but sent to all the performers following the Kansas City performance,

she confessed that when she saw how Lloyd and Paxton had interpreted her instructions,

> I thought, 'O yes of course, that looks just like I thought it would:
> *they couldn't have done it any other way (!)* There is nothing to say
> (criticize) about that.' Blast me! There I stood with my steely gaze
> brazenly taking credit for what you had done. Wow![104]

It is a sincere self-indictment, one that she asks them not to forgive but to correct in the moment,

> OK so next time make me look – right then and there in
> performance. I would like to share your pleasure. I would like to
> acknowledge your feat. I don't want to take anything for granted
> and I want whatever contact and interaction the situation brings
> up.[105]

Rainer was asking to be called out for her inattention and self-satisfied authorial remove in a way

which would at least momentarily disrupt the performance for the performers or audience or

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[102] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 319.

[103] Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer*, 128.

[104] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 147–48. (Emphasis in original.)

[105] Ibid.

both. She was not looking for her letter to smooth out any conflict that may have occurred above

or below the surface in the Kansas City performance, instead she wanted to more fully

materialize the tension that produced and is produced by spontaneous behavior and subjective

amazement onstage through verbal, interpersonal signaling and redress. In other words, what she

was talking about was talking it through.

As Rainer began to regard spontaneity as, in essence, one of the materials with which she

could construct her compositions, she found that it was only in tension with certain limitations

that the distinct qualities of spontaneity could make themselves known, and distinguish

themselves from the qualities of other, equally contingent approaches to keeping the

performances hinged to the moment of presentation. She tried to introduce a new set of rules to

allow spontaneity within a consensual veto system, rather than under the usual conditions of

absolute license, in which not only the impulse could be introduced spontaneously, but so could

the objection to the impulse, allowing her to exert control, but at the same time to expose herself

in the process of exerting control. She spelled her proposal out in an addendum to her post-

Kansas City letter,

> I am ready to accept total freedom of 'response.' At this moment I
> have trepidations about allowing people to 'alter' my material or
> introduce their own, BUT (concurrent with my trepidations) I give
> permission to you all to do either of these *at your own risk*: that is,
> you will risk incurring the veto power of me or other members of
> the group, *in performance* (I do not want to know about such
> intentions prior to performance.) In short, I reserve the right – and I
> confer upon all of you the same right – to be true to my/your
> responses in performance – be they enthusiastic or negative –
> bearing in mind the *natural precedence and priority of my
> material.* This last condition is based on the assumption that by the
> time of performance you are all willing to cooperate in showing
> the/my material, your initial responses having worked themselves
> out and exerted their influences on *me* during rehearsals. In the

case of those who have been absent for preliminary rehearsals…. I
understand and accept the condition of risk attached to exposing
my new material to them in performance. I still wish to establish a
sequence of events before each performance. This sequence may
be altered or interrupted during the performance at the discretion of
anyone. ('Altering' of sequence is not to be confused with the
abovementioned 'altering' of material.)[106]

Here she seemed to want to both produce a spontaneous effect and to protect her choreographed

material from the impact of that spontaneity, in part by making the spontaneous negotiation an

intentional, if unpredictable, *part* of her material. At the same time, she seemed uncertain that

she wanted to fully relinquish her authorial position at all, even as a conceptual move, pointing to

the role of rehearsal in "working out," and thus synthesizing, the tensions over her choreographic

vision that were being expressed in performance. As the pressure to open up to changes was

often exerted as much by practical constraints as by conceptual ideals, it is the performers who

did not have the chance to "work out" their responses in rehearsal who present the most apparent

risk of spontaneously altering material in performance, a risk which Rainer acknowledges and

accepts. But of course it was also Rainer who was willing to incorporate performers who were

not able to rehearse with the rest of the company into public performances, something few

choreographers would be willing to do.

Given this evidence, I propose that these performances constituted Rainer's

experimentation with the possibilities of improvisation as a choreographic form. Improvisation is

often defined according to notions of license, expressivity, and sanction, but in Rainer's collage

performances, improvisation also invited and emphasized conflict and tension. This is

improvisation not as a presentational form in which a safe space is cleared for spontaneous

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[106] Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer : Work 1961-1973*, 149–50. [Emphases in original.]

expression (the kind of improvisation with which Grand Union, the company Rainer and her dancers would form the next year, would later be associated,) but improvisation as an invitation to engage in actual processes of negotiation on the stage. This improvisation is not a harmonious outgrowth of mutual consent, but the difficult, messy, dialogic decision making mechanisms and power dynamics through which performance of all sorts comes into being, with the unpredictable outcomes that result from such collisions placed center stage.

Initially, Rainer was proposing that teaching could be as important as knowing and learning could be as interesting as mastery. But as Rainer saw it, "'(t)eaching' was now a very small part of the whole phenomenon."[107] Comparing the rehearsal section of *Performance Demonstration #1* that had premiered at Pratt the previous spring as *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* to *CP-AD* as it was developing that fall and winter, she wrote, "The basic difference between the two *CP*'s is in the time that I spent teaching new material in the earlier performance, thinking that 'teaching' was the primary ingredient of a rehearsal… Since then my idea of the rehearsal has become much more elaborate."[108] Eventually this would become a live negotiation with her dancers over the position of author and the location of the work, in which spontaneity, sequence, and presentation were contentiously up for grabs. In this exchange, the real human relationships that make art possible were materialized on stage. Rainer's willingness to expose the imperfect in front of her audience differs slightly from more recent interest in "failure" in postmodern performance, which tends to focus on the radical potential of falling

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[107] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 330.

[108] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 152.

decidedly, even spectacularly, short of an idealized and often impossible end result.[109] Rainer's

focus is on the not-yet-perfect, and the procedure by which an authorial idea sits in productive

tension with its (always imperfect) embodied realization through a process of experimentation

and negotiation that can only end arbitrarily in performance.

It was these relationships, the co-presence and the contingency of imperfect individuals

striving for something more perfect than the present, the shared speculative nature of

performance stripped of its pretense, that gave Rainer the greatest hope during what would prove

a relatively brief period of discovery that, perhaps inevitably, would soon move into two distinct

directions. In her letter to her performers following the performance in Kansas City, Rainer

described the potential of this emphasis on idiosyncratic co-presence as revelatory, even quasi-

utopian, a possibility that she glimpsed in the spontaneous encounter of new material with old,

the expected with the unexpected, the immediate with the choreographed:

> I got a glimpse of human behavior that my dreams for a better life
> are based on – real, complex, constantly in flux, rich, concrete,
> funny, focused, immediate, specific, intense, serious to the point of
> religiosity, light, diaphanous, silly, and many leveled at any
> particular moment…. Yet at the same time there is a consistent
> seriousness of response in the best sense – whether it be giggling,
> scowling, or reflective – that unifies the whole thing. We are
> totally and undeniably *there*.[110]

Barbara Lloyd reflected back the joy and precarity that Rainer had experienced in a letter she

sent in response, giving her own account of the performance. She recalled Rainer telling her

beforehand that "I was always wanting to get someplace and that I should just be where I was –

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[109] See for example: Sara Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Repair Service* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011).

[110] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 148.

and only there – and that was what happened in the performance." Describing her thoughts in performance, she wrote,

> I felt natural and relaxed about learning in front of people. Was it then Steve put on the *Satie*? What a surprise. What a glorious feeling to do that as a solo and duet at the same time. Like two people floating thru the clouds together and occasionally touching…[111]

Her quasi-utopian experience was predicated on experiential immersion in a process of learning and in moments of surprise and connection, all of which had very little to do with composition or technique and a great deal to do with being receptive to the conditions Rainer had established in the performance.

Whereas Rainer and the other Judson dancers were initially making work in tension with what they saw as the traditions and expectations of modern dance, this later work of Rainer's was committed to bringing the tensions that arise in art-making, both interpersonal and interdisciplinary, into the work itself. For Rainer, the work came to be located in the negotiated performance encounter, rather than in the shared gesture, materializing the real human relationships that make art possible on stage. Crucially, it was in response, interaction, and negotiation that Rainer located the potential of the work, and its unifying force. And it is precisely this material, the spontaneous, fluctuating verbal and physical interactions of particular encounters, that dissipates and disappears. It leaves behind a deceptively incomplete record of the pieces arranged, but not their arrangements, material forms without memory of the idiosyncratic occasion of the presentational format that brought them into active, and unpredictable, contact with one another. Indeed, these letters exchanged between performances

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[111] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 327.

in late 1969 and early 1970, which constitute offstage attempts to negotiate the ground rules and

the underlying ethos which would govern their collective responsibility for what would happen

onstage, constitute some of the best evidence available of what might have happened in the

ephemeral performance encounter.

It was with their shared belief in the possibility of the materialized and negotiated

collective responsibility for a performance that was neither entirely spontaneously generated nor

autonomously controlled by any one person that Rainer and her dancers plunged into their next

booking at Amherst College that winter. Going in, they brought the excitement and euphoria of

Kansas City, as well as the newly articulated understandings between them which had been

communicated in the interim. According to Rainer, Barbara Lloyd, excited by these newly

developing possibilities, "had already introduced the idea that they might introduce their own

stuff in performance." But, writing to the group in the aftermath of the performance about six

weeks later, Rainer admitted, "I wasn't ready for that big a leap."[112]

> My main reservation about the Amherst gig was that we were
> operating on the assumption that anyone could depart from the
> basic structure on an individual basis at any time…. Amherst was
> so different from anything I could or would have thought of
> making that I am still sort of astonished and blown by it…. What I
> would like to try next time is a system which would produce both
> the unevenness and diffusion of the Amherst performance *and* the
> concentration and tight focus of a lot of my imagery…. I hate to
> say it, or I almost hate to say it, but I really do seem to be about
> variety, changes, and multiplicity. Not necessarily contrast, but
> rather a spectrum of possibilities in terms of partial density, types
> of performance (rehearsal, marking, run-thru, teaching, etc.), and
> perhaps most important of all: durations and sequence.[113]

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[112] Rainer, *Feelings are Facts,* 328.

[113] Yvonne Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 150–151. [Emphasis in original]; When reprinted in her memoir 30 years
later, the first sentence was amended to read: "My main reservation about the Amherst gig was that we were

She seemed to be suggesting here that they try to resolve the tension by leaning in to it in some way by design, by limiting options for independent and autonomous decision making in performance, and thus making any in-the-moment decision contingent upon actual negotiation and group decision making, in particular voiced decision making. In other words, rather than following the rules or following their hearts, the dancers would have to talk to one another in order to arrive at mutually agreeable performance decisions.

She went on to explain that what that would mean would be reducing the number of options available to be performed solo, so that most activities would require group cooperation and shared focus. Further, any autonomous decision did not release the person making it from responsibility to the group, she wrote, "If you wish to break for a solitary activity (like talking or doing your own thing) you must ask permission of the group and then set up their time – either by telling them to continue what they're doing or to do something else. In other words, whoever initiates a break must also exercise responsibility for it by choreographing it totally."[114] She noted that something like this system of calling signals to initiate certain sequences stretched all the way back to *Terrain*, but that in this case the amount of material being called and negotiated at any given moment made a significant contribution to the structure of the piece, rather than constituting one of the many micro-fibers making up its texture.

Rainer's call for communal responsibility in performance extended not only to the arrangement of the performance, but to quality of execution, as well, something she enlisted the

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operating on the assumption that anyone could depart from the basic structure (meaning my material) on an individual basis at any time." *Feelings Are Facts,* 328. [Emphasis added.]

[114] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 151.

performers in monitoring and improving. However, this was not out of concern for presenting a

polished product; instead it sprung from a desire to see each potential realized in the best way

possible,

> It is hard enuf [sic] to perform material that has been, either out of necessity or intention, under-rehearsed and so results in a 'less-than-polished' performance. This I am definitely interested in. It is quite another matter to think you are on top of material and then find that for reasons inherent in the performing situation you are not… If something doesn't work that hasn't been rehearsed, then ok, we do it as well as we can do it… But if it doesn't work when it had been okay at a previous run-thru, I think it should be done over…or someone should call a halt and suggest we concentrate (suggested script!: 'OK let's knock it off you guys; pay attention, stop goofing off, enough fucking around you knuckleheads!)' It might appear that these delicate sentiments be provoked only in the breast of the boss-lady, but I have reason to believe that others of us have similar moments, whether or not you act on them. Given the current scheme of performance "variables" it is important to have certain things done "perfectly", and I don't care how long or repeatedly we have to do the thing (in performance) before arriving at the 'perfect' end of the spectrum.[115]

Here Rainer was enlisting her dancers in a self-monitoring process that did not necessarily

privilege rehearsal over performance, or her perspective over theirs, but evinced belief in

collectively striving to realize the full potential of every movement or performance impulse,

shared equally between all participants, given the limitations of the performance situation.

Importantly, Rainer did not assume that making a process of improvement through repetition

visible in performance would diminish appreciation of the realization of that sequence; in fact,

she was suggesting that it might increase it. That a moment of thrilling possibility might rest on a

transparent gradual process of trial and error over time rather than a skillfully maneuvered

appearance of ease again promised to present performance as collectively negotiated labor,

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[115] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 152.

comprised of a continuous process of making, with no discrete product, only the never-realized potential of perfectibility.

Finally, Rainer sought to classify, once and for all, the kinds of spoken material she wished to incorporate into *CP-AD*. The type of talk that has been the focus of this discussion – utilitarian, self-reflective, and born of the moment – was essentially a given: "commenting directly on the action (instructions, comparison with previous performance)" constitutes the first of Rainer's categories. In fact, in Amherst she had placed mikes on stands for the performers to retreat to and speak directly about their experiences at will during the performance. But she also wanted to make room for "reciting learned material." She proposed using quotes from film performers and directors, many of them culled from Kevin Brownlow's oral history of the early film era, *The Parade's Gone By*. In the next iteration she would have additional performers recite these passages much in the way she had been reciting the Lenny Bruce snot monologue, as found material with its history as extemporaneous utterance embedded in the text and deliberately estranged in delivery: "…it can't be improvisational or 'in the style of'; it must be a performance of someone else's material at a remove from the original or implied performance… material that has actually previously been brought into existence (via media or live), *as though* it is one's own, but in a style completely different from or inappropriate to the known original."[116] Rainer looked, in other words, to the fixed media of transcribed or technologically captured utterances for choreographic source material that could be replayed as self-consciously, probably humorously, inauthentic talk juxtaposed with entirely spontaneous and situationally contingent instances of talk as pragmatic communication and first-hand reflection.

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[116] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973,* 153. [Emphasis in original.]

In a letter Steve Paxton sent in response, however, it is possible to see him already

pushing back against Rainer's ambivalence about the kind of license she was willing to grant her

performers. He wrote that he arrived at Amherst "…having already decided not to do anything

extra – having discussed the possibility with you and having consistently gotten uptight and

cautious and reserved consent, didn't want to make a move not eagerly anticipated." Contrary to

Rainer's aspiration to engage in clear, open, and direct interpersonal communication in full view

of an audience, Paxton suspected their chatting was coming across more stilted than intended. He

longed for a less self-consciously theatrical presentational mode in which to involve the audience

in their performance negotiations, without disrupting the relative ease with which they were able

to execute Rainer's choreography:

> It seems to me that all, including you, are uneasy with the mikes. It
> would be groovy if they were capable of picking up random
> verbiage but they aren't. This has to be addressed. From all of us
> casually super-skilled bodies these tense and defensive voices come
> out. It is a good vibe-killer.

Paxton worried about something else that for Rainer had seemed a merely an opportunity.

Though he was as unconcerned as she was about presenting unrehearsed material as such, he did

worry about group cohesion in the absence of the community-building function rehearsals

usually serve:

> What substitute is possible with the company spread out like oleo
> on bagels? How to make our performance inter-connections floaty
> and unthought? And how to fall in love with each others' work
> without a chance to see it, even in performance? I miss seeing us
> dance.[117]

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[117] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 331–34.

No wonder Paxton would eventually found a dance genre that was essentially *only*
the rehearsal of group cohesion.

The divergent understandings of what was happening onstage hint at the philosophical
differences developing in the group, and the different directions to come. Rainer held onto her
own creative vision and the possibility of its realization in some conceptually perfectible future,
but embraced exposing the messy, conflictual, imperfect procedures by which that material was
learned, developed, arranged and deployed as an active part of the onstage goings on in the
present. Paxton, meanwhile, hoped for a cohesive and perfectable group dynamic that could
realize and share impulses with compassion and ease, assuming "floaty and unthought"
connections would emerge from that cohesion. On the one hand, the labor and frustration of
working through material live onstage, on the other the hope for a utopian community out of
which work unweighted by interpersonal strife might flow.

Rainer's post-Amherst letter and Paxton's response came more than a month and a half
after the Amherst performance, and though they were reflecting on those experience they were
no doubt also anticipating their scheduled performances at the Whitney Museum that spring.
This would prove to be the final full-evening (and Rainer would claim "definitive") version of
Continuous Project-Altered Daily, presented at the Whitney from March 31st-April 2nd of 1970.
Returning to the diffuse spatial configuration of *Connecticut Composite* for this version, Rainer
again allowed the audience to exert their agency over the arrangement of the material, inviting
them in the program "…to go to any of the three performance areas at any time." In these, Rainer
and her dancers rehearsed and arranged new and old material, while other performers recited the
passages about the film industry Rainer had pulled from *The Parades Gone By* at microphones

while, in adjacent galleries, films played, from Hollywood offerings with the sound switched off to *Connecticut Rehearsal,* which featured silent footage of Rainer and her dancers at Connecticut College the previous summer rehearsing some of the same material they were performing live in the next room.[118]

As Carrie Lambert-Beatty observes, "Just as for performers of such work the prechoreographed dance had given way to a set of choices, for the viewer the singular performance had been replaced by a manageable yet mutually exclusive set of options."[119] At the same time, Rainer constrained her audience from fully joining in the performance, specifying in the program, "<u>Do not walk across</u> the main performance areas, but proceed around the periphery or along the walls to get from one place to another."[120] This kept the audience spatially and experientially separate from the performers, which Lambert-Beatty correctly reads as a preference for Brechtian critical distance over the immersive, Artaud-inspired works typical of prominent New York experimental theatre companies during the 1960s. Those works, such as The Performance Group's *Dionysus in '69* or The Living Theatre's *Paradise Now*, plunged their audiences into chaotic, full-contact experiences by design, in order to physically and emotionally transcend the performer-audience divide. Their non-narrative, para-theatrical predecessors in the early 1960s, the Happenings, with which Rainer would have had a great deal of contact thanks to personnel and venues often shared with JDT and post-Judson dance, also offered performance

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[118] "Continuous Project-Altered Daily" program, March 31 - April 2, 1970, Box 22 Folder 14, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[119] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 218.

[120] "Continuous Project-Altered Daily" program. [Emphasis in original]

environments that blurred disciplinary categories and the roles of performers and audience through spatial and sensory disorientation.

These models of avant-garde performance operated on the basis of excess, granting each audience member the opportunity to forge for themselves a unique, unrepeatable experience out of plentiful raw material, intermingling the roles of spectator and performer. In contrast, arguing that Rainer built these performances on the structure of selective viewership borrowed from mass media experience, Lambert-Beatty points to Rainer's interest, even at her most experimental, in maintaining a distance between audience and performers.[121] For Lambert-Beatty, the distinction rests "in her resistance to the binary opposition between 'captive' spectator and putatively liberated viewer-participant" in favor of "an audience whose freedom was *the freedom to choose what to watch*."[122] Building on this, I would argue that the incorporation of distance was as much about the audience, and the performers, understanding the particular conditions of live performance as a total situation, both as a relational and spatial/temporal phenomenon and as the result of a processes of negotiation, experimentation, and control, as it was about modes of spectatorship.

Ultimately, Rainer wanted to expose the procedural underpinnings of the work, and to experiment with her degree of control over it, or lack thereof, moment to moment. In this respect it mattered not only that the event ranged across several rooms and media and that the audience could explore this environment with relative freedom, but also that in the process each member of the audience participated in acts of selection and composition akin to the power Rainer and

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[121] Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched*, 225–26.

[122] *Being Watched*, 227. [Emphasis in original.]

her performers had been struggling over during the previous year. Unlike the Happenings or

1960s environmental theatre, there was not so much material that any individual experience

became a hyper-specialized and irretrievable anomaly; rather Rainer had selected and packaged

the possible elements in such a way that the audience encounter amounted to a final edit of sorts.

The audience did not compose the work, but Rainer handed to the audience the power to make

the final adjustments that would realize one given set of possibilities. Drawing together the

multiple temporalities embedded in the piece into the moment of encounter, Rainer offered

editorial control to each unknown recipient to experience it according to their own time and

pattern, allowing the material itself to remain always in a conditional, contingent, potential, yet-

to-be-perfected state, never pinned to the finality of a "definitive" version. Paradoxically, this

undecided state is precisely what allowed Rainer to consider the Whitney iteration of *Continuous

Project-Altered Daily* the "definitive" realization of her intentions.

In her program notes, Rainer attempted to explain her authorial position, and her

ambition to conditionally release certain aspects of her control over her work by placing the

rehearsal process on view in order to question the distinction between performance and

performance preparation,

> A curious by-product of this change has been the enrichment of the
> working interactions in the group and the beginning of a realization
> on my part that various controls that I have clung to are becoming
> obsolete: such as determining sequence of events and the precise
> manner in which to do everything. Most significant is the fact that
> my decisions have become increasingly influenced by the
> responses of the individual members…. Freely exchanging
> opinions and associations about the work as it develops.[123]

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[123] "Continuous Project-Altered Daily" program, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

This was followed by two pages of "Rudimentary Notes Toward a Changing View of Performance," which sought to theorize the performance discoveries she had made through the *CP-AD* process. These included "Levels of Performance Reality," accounting for a performer's distance from their source material – from primary to tertiary. Her list of "Elements" used in the performance differentiated categories of preparatory activity to include not only "Rehearsal," but "Run-thru," "Working out," "Marking," and "Teaching," as well as "Surprises," which acknowledged the inevitable introduction of the unexpected into even a tightly planned process. The final performance element Rainer identified was "Behavior," which she divided into "Actual" behavior, introduced spontaneously into a performance, and "Choreographed" behavior that has been prepared and predetermined. This was followed by an extensive alphabetical "selection of roles and metamuscular conditions affecting… the execution of physical feats." The list of "roles" ranged obscurely and eclectically from "adolescent," "Buster Keaton," and "confidante" to "Richard Foreman," "12-year old ballerina," and "WC Fields," while "metamuscular conditions" provided slightly more concrete, if still somewhat esoteric, suggestions of embodied states, such as "celibacy," "diarrhea," and "pregnancy."[124]

Though in later years she would dismiss these pages as "just theoretical jottings" not substantially connected to what actually happened at the Whitney, it is clear that the printed program, at least, documented a new and intellectually complex way of thinking about making and performing born of the *CP-AD* development process.[125] She even included a fourth page made up of quotes from the various letters sent back and forth during the fall and winter to

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[124] "Continuous Project-Altered Daily" program, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[125] Rainer, letter to Quatuor Albrecht Knust, May 30, 1996, Box 33 Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

negotiate the terms of their contingent performances, offering material evidence of their collective preparation. And though the very first words on the program assured the audience that "It is not necessary to read this program prior to performance," it is also clearly the case that taken together with the live event, the program constituted Rainer handing over to her audience a guide to playing their role in navigating her material even as she was in the process of relinquishing it.

Deborah Jowitt's *Village Voice* review opened by commenting on the four-page program and the weight of preparatory knowledge it implied (despites the reassurance that it was not necessary to read), but explained that the gist of it was that "Rainer has become increasingly interested in process and put it into her work." Her review then illustrated the structural work the program asked Rainer's audiences to do, filling several paragraphs with lists of images and moments collaged together from her memory and idiosyncratic experience and concluding that, "Rainer's abdication of her creative control of the dance has not resulted in a work that is any less Rainer, only in one that is less controlled."[126] Her statement suggests both Rainer's triumph in giving up control while maintaining authorship, and the brick wall she had come up against in reaching the limit of her willingness (or possibly her ability) to truly co-author her work with her dancers (or her audience.)

On one level, this tension within the group and within Rainer's artistic conscience was resolved shortly by the formation of Grand Union and Rainer's subsequent departure for her film career, which stepped back from the collective and spontaneous impulses of her intermedial performances. However, I am still left with the amorphous potential implied by a format that

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[126] Deborah Jowitt, "Undulate, Lope, Twine," Village Voice, April 4, 1970, Box 40 Folder 17, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

incorporated disagreement and negotiation into its presentation. Surveying what remains of this

18-month experiment, the image is of an archeological remnant of a creative sphere disappearing

almost as soon as it came into being. Nonetheless, even the process of evaporation also became

part of the composition, as Rainer wrote: "After that I no longer formally contributed anything

new to the performances, but supported and participated in a process of 'erosion' and

reconstruction as the group slowly abandoned the definitive 'Continuous Project' and substituted

their own materials."[127] Rainer's withdrawal from her authorial role itself, then, became her last

act of authorship in this project, generating the group's next phase.

Grand Union

Rainer recalled that while having drinks after the first performance at the Whitney,

> Bob Morris carried on about the 'unnecessary' amount of talking
> during the show and how it distracted from what we were
> otherwise doing. I totally agreed with him…. Why did we have to
> act as though we were still in rehearsal with stuff that we knew so
> well? The permission to 'behave spontaneously' was like a
> contagion, spreading over the whole endeavor. The following
> night, hoping to contain some of their vocal exuberance, I
> conveyed these thoughts to the whole group.[128]

This resulted in an onstage collision, when David Gordon's anger at Rainer's "censure of the

group's growing sense of freedom" caused him to act out and swat at a pillow on her head extra

forcefully, striking her in the performance. This further discord born of attempts to realign the

group would characterize their next phase. Rainer felt that after the Whitney, "(t)he die was

indeed cast" for the coming dissolution of her troupe and their idiosyncratic experiment with

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[127] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 125.

[128] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 334–35.

presentational form, though the performers themselves kept trying to cling together as their identity shifted. "By the end of 1970 we…were calling ourselves the 'Grand Union.' There was still a rocky road ahead on the way to becoming a completely autonomous improvisational group."[129] Sally Banes explains that "...early Grand Union performance were often based, for many of its members, on the concept of the group as a 'repertory dance company with an inheritance from *CP-AD*.' They created evenings of dance with partially improvised organizational structures, using much material from the Rainer work."[130]

Early on, this was sometimes paired with Rainer's own directorial work, *WAR*, presented in different versions at Douglass College of Rutgers University, New York University, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC, in rapid succession during November of 1970. For these engagements Rainer revived the earlier collage works' strategy of recruiting large groups of students to perform minimally rehearsed work, in this case a loosely structured system of movements and interactions with a set of objects accompanied by a performer reading short quotes about wars both ancient and contemporary.[131] In all three locations *WAR* was performed by the student or community volunteers, while Rainer and Grand Union performed separately in another space, inviting the audience to move freely between the performances.

The program for the Rutgers and DC performances billed them as "Yvonne Rainer and The Grand Union" and explained that, "The material is from 'Continuous Project—Altered

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[129] Rainer, *Feelings are Facts*, 335.

[130] Banes, "The Grand Union: The Presentation of Everyday Life as Dance," *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 207–8.

[131] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 161.

Daily' and 'WAR' and ideas of various members of The Grand Union."[132] Presumably

Continuous Project—Altered Daily had been shrunk back down to the contained version of

variable process-based material in rehearsal with which it had begun, rather than the template for

arranging diverse media under Rainer's authorial imprimatur it became. It was that earlier small-

scale, process-based performance that Grand Union built on and began to make their own.

Certainly Rainer could have claimed the diverse material, the professional dancers of Grand

Union, and the untrained groups she incorporated into the performance all as part of an expanded

and re-imagined *CP-AD*, and probably would have only months earlier, but in these

presentations Grand Union was allowed to stand as it own entity, with an approach to work

distinct from Rainer's, even as Rainer remained an integral part of the group.

The DC version even added its own title to this hybrid of Yvonne Rainer & Company and

The Grand Union, the new egalitarian group with which it was coterminous, labeling the evening

"Perceptions 3." Perhaps most revealing of the shifting ethos of Rainer's post-*CP-AD*

collaborations was the note she appended to the programs that read, "A performance is a

convergence of people and a particular time and a particular place. It seems right that the next

day, or two weeks later, it might seem completely different. What you will see is something in

flux."[133] This was a very different voice from the one insisting that material should be repeated

until as near to perfect as possible just months earlier. Also out of character was her open, if

somewhat lukewarm, invitation in the Douglass College program, "Responsible audience

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[132] Douglass College program, November 6, 1970, Box 33 Folder 10; Smithsonian program, November 19-20, 1970, Box 33 Folder 11, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[133] Smithsonian program, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

participation is O.K."[134] Certainly the reigns were loosening, a marked contrast to her audience

instruction in the Whitney *CP-AD* program earlier that year: "Do not walk across the main

performance areas, but proceed around the periphery or along the walls to get from one place to

another." For Grand Union, spontaneity was more dependent on the moment than on the working

through of predefined material, and Rainer's authorial voice was becoming only one among

many.

Banes asserts that, "Rainer was quite consciously submerging her ego in the Grand

Union's democratic process, and simultaneously reasserting directorial authority in her own

pieces."[135] Similarly, Steve Paxton wrote, "When Rainer had ritually merged her separate ego

with those of the company via CPAD, they had reached the beginning of Grand Union."[136] The

early days of Grand Union were largely defined by the history and perception of Rainer's

leadership, and the structural legacy of *CP-AD,* but after two years of internal struggle, and

especially after Rainer's absence while traveling in India in 1971, a more collective ethos had

taken over.[137] This allowed the group to set aside Rainer's lingering directorial influence in favor

of fully improvised performances.

> By late 1972, with Rainer's position as an equal member clarified,
> and with two years of experiments in structure and power relations
> behind them, they had evolved a flexible, open, generous
> improvisatory format. It allowed for invention, commentary,

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[134] Douglass College program, November 6, 1970, Box 33 Folder 10, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[135] Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 208.

[136] Steve Paxton, "The Grand Union," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 3 (1972): 129,
https://doi.org/10.2307/1144779.

[137] Coincidentally, this was not unlike the power vacuum that Richard Schechner's extended trip to India left at The
Performing Garage, which allowed Gray and Lecompte to shift focus to their work, creating the foundation of what
became The Wooster Group.

teaching, repetition, imitation, and all the other possibilities for handling material that *CP—AD* had unearthed.[138]

In many ways, Grand Union was positioned as the inheritor of, and possibly the logical conclusion to, Rainer's work in *CP-AD* and its predecessors.

Banes describes a typical Grand Union evening of this period, beginning with warms ups, a little music on the record player, and then,

> Gradually interactions would come about: people imitated each other*,* or did variations on one another's movement styles, or engaged in movement dialogues. Or they talked—quietly conversing, or loudly commenting, or running a separate channel of information in speech that altered the perception of the movement material… The performance ebbed and flowed. Logic was invented, then discarded. A process was begun, examined, dropped, or carried through to its limits—or past its limits into something new… If someone felt hostile, it came out. If someone was hurt or surprised by someone else's actions, that had to be dealt with…The performances were without plan, without script, without a single pre-planned structure. There was no focal climax, no particular order, no illusions that were allowed to stand for more than a moment. And yet the performances were always about illusion, order, climax, focus, presence, repetition, logic, and structure no matter what the surface material was.[139]

This largely fits with my own viewing of a series of Grand Union performances from May 1972 on videotape, possibly the same performances Banes was describing. Presented in a large hall with the audience seated around the edges, rather than in a frontal arrangement, the performances proceeded informally, with decentered and overlapping action and the performers moving freely in and out of the audience. At the same time, though, much of the improvisation was based on a kind of para-theatrical play involving costumes, invented dialogue, and hints of narrative

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[138] Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 208.

[139] Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 215.

fragments, which seemed to toy with the potential for theatrical representation and the thin line between performing as themselves and performing through fictional personae.[140] Paxton also saw their new improvisational form as a collectively negotiated endeavor, "The Grand Union performance is a not a two-hour predetermined flow, but an instant-to-instant, personal, additive experience... The medium is people and what they are doing to and with each other."[141] As in the videos and Banes's vision, this presents Grand Union's performance as a self-creating process constantly righting itself without covering the tensions and textures that make it up.

Banes's description echoes Rainer's vision in the Kansas City version of CP-*AD*, "of human behavior that my dreams for a better life are based on – real, complex, constantly in flux, rich, concrete, funny, focused, immediate, specific, intense, serious to the point of religiosity, light, diaphanous, silly, and many leveled at any particular moment…." In this account, Rainer's vision was extended, and perhaps more fully realized, in the improvisational work that came out of, after, and in response to it.

The idealized communal creation Banes describes, however, is somewhat tempered by the responses to her questions offered by members of Grand Union several years after the group disbanded in 1976, which she includes with her essay. Though these accounts do not contradict Banes's, they offer a glimpse at the atomized and individual experiences of moving out of being Rainer's company and into a new collective identity, trying to make work on an even playing field, and starting from scratch every night. No longer arranging or learning the material, but making it, these accounts paint a picture of a process that was as filled with the tension, strife,

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[140] "Grand Union, May 1972," VHS, Box 124, V125-131. Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[141] Paxton, "The Grand Union," 130.

and struggle for authority and control as Rainer's performances ever had been. Indeed, rather than the harmonious vision of agreement Paxton had hoped for, they largely reflected her understanding of unrehearsed performance as a negotiation between individuals in which opposing powers would always come into play. David Gordon described the early transition into Grand Union, during the period in which they would perform alongside Rainer's *WAR*, in terms of a generative, if frustrating, tension between Rainer's material and the dancers' desires to depart from it, played out in performance:

> We dealt most badly with Yvonne's material input. Now that she was not the boss, and none of us were, it was very difficult to stick to anything in rehearsal and more difficult to stick with her material. But peculiarly the Y.R. Co. kept having places to perform. We began to bring some of that under-rehearsed and unrealized material into performance which still had as its basis the material from *Continuous Project.* People would then begin improvising around this new material and also around their self-consciousness about being in performance without much material.[142]

Rainer, who would leave Grand Union after its first two years, saw it similarly, locating the source of The Grand Union's internal strife in her earliest impulses to loosen her authorial control:

> Some of the contradictions that pushed the Grand Union where it eventually went were present at the very beginning of *Continuous Project—Altered Daily.* There seemed to be an innate connection between—or we weren't aware of the difficulty of—improvising and talking casually, and performing material in a very professional, perfect way. I wanted to have not just a totally improvisatory look, or a totally unrehearsed look, or a totally casual behaviorist look. I wanted CP—AD to go from one thing to another, making clear that the things were very different. But the process of democratization and disintegration had already, I think, from the first moment, begun its inexorable progress and I just

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[142] Banes, "The Grand Union, Q & A," *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, 221.

> went with it. There was no way of my getting back in control. It
> would have meant that I had to demand that my material be done
> in a certain way. And that was one of the key psychological factors
> that started the momentum.[143]

In the end Rainer insisted, pessimistically, "Grand Union was the result of total social breakdown!" She told Banes, of the portion of her book on post-modern dance *Terpsichore in Sneakers* dedicated to the group, "Your chapter gives it more dignity than it had."[144]

While Grand Union represented either the ultimate realization of Rainer's impulse toward multiplicity and process orientation in *CP-AD*, or a failure of interpersonal dynamics that revealed the fatal flaw in same, Steve Paxton was at the same time developing an even more purely unrehearsed approach to collective dance experimentation. This came to be known as Contact Improvisation, an approach to entirely spontaneous collective dance, which grew to be a movement predicated on the physical and emotional interdependence of participants in the moment. Paxton told Banes that, "The vision of Contact Improvisation was in part provoked by the constant flowing forms we encountered when Grand Union was cooking," moments, it would seem, when Paxton felt they were particularly in the flow, free of the burden of predetermined performance material or expectations.[145]

In her history of Contact Improv (CI), *Sharing the Dance,* Cynthia Novack writes of CI's origins in The Grand Union,

> …the Grand Union practiced open-ended improvisation which
> switched rapidly from surreal dramatic scenes to movement games
> to personal, conversational encounters, all conceived of as being
> within a context of extreme individual freedom for the performers.

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[143] Banes, 224.

[144] Banes, 230.

[145] Banes, 229.

> As a member of this group, Paxton pursued his interests in finding out how improvisation could facilitate physical interaction and response and how it could allow people to 'participate equally without employing arbitrary social hierarchies in the group' (Paxton 1971: 130) He was clearly concerned with developing new kinds of social organization for dance….[146]

Ultimately, Contact Improvisation largely dispensed with the special status of the performance event as a fixed and final form, which Rainer had begun pushing back on in 1969 when she first incorporated rehearsal into *Performance Demonstration #1.* Though it is occasionally presented in concert formats and has at times been incorporated into concert dance choreography, CI is most often a participatory, communal activity, practiced in inclusive workshop settings called "jams," after similar musical sessions. In a CI jam, everyone in the room is participating, and any spectatorship that occurs is purely incidental. These events amount to formats for a totally negotiated convergence between participants, which build on previous encounters, but start from scratch each time. They are *only* in flux, no material is being rehearsed or arranged or repeated, it is only the performance encounter that forms and informs what transpires.

Performance/Lives of Performers

Though the spontaneous approach of Grand Union and even Contact Improvisation can be said to have come directly out of Rainer's impulses to explore contingency in performance, for her that contingency always depended on the tension between set material and the processes of learning, rehearsing, and arranging that material. As her collaborators' approaches loosened with the formation of Grand Union, her own choreographic and directorial authority tightened again in contrast. For the first two years of the 1970s, while she was still a member of the group, this

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[146] Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 58. Paxton qtd from "The Grand Union," 30.

often happened in direct dialogue with Grand Union's exploration of spontaneous and fluctuating structure and control. The aforementioned *WAR* staged "a huge sprawling non-competitive game-like piece for 31 people" while the Grand Union performed their earliest riffs on *CP-AD* for the first time under that name in an adjacent space.[147] 1971 began with Rainer traveling to India on a fellowship for six weeks, leaving Grand Union to begin to define itself apart from her creative legacy. On her return, however, she found herself "in a state of extreme culture shock" and, like Spalding Gray after the trip portrayed in *India and After (America)*, she sunk into a deep depression and began doubting whether she wanted to continue on the same creative path. This was a turning point in her career, as it had been for Gray; in fact by coincidence or not she even titled a chapter of her memoir, written 35 years later, "India and After (*Dénouement*)."[148]

Out of this period of uncertainty and self-doubt, Rainer turned to new work, which did not repurpose or rearrange her previous choreography, for the first time in years. She built brand new material for what became *Grand Union Dreams*, a performance explicitly meant to reconnect her work as a director with Grand Union's new direction. She did this first by looking to Grand Union in performance for material, using moments of improvised movement that Rainer had observed as material she could arrange and rearrange. Second, she used Grand Union itself as a distinct part of her cast. *Grand Union Dreams* was a large-scale pageant playing with notions from mythology, which cast the Grand Union dancers as "Gods" while other groups of performers were labeled "Mortals" and "Heroes."

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[147] Rainer, *Work 1961-1973*, 161.

[148] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 368. Gray's journal entry from 12 January 1979 indicated that he phoned Rainer to invite her to a performance of *Rumstick Road*, so she would have been aware of him by the time he premiered *India and After...* later that year. Whether she knew of or had seen that work in particular, though, is not clear. Spalding Gray, "Journal: 1978-79," Spalding Gray Papers, Subseries C. Journals, 1964-2003, 35.1, Harry Ransom Center.

Much as *The Mind is a Muscle* had provided the raw material that had been deconstructed and reconstructed through the various iterations of *Performance Demonstration* and *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* over the previous three years, *Grand Union Dreams* would become a new source and template for Rainer's work during the next few years, up until the point at which she decided to leave live performance entirely.[149] Following *Grand Union Dreams* and Rainer's eventual departure from Grand Union, her work began moving in two interconnected directions, which would characterize her focus over the next few decades. First her work became much more concerned with its own content as representational of certain emotional and relational states, some of which could be characterized as narrative, though in unconventional ways. This approach meant that language became central not as interchangeable "material" to be juxtaposed with other material, nor as an organizational system for that material, but as a contributory element to a coherent whole in which spoken and written language became an indispensable aspect of Rainer's composition. This work newly aspired to move past its history as an example of ostensibly apolitical postmodern minimalist formalism into an expressive and emotionally awakened space that embraced the then-current sentiment of the contemporary women's movement and its aesthetics that the "personal is political."[150]

The second, connected, change in Rainer's work was a reorientation toward filmmaking, which was as much a move away from her longstanding intermediality as it was a step in the direction of a new media. As Rainer wrote in an essay in 1971, "I'm no longer interested in

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[149] Rainer, *Work 1961-1973*, 189.

[150] Popularized by Carol Hanisch's essay: "The Personal is Political," Eds. Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt, *Notes from the Second Year : Women's Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (Radical Feminism, 1970), 76–78.

mixed media. You either make a movie or you don't make a movie."[151] Though she had made

half a dozen short films during the previous five or so years, she positioned all of them as, in one

way or another, silent extensions of her choreographic material, "choreographic exercises that

were meant to be viewed with one's peripheral vision," which she saw as, "a boring hybrid, too

obvious and simplistic to work as either film or dance."[152] Instead, relying on the mediation of

filmed material, as well as on the editorial strategies associated with montage technique, Rainer

moved, in both her live work and in the full-length films that that she would make in the years to

follow, from an orientation to dance and live performance to a fundamentally cinematic

vocabulary, onstage and on screen.

In early 1972, she more or less simultaneously made two new works with a great deal of

overlapping content: *Performance*, a live theatre piece that "continued the process of

accumulation and juxtaposition of old and new components that characterized *Performance*

Demonstration and *Rose Fractions,"* which was presented at Hofstra University and at the

Whitney Museum, and *The Lives of Performers*, a feature length film with the same cast

covering much of the same ground as the live piece.[153] In these works, the labor of ordering and

arranging material, which had been at the center of Rainer's previous performances, gave way to

more familiar through lines of narrative and character. Even though this material was represented

in idiosyncratic and unconventional ways, a fictional narrative, rather than a presentational

framework, still held together the various diverse activities seen onstage or on screen. In fact any

narrative inconsistencies could logically be explained away by the premise of the film's title. If

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[151] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 209.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 243.

these were in fact the "lives of performers" then any inexplicable or idiosyncratic activities they were seen engaging in that did not conform to their character arcs must therefore be the public "performance" side of the fictional private lives on which the narrative focused.

The fact that the film opens with a dance rehearsal, documentary footage of Rainer actually rehearsing the main cast of the film and some auxiliary dancers for a dance they would be presenting in the live version of *Performance*, reinforces this idea that what the film shows are the lives of performers in all their dimensions, including rehearsals and performances. The normalization of esoteric performance behavior contrasts with the film's purposefully artificial and stilted portrayal of the performers' everyday lives; their lives as performers, it seems, may actually be the only thing that is recognizably naturalistic about them. But what the self-conscious theatricality emphasizes and makes obvious is still the mechanics of narrative. This new narrative logic in her work, reinforced by the editorial logic of film, disappears the underlying organizational process, which Rainer had showcased in her earlier work by endlessly rearranging her material into different permutations and configurations and focusing on the relationship between variable material rather than the content of any given piece. Finding herself turning back toward the narrative impulses and use of human behavior as material that she had pushed back against in her earliest choreography, Rainer wrote at the time,

> Let me say that I am no longer interested in unlimited interchangeability as I labor toward a kind of ordering somewhere between the arbitrary and the open-ended, between the excessive specificity of the story and the absence of emotional specificity of object-oriented permutations; a kind of ordering between commitment and ambiguity, between giving the game away and eliminating familiar rules, between a horizontal and vertical

> examination of human behavior. Maybe something between the analytical and the sentimental.[154]

While the organizational functions Rainer had previously centralized through verbal negotiation onstage (what in the language of organized labor and other political spheres are called "talks") were subsumed into the narrative and editorial necessities of film, talk itself became newly central as the material out of which the piece was built, not only the tool with which it was pieced together.

Though her transition from live art to film might seem to be her most significant transition, she was in fact working across media already in her previous works, which included projections of film and still images and recorded speech and music. It was her disciplinary realignment with the strategies of specifically narrative filmmaking, and its use of language in particular, which proved most dramatic and most revealing about her underlying motivations. In correspondence with the art historian Nan Rosenthal after a screening of *Lives of Performers* she wrote, "Dance was not as specific, meaning-wise, as language."[155] Rainer wanted to be able to, literally, speak about concerns, both personal and political, beyond the formal movement and spatial arrangements that had characterized her work and the work of artists with whom she was associated both in dance and in visual arts up until that point. She hoped to unearth what she autobiographically knew was there, the warm-blooded, complex world of lived experience beneath the aesthetic surface of minimalist art: "While we aspired to the lofty and cerebral plane of a quotidian materiality, our unconscious lives unraveled with an intensity and melodrama that inversely matched their absence in the boxes, beams, jogging, and standing still of our austere

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[154] Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973*, 244.

[155] Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 390.

sculptural and choreographic creations."[156] Rather than denouncing these aesthetics, she wanted

to investigate if there was a way to reconnect art not just to the form, but the experiential content

of life. She asked Rosenthal in her letter, "…is there some connection and/or polarity between

formalism/alienation/humanism? Or indeterminacy/narrative? Or psychological content/the

avant-garde? Or am I creating straw men?"[157] The next phase of her career, launched with *The*

Lives of Performers, constituted a prolonged attempt to resolve these questions.

It is no coincidence that, like Antin and Gray, it was to language that she turned, with its

capacity to be both formal and expressive, both fixed and ephemeral, both highly crafted and

extemporaneous. Describing her use of language, which was both spoken aloud and projected on

the screen in *Performance* and in *The Lives of Performers*, in comparison to her use of language

and text in earlier pieces, she wrote,

> The text now functions to construct a fictional continuity and
> cohesiveness. In the past it was an independent element that was
> meant to enrich a sequence of events and very often replaced
> music. It provided an emotional or dramatic fabric that I had not
> necessarily been concerned with in the making of the dance, a
> filling in of crevices with a content that the dance itself did not
> supply…. My process requires that I make certain distinctions for
> myself: What do I want the audience to do: *read* or *hear* textual
> material? When should such material be heard as a *recording* and
> when should it be heard *live*, i.e., from the lips of the performers
> themselves? In film should the spoken words be *in synch* or *out of*
> *synch*, or should there be *voice-over narration*? … Should the
> performer *read* the words, *recite* them, or *paraphrase* them? These
> decisions are usually contingent on the nature of the material
> itself… and/or the context within which it is to be presented. The
> particular construction of a given sentence may be more important
> to me than a quality of 'ad libbing', or vice versa.[158]

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[156] Rainer, *Feelings are Facts,* 391.

[157] Ibid.

[158] Rainer, *Feelings are Facts*, 277. [Emphasis in original.]

The role of language in the film shifts between the approaches she describes. Following the documentary footage of the dance rehearsal, a sequence features a series of static shots of still images from *Grand Union Dreams* laid out on a table filled with notebooks and detritus. On the soundtrack, Rainer and the performers discuss the images and reminiscence about the interpersonal dynamics that attended touring as a company. The film deliberately blurs the line between fiction and reality in these apparently informal, "behind the scenes" memories. Seemingly spontaneous recollections give way to deliberately stilted delivery, and moments when the performers ask each other whether they are reading the things they are saying or remembering them.

A love story that begins in this commentary then carries through to the main section of the film, which involves the film's four "protagonists" in various tableau poses in a dance studio, which has been staged with minimal decoration to represent a domestic space – a couch and a lamp, a bed, etc. suggest a theatrical set rather than a cinematic location. Voiceover narration provides this series of tableau significance as a kind of melodrama about the love lives of these characters, who go by the same names as the dancers portraying them. It is not clear, though, if the narration controls the meaning of the tableau or the tableau controls the meaning of the narration, that is if the performers are acting out the story or the voiceover is trying to make a narrative out of disconnected stage pictures. At some points audience laughter can be heard on the voiceover track (Rainer used some audio captured at a live presentation of *Performance*) and this adds to the suggestion of contingency, as if the tableau and the narration were occurring separately but simultaneously in real time. The language moves back and forth between voiceover, in both Rainer's voice and in the conversational voices of the protagonists, title cards,

and sync sound, each linguistic register competing for control of the narrative and its meaning. At times the voices sound flat, like they are reading the words or the language was learned through repetitive drills; at other points, especially as the film goes on, the remarks sound spontaneous, sometimes even like the performers are laughing in response to the text.

Late in the tableau sequence all talk cuts out and Valda Setterfiled does a dramatic solo dance, involving an arching backwards bend, which was originally choreographed for *Grand Union Dreams.* The film returns to the dance rehearsal, in which the performers are trying to recall what they did at the Hofstra presentation of *Performance* using a shallow upright box, in which very tightly contained tableau are framed. At some points, Rainer speaks directly to the cinematographer, Babbette Mangold, breaking the fiction and acknowledging the process of the film being made, as in the KQED studio several years earlier. The film ends with another series of tableau, the performers this time recognizably in costume as "characters," imitating stills from GW Pabst's 1929 silent film *Pandora's Box* (or *Lulu*). Rainer calls this a "real performance," in other words not a performance of not performing, but a formally recognizable representational format inside the frame of the film. At a certain point, the Rolling Stones song "No Expectations" plays over the tableau, offering the sensual flooding and emotional release that Rainer's judicious use of music often has, and then cutting out just as suddenly to end in silence, all the more stark for the juxtaposition.[159]

Though Rainer's authorial presence had become more clandestine in the film, language was newly asserting itself, with its multi-faceted ability to both control and be controlled, to dictate and respond. Through varied performance mechanisms and technological methods, *The*

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[159] Yvonne Rainer, *Lives of Performers: A Melodrama*. (New York, NY: Zeitgeist Films, 1972), VHS; Rainer, *Lives of Performers* script, *Work: 1961-1973*, 213-233.

Lives of Performers demonstrated the very different registers at which language could be deployed in film. It presented the possibility of highly formalist and ironic construction as a commentary on the clichés and conventions of narrative, and of life lived in its shadow, at the same time that it suggested the possibility of an authentic and "realistic" narrative representation of the human condition that does not remain aloof from pronounced aesthetic sensibilities and genre-defying artistic convictions. As dramatic storytelling, this is certainly a Brechtian approach, which would inform her filmmaking in the years to come. Juxtaposing visual text with sync and non-sync dialogue, and moving images with still, to emphasize the construction of the dramatic unit, while still always recognizably telling a story, would become a signature of her cinematic style.

This fusion in language of formalist experimentation with a humanistic narrative impulse was also present in the non-dance lecture performances, which would constitute her live performance output during the time she was making film and not making dance. Many hallmarks of Rainer's choreographic approach could be found in these performances, particularly their treatment of spoken and written language as found material she could employ in collage form. However, like her film work these lecture pieces also stood out for how unequivocally not in dialogue with dance they were. As she turned from intermediality toward film work that embraced film as a medium, not an element of a collage, her use of language became similarly centralized in pieces that were built on genres of speech, which in turn became templates for collage. Even a lecture performance with a title as inviting to somatic exploration as *Woman and the Body* turned out not to have employed kinetic movement, but to have dealt strictly with speech genres as a means to analyze public and private roles for the aging female body.

This performance, in a video document of a version presented in 1998 when she was 64, begins with Rainer applying lipstick and holding a tub of face cream up to an imaginary camera while a recording of a man's voice recites diagnoses of degenerative vaginal conditions. She then reads, verbatim, a speech delivered to the United Nations by Australian anti-nuclear activist Helen Caldicott, in which Caldicott leans into the notion that were women in power they would be able to end nuclear proliferation, and chides women for not taking power more proactively. Rainer carefully notated this speech, both for a precisely calibrated delivery, and with her own critical commentary on Caldicott's attitude, which she also reads aloud. She then moves seamlessly from Caldicott's formal address to a series of personal histories she has collected of women's experiences with menopause, each delivered in her own voice. This includes a re-enactment with an audience member of the interview questions she used to elicit these histories from other women. This leads to a more academic lecture on different cultural attitudes toward menstruation and menopause before she turns, on a Lenny Bruce joke about how unattractive post-menopausal women are, back to her own personal history. Never moving from her Spalding Gray-like seat behind a desk, she combines these diverse sources and genres of speech through her single voice into a consideration of the public life of women and their bodies. Bringing together disparate materials in this embodied performance, her body once again remains the only enduring reality.[160]

While her filmmaking career took up and extended the combinatory process of diverse sources into a coherent whole that she began in her dance performance, re-aligning her use of image and text with film language, her lecture performances incorporated the use of speech and

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[160] "Woman and the Body," La Jolla Museum of Art, 1998, VHS, b108 V39-40; "Woman and the body" text, b35 f9, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

recited text as found material, and of talk and talk structures as organizational tools, also born in her dance practice. And when Rainer returned to making dance work again in the 1990s, spoken language reappeared, too, as improvisational conversation, found text, autobiographical material, deployed in similar piecemeal ways as in the earlier collage works, but coming from closer to the bone.[161] Language remained, always providing an ironic distance on the dance material, always offering a glimpse at the thinking and the doing behind the choreography, always providing a bit of personal history, and always instigating, tracing, and knitting imperfectly back together the fissure in the surface of performance.

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[161] See meeting with Xavier LeRoy, Berlin, VHS, 2001, Box 121, V113; Rainer with Richard Move as Martha Graham, VHS, Box 116, V86a-b; *After Many a Summer Dies a Swan*, BAM, VHS, 2000, Box 120 V109, Yvonne Rainer Papers. As well as the aforementioned *Assisted Living* pieces (2011/2013).

EPILOGUE

Each of the preceding chapters offers an account of the talk performance career of the artist at its center that is at least partially concerned with the entwined relationship between extemporaneous talk and the media technologies, formats, and distribution channels which shaped, preserved , and circulated their talk practices. Chiefly, this has involved digging in the archive for the media traces of past performances and some sense of how they came to be, how they were understood at the time, and how they changed over the course of each career, especially in relation to disciplinary lineages, historical circumstances, and shifting critical conversations inside and outside the academy. In this epilogue, however, I will briefly treat the issue of how those archival traces have continued to make themselves known through re-performance, remediation, and material persistence long after the talk careers chronicled in this study ended. Revisiting extemporaneous talk performance is not always a straight line, but as the mediated afterlives of these three artists' work shows, talk remains available. As each of these cases demonstrates in distinct ways, the question of how it is revisited and re-experienced exerts a powerful influence on how the original talk performance practices are understood and historicized, and therefore on how those practices might be taken up and further theorized and transformed as objects of critical study and as creative practice in the future.

Continuous Project-Altered Daily Continued: Rainer's Second Dance Career

The negotiations over the make-up of *Continuous Project-Altered Daily* did not end with the Whitney performance in 1970, though they went into a long period of dormancy. The

combinatory impulses that animated that performance became the underlying logic for the film

career that Yvonne Rainer developed over the 25-year interval between *The Lives of Performers*

and her return to dance work in the 1990s. However, Rainer's dance work continued to have a

life of its own through memory, artistic reputation, and documentary fragments, many of which

can be found in Rainer's quasi-scrapbook publication *Yvonne Rainer: Work 1961-1973,* which

she put together at the beginning of her film career as a means of preserving her dance work,

while also consigning it to the past. The very existence of that book, though, introduced the

possibility of revisiting Rainer's collage performances, at least intellectually.

In 1996, the same year Rainer made her final film, the possibility of approaching *CP-AD*

as a lived performance again re-emerged. A French group specializing in dance reconstructions

known as Quatuor Albrecht Knust determined to stage *CP-AD* for a dance festival in Montpelier,

France that included a retrospective of works by Rainer and Steve Paxton. Unsure how to

proceed from the available material, the company entered into a correspondence with Rainer and,

as had been true a quarter century earlier, the terms of the performance were largely negotiated

through this advance exchange. In a sense, then, the reconstruction of *CP-AD* began even in the

planning stages, which replicated Rainer's exchange of letters with her company about the rules

and limits of spontaneous onstage activity in the original *CP-AD*.

Working, at Rainer's suggestion, from her *Work 1961-1973* book, a company

representative wrote to her to ask for some clarification about the idea that the work was "altered

daily" and what, exactly, was being altered. Looking to the program from the Whitney, which

was reproduced in the book, they were focused on interpreting the types of performance behavior

listed and wanted to confirm that they should take the documentary material found in the book as

"the ultimate reference."[1] They also wanted to know if they could use other music than that indicated and if they could add to the recited texts Rainer had used, the selections from Lenny Bruce and the film history book *The Parade's Gone By*, "others equivalent to them in the french [sic] culture?"[2] This line of inquiry suggests two possible modes of reconstruction, one in which the accuracy of the performance could be policed against a precise recreation of what had been documented in the book, and the other in which some kind of equivalency could be created between the performance as Rainer staged it, with the cultural references she used, and a performance that would do what Rainer's had done, using appropriate French references to create an equivalent experience.

In a brief, undated response Rainer seemed to release the group from the requirement to adhere to her choreographic authority, suggesting there is no avenue to reconstruct *CP-AD* in the manner of other dance reconstructions like *The Rite of Spring,* which they had also performed. Instead, she wrote magnanimously that they "should go with your 'sense of the project.' ... It is now your project. You have my blessing." However, another follow-up made it clear that a sound designer had already been brought in to interpret the sonic elements of *CP-AD*, which Rainer had listed as three songs by Ike and Tina Turner and one by The Beatles. This designer, Jean-Jacques Palix, proposed using the original music, which he understood to have been chosen as emblematic popular American songs from 1970, for the fully choreographed "Chair/Pillow" sequence, but for any other music played extemporaneously during the rest of the performance, he advocated "A selection of significant popular songs and musics [sic] dating back to the same

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[1] Yvonne Rainer, *Yvonne Rainer : Work 196 -1973* (Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 130–34.

[2] Montpelier CP-AD reconstruction correspondence, 1996, Box 33, Folder 15, Yvonne Rainer Papers, 2013, bulk 1959-2013, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

year in France... The actors will be able to use these records freely to play short extracts that everyone can recognize." This brought the other side of Rainer's authorial personality into the equation, and she responded somewhat more pessimistically on the 30th of May, "My book can hardly be 'the ultimate reference' for 'Continuous Project-Altered Daily'" as it does not contain the Labanotation for "Chair/Pillow" and "Trio A" that had been prepared in the 1990s detailing her precise choreography. She insisted "it would be impossible to reconstruct the entire dance from <u>any</u> of the available sources, including my lousy memory" and intimates surprise that they are even going to attempt to do anything beyond the notated sequences.[3]

With her understanding that they were in fact attempting to reconstruct *CP-AD* in its entirety, she offered some cautious suggestions that did not tell them how to recreate *CP-AD*, but seem to make it more possible that they might do something like what she did, while holding onto certain aspects of her material that she found authorially important. She suggested drawing on a list of props included in the book, using spoken texts, for which she gave permission to find French "equivalents," and music, for which she did not give such permission, and making use of the elements listed in the theoretical section of the program as "teaching," "rehearsing," "marking," and "surprises." Of the last she wrote, "i.e. material planned by one or more members of the group unbeknownst to the others and introduced during performance, not necessarily at the most appropriate moment!" An open invitation, it would seem, to include elements she did not author in the performance. Even 25 years later, Rainer was still exerting her authorial prerogative while releasing certain elements to performer intervention in a highly controlled and negotiated give and take that kept the outcome of the performance undecided, but still under her influence.

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[3] Montpelier CP-AD reconstruction correspondence, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

One more correspondence, written to Rainer by one of the dancers, Emmanuelle Huynh, after the performances in Montpelier, where Rainer had been present and offered feedback, reveal some sense of what that performance was like for the dancers. Evaluating the difference between their project, which was ultimately billed as *Continuous Project-Altered Daily (Fragments)*, and the original *CP-AD*, Huynh wrote: "My deep feeling is that we miss simply time together. You were five or six people who knew each other very well... The clear difference between clean, choreographed work and the chaos is another very important point." Presumably, Huynh found that the precision required of a group without a learned sense of their collective dynamic resulted in the loss of the chaotic element that was in fact part of the work's design. Nonetheless, in realizing the reconstruction, Huynh was able to experience the undecided contingency that Rainer and her company sought and fought over a quarter century earlier, "Reconstructing CP-AD meant to me to make visible again the disruptive strength of it and its implications..."[4]

Even at the remove of many years, Rainer continued to exert her control over *CP-AD* at the same time that she sought ways to keep the performance open to undecided possibility. In some way, Rainer's continued control and skepticism about the possibility of ever revisiting the work suggested it could never be transferrable to other bodies. Or else, her maneuvers to open up certain elements of the piece and keep others set, to create a situation in which something like her *CP-AD* could be performed by other dancers in a different time and place, meant that it could always be transferrable. This understanding of *CP-AD* is as a performance circumstance, a tool kit with certain elements provided upon which it is necessary to expand, invent, and improvise,

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[4] Montpelier CP-AD reconstruction correspondence, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

passed down as an oral tradition. But it remained held together as a negotiation between author

and performers, an exchange that both reified and undermined the position of each in the

performance, and kept *CP-AD* a performance that could never be finished, but can only happen

again, and even then still remain unknowable.

Since Rainer remained outside this process, her voice could not be directly included and

she had to speak only through her correspondence, and whatever she communicated in the

workshop rehearsals she attended in Montpelier. But several years later she was reunited with

one of the dancers from the group, Xavier LeRoy, who had become well-known in the

intervening years, for a sort of revisitation of the format once again. A German art festival had

invited them to collaborate together in any way they saw fit, and since they did not know one

another well, they became acquainted and began to negotiate what they might do via an email

exchange. Rainer proposed a familiar sounding combination of conversation, demonstration, and

skill sharing in an informal setting, "some kind of public 'demonstrations' perhaps, like two

strangers meeting and describing and demonstrating what they do."[5] Comparing the idea to a

similar event Rainer had staged with Steve Paxton at the Montpelier festival, LeRoy recalled

that, "it had no border between talking, 'moving' and 'demonstrating'"[6] and Rainer suggested,

"It should be like we've met for a cup of coffee to share some ideas..."[7]

This sense of informality they discussed came to fruition in the project they realized

together in Berlin in 2001, in which they appeared together in an open studio space wearing

headphone mikes and standing informally talking while slides of their careers flipped by on a

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[5] Rainer email to LeRoy, 21 Nov 1999, Box 34 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[6] LeRoy email to Rainer, n.d., Box 34 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[7] Rainer email to LeRoy, 30 Jan 2000, Box 34 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

projector behind them. They talked and demonstrated certain moves for one another, especially

nuances of the "Chair/Pillow" dance from *CP-AD*. They asked each other questions and Rainer

rehearsed once again the history of *CP-AD*, the contentious onstage negotiations, the founding of

Grand Union, and the start of her film career. Revisited thorough embodied, dialogic

reengagement negotiated moment to moment in real time, but built on their independent career

histories, this "meeting," as they called it, became in some respects another version of *CP-AD*,

arranging and re-arranging the same source material.[8]

Rainer had in fact just come from making her first dance work in more than 20 years,

After Many a Summer Dies the Swan, her collaboration with Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak

Dance Project, which she had described as "a kind of collage of bits and pieces I can retrieve

from my 15-year dance career, including CP-AD. 'Yvonne Rainer's Greatest Hits' you might

call it."[9] Since *CP-AD* itself collected and rearranged "bits and pieces" from Rainer's dance

career, the piece revisited both the material from her dance career and her earlier revisitation of

it, going over the same material anew in the performance. And in fact, during Rainer and

LeRoy's conversation, they discussed an installation Rainer was then preparing based on *After*

Many a Summer Dies the Swan that further recycled and rearranged the material once again.

As Rainer has re-established her place in the dance world in the 21st century, already

outlasting what she called the 15-year duration of her previous dance career, she has continued to

revisit and re-work the material which made up that earlier choreographic repertoire and

constituted the raw material of *CP-AD*. In recent performances like *Assisted Living: Bad Sports 2*

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[8] LeRoy meeting video documentation, VHS, 2001, V113, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

[9] Rainer email to LeRoy, 21 Nov 1999, Box 34 Folder 4, Yvonne Rainer Papers.

(2010), physical elements from previous performances and choreographic sequences like "Chair/Pillow" were brought together in a quasi-collage work. In the performance Rainer herself stood with a hand held microphone and a stack of loose leaf papers, reading autobiographical and political material, while the various elements of her past performances were executed around her by her dancers, The Raindears. This bears more of a resemblance to her earlier uses of spoken language as recited or recorded text employed as an alternative accompaniment to music for her choreographic sequences than it does to her informal use of talk as a means of composition and negotiation in the later collage performances and her collaboration with Leroy. But the collage nature of the work, and Rainer's physical presence as the identified authorial voice, invite comparisons with *CP-AD* and the strategies of her other collage pieces of 1968-1972. Only now those elements and their relationships to one another have become fixed.

In fact, what she has really done may be to back up to the moment before *CP-AD* became the entirety of her performance to the point in the development of *Performance Demonstration* when she introduced "Continuous Project-Altered Daily" as a performance of rehearsal constituting only a single performance unit within the make-up of the piece overall. She returned to this strategy in the early days of Grand Union, presenting *CP-AD* as a more contained, discrete sequence, which became the basis of Grand Union's improvisational approach, alongside her participatory, large scale, fully choreographed performance *WAR* (1970). In her more recent piece, *Spiraling Down* (2008), she includes an extended section in which predetermined choreographic material could be arranged in different configurations by the dancers in the moment, a strategy that extends back to the talk structures of her evening-length works of the 1960s. This allows for a choreography that is deliberately in flux, neither improvised nor fully

authored, but which can be enacted over and over again with different outcomes each time. It is now from the position of a fixed performative present that Rainer is able to endlessly rearrange and re-sequence the choreographic building blocks of her past, exerting the editorial precision she brought from filmmaking on her memory and history as a dance artist, and on the material remains of *Continuous Project-Altered Daily*.

Hearing Antin First: Talk Poetry without the Page

David Antin's work has had little chance at remediation. He continued his talk poetry practice in more or less the same way until his death in 2016, and the poems continue to be published and circulate widely (in experimental poetry circles, that is) as textual artifacts that can be revisited, quoted, and invoked according to a more or less established understanding of poetry as a discipline and of his idiosyncratic practice. As explained earlier, I discovered in the archive that understanding was erroneous in at least some of its particulars, but the extent of Antin's editorial intervention in his talk practice is still not widely known. At the time I was conducting my research, anyone who wanted to hear an Antin talk piece would, save for very few exceptions, have had to either attend one of his rare public appearances or traveled to the Getty Research Institute and ask to hear one of the tapes in his archive. In practice, the recordings of Antin's talks, as I have argued, were essentially transitory documents sacrificed to the eventual circulation of his works via print media. No one heard Antin's talks who was not present for one, and no one expected to.

Therefore, the recent sudden availability of a large swath of archival recordings of his performances online has enormous implications for the understanding of his work. Shortly

before his death, The Getty made a selection of 150 or so of these recordings, which are mostly on cassette or reel to reel tape, available online in digitized form without restrictions.[10] It appears that many, if not most, of these selections resulted from my research priorities during the period I was doing archival work, as the list includes all the material that was digitized for my benefit, as well as a few others. But beyond the evidence of the institutional trace of my own research, this seemingly simple shift in the availability of Antin's performance recording profoundly shifts the material possibilities of encountering it for anyone familiar with or curious about Antin's work.

Where previously his performances were unseen reference points for his textual production, now the recordings can augment, compete with, or even supersede their textual representations. Though it would still require access to the transcripts and manuscripts Antin prepared on the way to publication to understand how and when the content of the recordings was revised for publication, no doubt savvy listeners with book in had will quickly spot the inconsistencies between the performances and their published versions. Even more importantly, the recordings offer the possibility, even the probability, that many will now encounter Antin entirely apart from the published talk poems, rendering Antin's signature contribution to the disciplinary conversation in poetry, his typographic and editorial interventions included, a mere footnote to his contribution to the globally available, more generalized performance archive.

Already, I have informally observed a pivot toward the sound recordings and the performance events they evidence. Antin's page on PennSound, which mostly includes interviews and other non-talk poem recordings, now includes a link to The Getty resources at the

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[10] Selected audio and video recordings from the David Antin papers, ca. 1972-1995, Getty Research Institute, http://hdl.handle.net/10020/2008m56av

very top of the page.[11] Where once a curious researcher would have had to comb through the collection to find scant, fragmentary examples of a talk poem in action, now the same researcher will be immediately diverted to an almost inexhaustible source of Antin talk performances. A poet and scholar of my acquaintance (who shall go unnamed due to the dubious legality of his actions) recently marked Antin's death by taking the digitized files from the Getty site, where the player can be frustrating to use, and making them available on his own site as downloadable files. And when a former instructor of mine wrote me last year to ask for recommendations of Antin material to introduce in a sound class he was teaching, it was clear that he already assumed all Antin recordings would be available online. In fact, when I mentioned that two of the pieces from Antin's books that I recommended as good introductions to his work were not available on the Getty's site, he seemed confused and surprised, and in fact asked if they were in fact talk poems.

I have so far refrained from drawing on my own arts practice for this project, despite its relevance to it, but I do wish to make an exception for a set of examples that can further help put into perspective the mediated return to relevance of Antin's performance practices. I have instigated several Antin-related performance projects, two of which approach Antin's talk poetry from either end – as a set literary template and as a performance concept. As part of a longer performance of different talk strategies in 2013, I performed Antin's late talk poem *talking at blérencourt* verbatim, using the typographical layout as a score for my delivery, while projecting the text behind me.[12] The following year I collaborated with Toby Altman and Alix Anne Shaw,

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[11] David Antin, *PennSound*, University of Pennsylvania, http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Antin.php

the curators of the experimental poetry series Absinthe and Zygote, on an event responding to Antin called "Talking Back."[13] Ten performers were each given the title of an Antin talk poem as a prompt and invited to deliver their own extemporaneous talk simultaneously in the same room, while mingling with the audience, who inevitably begun responding in kind, so that Antin's monologic format was instead suffused with talk going every which way. Three transcription stations were set up in the room, with computers attached to projectors, allowing anyone who wanted to take turns transcribing what they heard to set it down and project it back into the room. These idiosyncratic and necessarily fragmentary documents, along with other material from the event and reflections from some of the performers, were then published in a chapbook as part of the Present Tense Pamphlet series of performance scores.[14] This publication constitutes a rather idiosyncratic revisiting of Antin's publication process, it preserved much of the contextual detritus that Antin stripped away from his talk poems, and it rendered any given segment of individual discourse unintelligible, representing only the chaotic overlap on the page.

These experiments suggested the rigid fixity of Antin's textual product, which references but cannot reproduce the source performance, on the one hand, and the spatial, relational, in the moment nature of Antin's live performances on the other (deliberately multiplied and amplified beyond coherence in this case.) But it was a third Antin performance experiment that suggested to me the real potential of thinking about Antin's talk practice through live performance.

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[12] David Antin, "talking at blérencourt," *I Never Knew What Time It Was*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 49–60; Ira S. Murfin, *3 Talk Experiments*, Rhinoceros Theatre Festival, Prop Thtr, Chicago, Feb 10-11 2013.

[13] "Talking Back," *Absinthe and Zygote*, curated by Toby Altman and Alix Anne Shaw, Outerspace, Chicago, Oct 11 2014.

[14] *Before, During, and After* Talking Back, Present Tense Pamphlets, eds. Mashinka Firunts and Danny Snelson, Block Museum of Art, Evanston, IL, 2016.

Unsurprisingly, it involved a revisiting of the 80 Langdon talk discussed in chapter 2. As part of

The Festival of Poet's Theatre curated by Devin King and Patrick Durgin in 2015, I recreated

some of the conditions of that event in the Chicago gallery Sector 2337.[15] Approximating the

spatial layout, I took on the role of Antin, reading from cards with a transcription of the audio of

the event, and I handed out cards with transcripts on them to people sitting at the approximate

place in the room where each of the people who spoke during the last hour of the talk were

seated according to the diagram Ellen Zweig included in her account of the event, and asked

them to read their parts on cue.[16] Starting at the point when the talk became mostly a dialogue

between Antin and the audience, we went through the experience together, with cue cards to

signal to the rest of the audience what the response of the original audience had been.

This re-performance was as raucous and improvisatory as the source event, though

perhaps less contentious, and allowed us in the room to experience the spatial, visual, sonic, and

kinesthetic dimensions of the performance beyond its textual representation. A particularly

satisfying informal exchange after the performance drove home the effectiveness of the live,

shared event. The language poet Barrett Watten, who had been in attendance at the original 80

Langdon talk, but had not spoken, was there in Chicago the night of my re-performance in 2015.

Although initially skeptical about what I had planned, he said he felt brought back to that event

and, most significantly for me, the space itself. As he described to me what he had thought of his

friends who were heckling Antin, he gestured casually to where he had stood and where they sat

as if 80 Langdon had been superimposed onto Sector 2337 and all the environmental elements of

[15] Ira S. Murfin, *Figures of Speech and Figures of Thought (re-visited): Encounters from David Antin's 80 Langdon Street talk re-performed*, Festival of Poets Theater, Sector 2337, Chicago, Dec 5 2015.

[16] Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig, *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981), 175. (See Fig. 2.3)

a performance event that Antin habitually dispensed with brought back into the piece. Though we need not re-perform every one of Antin's poems in order to understand them, these three quite different experiments with performing his archive suggest that by attending not only to what is on the page, but to the spatial-temporal event and the experiential phenomenon of going through it together, we can perhaps revisit the poetics of contingent, collective, extemporaneous talk that underlie Antin's apparently monologic authorial practice.

Once More With Feeling: Gray After Gray

Perhaps the only performance of Gray's that can compete with *Swimming to Cambodia* in terms of impact and notoriety is his death. In 2001 Gray was in a car accident that left him severely physically injured and debilitatingly depressed, due in part to head trauma. In early 2004 he disappeared and, after two months of searching, his body was found in the East River, where he had apparently jumped from the Staten Island Ferry. News of his disappearance, the search, and the eventual discovery of his body, was widely reported. More people found out who Spalding Gray was, perhaps, by way of his disappearance and death than from even the film versions of his monologues or his bit parts in Hollywood movies. With Gray's absence, the process of mediatization was complete – Gray, his death, and his performance format, especially as presented in Demme's *Swimming to Cambodia* film, became the fixed media objects around which new performances could be built. Though, like Gray's inability to remember making the film of *The Seagull* in the dream he related at the end of *Swimming to Cambodia*, these performances for the most part mimic the formal elements of Gray's performance form, and the

reportorial style of the *Swimming to Cambodia* film, without reflecting the contingent procedure that originally defined Gray's approach.

During his later career Gray was happy to allow the distinct understandings of his work as extemporaneous talk and replicable text to coexist, blur, and merge. But since his death his work has, of necessity, circulated in forms that require a certain kind of orthodoxy about what Gray was doing disciplinarily. Though his work continues to be accessible in the various recordings he made while alive, it has also found new form in a number of literary projects instigated by his wife, Kathleen Russo, and in a micro-genre of what I will call tribute performances. By looking to both the official archive, as institutionalized, licensed, and promoted by his estate, and to a more contingent and collective archive that survives in the formal and thematic preoccupations of artists interested in and influenced by Gray and his work, it is possible to identify two distinct legacies of Gray's practice that continue to circulate alongside one another. I argue that in the former, Gray's entire performance project has been subsumed under the rubric of literary production, while the latter takes Gray as the founder of a formal and conceptual approach to performance that subsequent artists have used to structure and authenticate their approaches to autobiographical and first-person storytelling, sometimes taking Gray explicitly as subject, but only rarely replicating his extemporaneous process.

Gray's estate, as overseen by Russo, has extended the tendency Gray himself embraced in his later years to see his work as primarily literary in nature. Russo's 2006 widely-produced multi-actor collage script, *Stories Left to Tell*, compiled with Lucy Sexton from Gray's notebooks, letters, and monologues, paid tribute to Gray specifically as a writer, rather than an

idiosyncratic performance artist.[17] Along with *Stories Left to Tell*, Russo has made several of

Gray's later monologues available through a script licensing service for production by

universities and professional theatres. She has also overseen the editing and publication of

Gray's unfinished final monologue, *Life Interrupted*; Nell Casey's edited volume of personal

writings, *The Journals of Spalding Gray*; and the transfer of Gray's personal archive to the Harry

Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, where it resides alongside the papers of

many other key authors and dramatists.[18]

Russo's publication projects emphasize content over presentation, and textual authority

over ephemeral utterance, suggesting textual fixity as the stabilizing completion of Gray's

ongoing talk performance project. Textual authority ultimately suggests that the work's literary

status supersedes its life as performance. Russo remembered the first time she heard others read

Gray's words as a discovery that they could also be dramatic text: "It's like this light bulb went

off, I go, 'Other people can read his work. No problem.'"[19] And Lucy Sexton, her collaborator in

the creation of *Stories Left to Tell*, thought Gray's charismatic performance was to some extent

in the way of his work's literary merit, "because he was talking about himself and because he

was such a brilliant, funny, captivating performer, he kind of buried the fact that actually this

was really well-crafted writing going on underneath it."[20] It might be said that, contra Roland

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[17] Spalding Gray, Kathleen Russo, and Lucy Sexton, *Spalding Gray : Stories Left to Tell* (Woodstock, Ill: Dramatic Publishing, 2008).

[18] Spalding Gray, *Life Interrupted: The Unfinished Monologue* (Crown, 2005); Spalding Gray, *The Journals of Spalding Gray* (Random House, 2011); Spalding Gray Papers, 1959-2005, undated, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

[19] Jeff Lunden, "N.Y. Plays Channel Monologists Bogosian and Gray," *All Things Considered*, NPR, March 6, 2007, http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=7684896&m=7687371.

[20] Lunden.

Barthes, Gray's death and the end of his self-narrating performances that it brought, also meant

the birth of Gray the author.[21]

Perhaps even more than Gray's thematic and autobiographical legacy, he remains

significant for having defined a style of performance that has spawned a genre and influenced the

concept of first-person storytelling in the culture at large. This influence is marked by two chief

features: first, the formal arrangement of the performer addressing the audience from behind a

table; and second, the cultural investment in the authority of idiosyncratic and self-consciously

subjective first-person reporting. In fact, the former often serves to authenticate the latter,

granting any performer who sits down at a table like Gray's a measure of his authority. In many

of these performances, the table has come to stand for Gray, and for the set of formal and

narrative aesthetics that define a genre of autobiographical storytelling he was key in

consolidating and codifying.[22] The small wooden table, with its chair, microphone, glass of

water, and notebook, as well as Gray's habitual plaid flannel shirt, combine to do something

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[21] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1967, http://deathoftheauthor.com/. I do not mean to suggest that this process of entextualization began with Russo; in many ways Russo's publication strategies extend the process that Gray himself endorsed. Perhaps the most potent illustration of the entwined nature of text and performance for Gray was his autobiographical novel, *Impossible Vacation*, published in 1992. When Gray's novel was released, he had already been touring his monologue about writing the book, *Monster in a Box*, which had itself been published in book form the previous year, and the film adaptation of the monologue was released shortly after the novel came out. Nothing in *Impossible Vacation* argues for its status as a novel; instead it is its life as the titular overlong manuscript in *Monster in a Box* that casts it in that role, while the book narrates the development of the monologue form in context of Gray's fictionalized life. Together they make up a complete system, in which the monologue establishes the book's literary status and the book argues for the validity of the monologue form. Spalding Gray, *Impossible Vacation*, (Knopf, 1992).; Gray, *Monster in a Box* (Vintage, 1992); *Monster in a Box*, dir. Nick Broomfield (Fine Line Features, 1992).What's more, much of *Impossible Vacation* could be seen as a kind of literary "final draft" of the plot of *India and After (America)*.

[22] Certainly I can think of other theatrical tables. Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* comes to mind, as do John Cage's lecture performances, often delivered from behind a table. In particular, *Indeterminacy* involved autobiographical anecdotes not unlike the material Gray would later work with, though Cage structured his work by scoring his oblique and fragmentary anecdotes at a minute each, while Gray took up a similar practice only in *India and After*. Certainly Cage established a horizon of possibility for the table not only as a site of performance, but as a site of performance experimentation.

more than indicate or symbolize Gray, they create a kind of material force field that allows them to function as the mediating objects in response to which a new performance can be structured, always scaffolded on Gray's monologue format in general and *Swimming to Cambodia* in particular, whether acknowledged or not.[23]

It is this constellation of references that have stabilized a genre of tribute performances that deliberately reference Gray, as well as the larger subset of table performances that both preceded and followed Gray's and formally align with his presentational mode. As discussed above, many of the performances that explicitly evoke Gray can be characterized as tributes of one sort or another, often focusing explicitly on Gray's death by apparent suicide in 2004 as either a subject of inquiry or as a dramatic signifier of certain kinds of existential crises and mental health issues. Like Russo's posthumous editorial projects, these performances have also extended Gray's circulation. But where Russo saw the content of Gray's monologues and other writings as most in need of preservation, the tribute performances have emptied Gray's format of its original content in order to emphasize the formal and conceptual elements of Gray's work as a template for a set of performance strategies that can be deployed in response to a wide range of topics.

In these works, Gray remains the stabilizing source media structuring and contextualizing the work of performers looking to literally take his place behind the table. Both Zach Helm in 2011 and Justin Reilly in 2013 have actually revived Gray's ongoing dialogic format, *Interviewing the Audience*, and in 2015 Reilly also staged *Swimming to Cambodia*, a rare

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[23] An original trailer for the film declares: "A man. A desk. A Chair. A Glass of water: *Swimming to Cambodia*.": "*Swimming to Cambodia* Trailer Original with Spalding Gray," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4HGrxvoZ_Xc&feature=youtu.be.

instance of a Gray monologue being performed by another actor.[24] Though in these examples the

performers actually "covered" Gray, all Gray tribute performances have established metonymic

relationships with aspects of Gray's performance in order to invoke his authority or evoke his

presence. The film adaptation of *Swimming to Cambodia* has provided the most frequent touch

point, thanks to both its wide distribution and its pronounced social and political import, which

has endowed the work with a gravity and authority that purports to justify its application beyond

Gray's idiosyncratic performance. Gray's death has also offered many performers a personal

point of identification as they navigate their own troubled psyches and, for the most part,

ultimately declare their triumph in avoiding Gray's fate. The table, though, has more than any

other element enabled subsequent performers to reference Gray without referencing Gray,

whether they meant to or not.

Elements of Gray's table format and mode of address employed as authenticating quotation

were already identifiable in two performances originally presented in 2005, the year after Gray's

death, Michael Brandt's *A Spalding Gray Matter*, and Brian Finkelstein's *First Day off in a Long

Time*. In Finkelstein's performance, which took its title from the opening line of *Swimming to

Cambodia*, he sat behind a table and delivered a monologue in which the news of the discovery

of Gray's body was the entrée to the story of an encounter with a suicidal caller to a helpline

where he worked at the time.[25] Similarly, Brandt sat at a Gray-style table to deliver his

monologue, which used the very public search for Gray after his final disappearance as the

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[24] *Interviewing the Audience by Zach Helm at Vineyard Theatre*, Promotional video (Vineyard Theatre, 2011), http://www.vineyardtheatre.org/video_interviewingtheaudience_sneakpeek.html; "First Niagara Rochester Fringe Festival - Shows - Show - Swimming to Cambodia," First Niagara Rochester Fringe Festival, accessed July 16, 2015, http://rochesterfringe.com/shows/show/swimming-to-cambodia.

[25] Brian Finkelstein, *First Day Off in a Long Time*, web page, accessed July 16, 2015, http://brianfinkelstein.com/.

structuring device for Brandt to narrate his own harrowing experience with medical treatment following a near fatal bout of bacterial pneumonia. Fearing that he could have succumbed to Gray's fate, the piece ended with Brandt declaring, "I can't stop thinking about Spalding Gray because I'm safe at home. And he's not. And I'm terrified that I know why."[26] This echoed a line in *Swimming to Cambodia*, which ended the film adaptation, in which Gray, leaving the pampered life of the film set in Asia suddenly thinks, "I knew what it was that killed Marilyn Monroe."[27]

While these artists were using Gray's recognizable table much as he did, substituting themselves for Gray, others have relied on Gray's table as a substitute for Gray himself. In the first full-length posthumous tribute performance that I am aware of, Nilaja Sun's 2004 *Blues For a Gray Sun,* Sun presented a multi-character solo performance, which did not resemble Gray's performance style but was set on the day Gray's body was discovered.[28] In a racially diverse uptown Manhattan neighborhood 'I,' an Afro-Caribbean character closest to Sun's autobiographical voice, suffering from loneliness and depression that she identifies with Gray's struggles, repeatedly encounters the attitude that depression is not a real problem and suicide a cowardly solution compared with the material hardship and abuse regularly endured by poor people of color. Sun's piece contrasted Gray's world of downtown performance art, often thought of as quintessentially New York, with very different images of urban life in the Latin

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[26] Michael Brandt, *A Spalding Gray Matter* script, 2005, 20. Courtesy of the author.

[27] The line also turns up in an earlier Gray tribute, *Blues for a Gray Sun*, discussed immediately below. The main character, who is an Afro-Caribbean woman, is warned by her friend in exercise class about internalizing of racist beauty standards with the pronouncement: "I know what killed Michael Jackson." Nilaja Sun, *Blues for a Gray Sun*, 2004, 22. Courtesy of the author.

[28] An echo, perhaps, of Frank O'Hara's conversational poem about walking around Manhattan on the day Billie Holiday died, "The Day Lady Died", *Lunch Poems*, (San Francisco, Calif: City Lights Publishers, 2001).

American community uptown. Ultimately, 'I' leaps from the Staten Island Ferry, in emulation of

Gray's suicide, and, in an underwater fantasia, encounters Gray, who symbolically offers her his

table and chair so that she can find her own voice and avoid taking his way out.[29]

Similarly, David Tolchinsky's short play *Where's the Rest of Me?* uses the figure of Gray

at his table as a stand-in for the therapeutic potential of autobiography. In this case an actor

concretely represents Gray at his table, while another actor, playing Tolchinsky, delivers an

autobiographical monologue, which includes Tolchinsky's experience taking a performance

workshop with Gray toward the end of his life, when his mental health had already begun to

deteriorate. The Tolchinsky character ultimately takes inspiration from Gray's autobiographical

project, but resists emulating his performance style. He illustrates his independence from Gray's

legacy by telling his story from a standing position, moving in orbit around the Gray character,

who remains seated at his table. Like Sun, Tolchinsky is finally offered a lifeline by his rejection

of Gray's suicide in favor of what he sees as art's therapeutic potential, despite his explicit

rejection of Gray's style and format.[30]

Other tribute performances use the table to signal a departure from Gray's format,

especially by leaving the table, physically de-centering it, or putting it to other uses. Lian

Amaris, in her 2009 performance *Swimming to Spalding*, began her monologue from behind the

table, wearing a version of Gray's flannel shirt, and telling the story of her journey to Thailand,

which she modeled on Gray's experiences as described in *Swimming to Cambodia.* But when her

journey departed from Gray's template after she met a pair of Australian soldiers on a sex and

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[29] Sun, *Blues for a Gray Sun.*

[30] Tolchinsky, *Where's the Rest of Me?*, *Sick by Seven,* A Red Orchid Theater, Chicago. 26 June 2016.

drinking holiday in Bangkok, she not only removed the outer layer of her flannel shirt and came

out from behind the desk, using center stage for a more mimetic telling, but eventually found

herself sitting on top of the desk, repurposing it as a platform for a different kind of address. This

signaled that Amaris had found *her* Cambodia, the bigger issue to which her monologue was in

service. The effects of war on men who have served in the military, and her relationship to them

as a women, took over as the focus that allowed her narrative to leave Thailand altogether.

Having found a form through Gray, Amaris was able to let go of his form in order to tell a story

like Gray's, but very much her own.[31] Still, Amaris nonetheless chose to employ signature

elements of Gray's performances – the table and water glass – to evoke his influence in her

promotional images.

Gray himself was not beyond this tactic, once the table was firmly established as the site of

his performances, especially when he wanted to re-enact a past event. In the film of his 1989

monologue *Monster in a Box,* he came out from behind the table in order to re-create an occasion

when he told a story to calm an angry film festival crowd in Russia about an experience he had

just had visiting the Hermitage.[32] And in his final completed monologue, *Morning, Noon, and*

Night, he stood to recreate the utopian moment of an impromptu family dance party.[33] In this

later period of his career, he even used leaving the desk as a way to toy with the structures and

expectations of his genre. He toured a version of the early monologue *A Personal History of the*

American Theatre in the 1990s that he billed as a "talk" rather than a "monologue," which

[31] Lian Amaris, *Swimming to Spalding*, dir. Richard Schechner, digital video file, HERE, New York, NY, 2009. Courtesy of Schechner.

[32] Gray, *Monster in a Box,* dir. Broomfield.

[33] Included in Steven Soderbergh's documentary, *And Everything Is Going Fine* (Sundance Selects, 2010.)

involved him standing at a microphone to tell the stories from memory, rather than using cards to prompt his theatrical anecdotes while seated at his table as he had in the original.[34] Conversely, the power of the table to signify Gray's performance style was strong enough to support the eruption of a Gray style monologue by a fictional character in the middle of a domestic scene when the real estate developer and community leader portrayed by Gray begins explaining labor and economic theory using food as props at the dinner table in the middle of David Byrne's 1986 film *True Stories*.[35]

The proliferation of table performances did not stop at Gray and those emulating or memorializing him. While Gray's own creative work continues to circulate as fixed texts, on video and on the page, his performance format has become a visible, recognizable and replicable performance category that is used to contextualize and authenticate performances in diverse contexts with diverse aims and aesthetics. Certainly press and reviews for any autobiographical or first-person performance rarely neglect to mention Gray as an influence or comparative example.[36] The transformation of Gray's format into a reliable tool to contextualize and give shape to any instance of talk performance that needs a visual anchor is apparent in its use by performers who are not usually seen. The table provided radio pioneer Joe Frank an appropriate theatrical context for live performances of his surreal monologues, and it served to visualize Ira

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[34] Discussed in Peterson, *Straight White Male,* 66-7.

[35] *True Stories,* dir. David Byrne (Warner Bros., 1986.)

[36] Anecdotally, a Google alert for Spalding Gray yields far more references to him in the course of articles and reviews of other performers and comedians than it doe material directly about Gray.

Glass's position within and outside of the stories he presented on the short-lived television version of his radio program *This American Life*.[37]

The table also authenticates the work of an artist like Glass's nemesis Mike Daisey, who does not reference Gray directly, but whose extemporaneous monologues are perhaps the clearest inheritor of Gray's format. Daisey relies on Gray's precedent to justify his first-person reportorial project, more essayistic than autobiographical, which follows the model of the *Swimming to Cambodia* film adaptation to go observe, then wryly comment upon, some place or phenomenon of social import. Daisey's rift with Glass over the veracity of his anecdotes in one such monologue stems, I would argue, at least in part from differing disciplinary interpretations of what mattered most about Gray's performance project – dramatic illustration or reportorial accuracy.[38] Meanwhile, Gray's first-person impulse animates many corners of popular middlebrow culture with or without a table, from Glass's show and its progeny to The Moth story slams and all the many "live lit" storytelling events around the country. The annual

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[37] " Live Performances | Joe Frank - The Official Website," accessed July 16, 2015, https://www.joefrank.com/about/live-performances/; "TV Archive by Season | This American Life," accessed July 16, 2015, http://www.thisamericanlife.org/tv-archives.

[38] The Daisey/Glass dustup occurred after Daisey's monologue *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* was adapted to an episode of *This American Life* titled "Mr. Daisey Goes to China," in which Daisey recounted the inequities he witnessed at the Foxconn manufacturing plant where Apple products are made in Shenzhen, China. When it came to light that Daisey had invented many of the specific encounters in his narrative, Glass brought him back on the show for an episode called "Retraction" in which Daisey admitted to the fabrications and Glass mused on the implications of his fabrications for an understanding of the relevance of Foxconn's labor practices for American consumers of Apple products. Though this incident had many implications and complications, I argue that at least some of the vitriol between Glass and Daisey stems from essentially different interpretations of Gray's project: Glass understands the legacy of first-person storytelling as a reportorial one, in which the narrator authenticates their report via verifiable eye witness accounts, while Daisey understands first-person storytelling as a format through which research can be aestheticized and personalized in order to identify abstract social and political forces with individual experience in a way that will feel relevant to an audience. "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory," episode 454, *This American Life*, WBEZ Chicago, Jan 6 2012; "Retraction," episode 460, Mar 16 2012; For more see: D. Soyini Madison, "The Mike Daisey Affair: Labor and Performance," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 234–40; Shannon Steen, "Neoliberal Scandals: Foxconn, Mike Daisey, and the Turn Toward Nonfiction Drama," *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 1 (2014): 1–18.

conferral of the Spalding Gray Award by Performance Space 122 in New York advocates for

Gray's continued relevance for contemporary performance by tagging a diverse group of theatre

and performance artists, both solo performers and others, as working, somehow, in the ever-

enlarging spirit of Gray's monologues.[39]

The power of the table is such that, in Gray's absence, the table itself can sometimes be

said to perform. Any theatrical space set with a wooden table and chair facing out to the audience

evokes Gray's aesthetic and his authority. When the text adaptation of *Swimming to Cambodia*

was re-published after his death, the elegiac cover featured just an empty table with a water glass

and a microphone, both summoning Gray's presence and marking his absence. And in a potent

final example, the potential implied by this cover was realized in a recent performance by Rabih

Mroue (another winner of the Spalding Gray Award) and Lina Saneh, *33 rpm and a few seconds*.

In this piece, the desk and electronic gadgets of a recently deceased Lebanese theatre artist,

positioned onstage in the by now familiar configuration of these table performances, told the

story of his life, death by suicide, and the community that mourns him and wrestles over his

legacy through social, mass, and recorded media, without the presence of any performer at all. *33

rpm and a few seconds* may be the purest example of table performance yet.[40]

I am not arguing that any one of these examples represents an authentic continuation of

Gray's project, or even that such a thing is possible, but that each keeps something of his work in

circulation. In aggregate they form an as-yet-unarticulated field of performance discourse for

which Gray serves as the grounding figure. His table and his performance format have become

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[39] Winners have included dramatic monologist Heather Woodbury, experimental theatre artist Richard Maxwell, iconoclastic playwright Young Jean Lee, and Tim Etchells, director of the pioneering British performance company Forced Entertainment.

[40] Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, *33 Rpm and a Few Seconds*, MCA Chicago, April 10-12 2014.

the source media around which subsequent performances are structured. Gray himself, though --

the presence thinking and responding in the moment, allowing his personal history to "disappear

on a breath" – appropriately remains absent.

399

ILLUSTRATIONS

Talking at Pomona

what i would like to talk about   really   is a subject that probably doesnt have a name

if i were to give it a name it would sound kind of pretentious   and it might be

misleading   so   let me begin by reminiscing slightly   last quarter   we have a

trimester system that has quarters   it is an absurd system   i set about to ask myself

out loud   with a group of students   who were ostensibly concerned with art

what we could do to make a discourse situation in art   meaningful or comprehensible

now that sounds a little vague but what i really wanted to know was this   how can

you think about making art   and i use the word art as an undefined at the moment

how can you talk about it in such a way   that   it will lead to making more art

and the making of more art will itself be rewarding rather than a diminishing return

now how do you set about looking at art making   as something that will be

valuable to do   and the value of which will increase as you proceed to do more of it

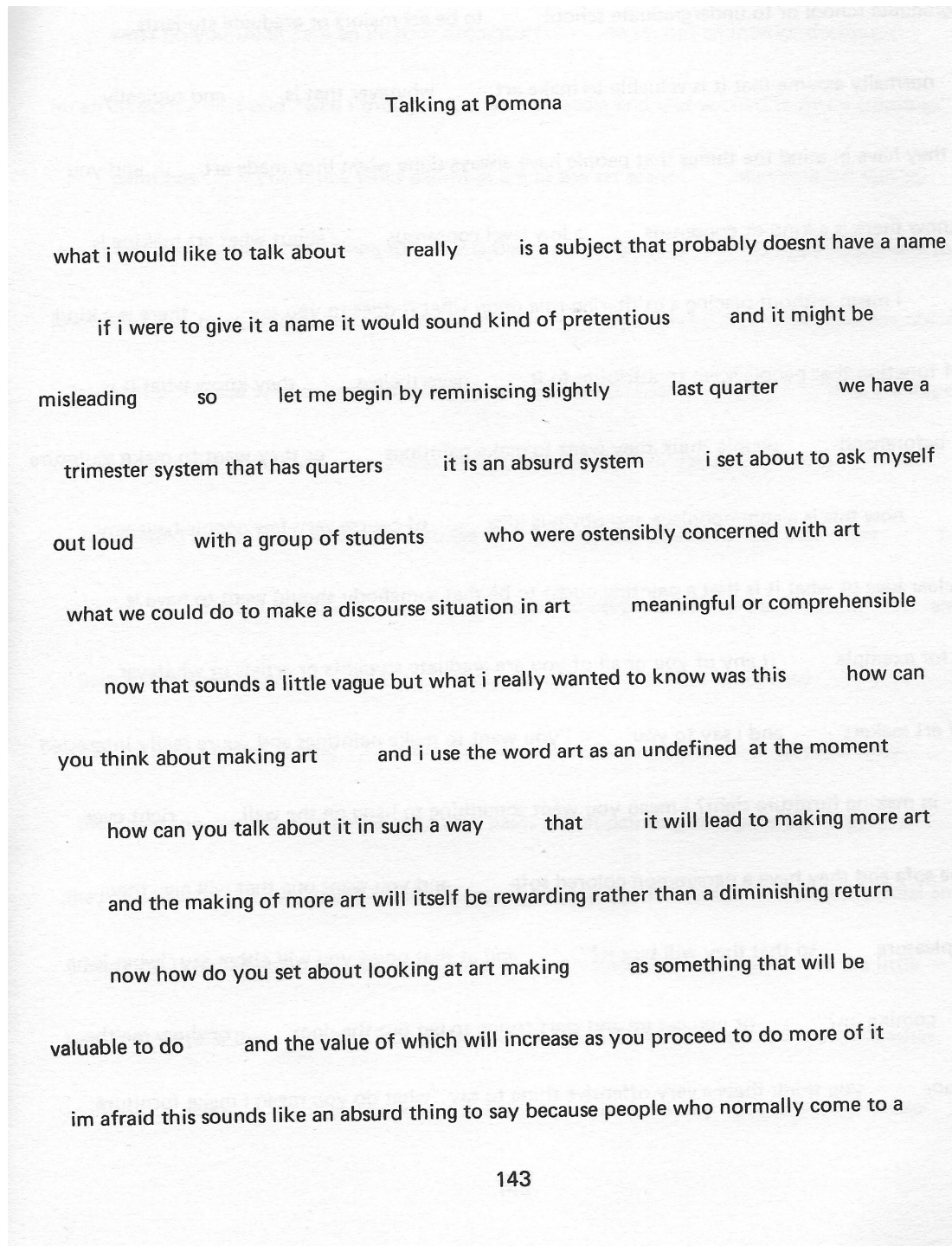im afraid this sounds like an absurd thing to say because people who normally come to a

143

Fig 2.1: David Antin, "Talking at Pomona," *Talking* (New York: Kulchur Foundation, 1972) 143. Author photo.

both pieces are rather melodramatic   ~~and~~ i dont advocate *mean to*

only melodramatic operation but ~~now~~ youll notice that both of these pieces

are about pornography in art they are about art as it were oportunizing over

social human activity now it seems one of the problems here thats raised

is the kind of conflict that extists between human values and the idea of art

making itself as a career   that is what art making is about .. or what it has

often been about take the nude say the female nude   from the Renaissance on it has

always offered something of an entrance to the painting through human sexual feeling

the consumer the art looker was always assumed to be a man   now everyone knows

that men dont get excited when they see a painting of a beautiful naked woman   not a

gentleman or an art lover relator not now anyway that we have photographs and movies

still who can deny that there is that momentary flicker of interest   sure its more

complicated than that this feeling is surely diverted or suspended   by some conflict

of interest   in painting say or antiquity nostalgia   still its a naked woman youre

looking at in a Titian or a Renoir or a Wesselman   it isnt a wine bottle or a moun-

tain   though the feeling the flicker   of sexuality is protected from its conse-

quences by its surrounding attributes its props   the case is may be clearer with

suffering than with sexuality   the painter has painted a picture of a human being

in torment you are filled with an honorable ennobling sympathy for his exquisite

torment   you look at ~~the~~ Gruenewald's Christ and are filled with pleasure   youre

masturbating at the crucifixion we are back to Vito Acconci   what is

the point of all this self stimulation if you are the viewer   or why all this gene-

Fig 2.2: David Antin. "Talking at Pomona" transcript. Box 34, Folder 7. "David Antin Papers, 1954-2006." 27.
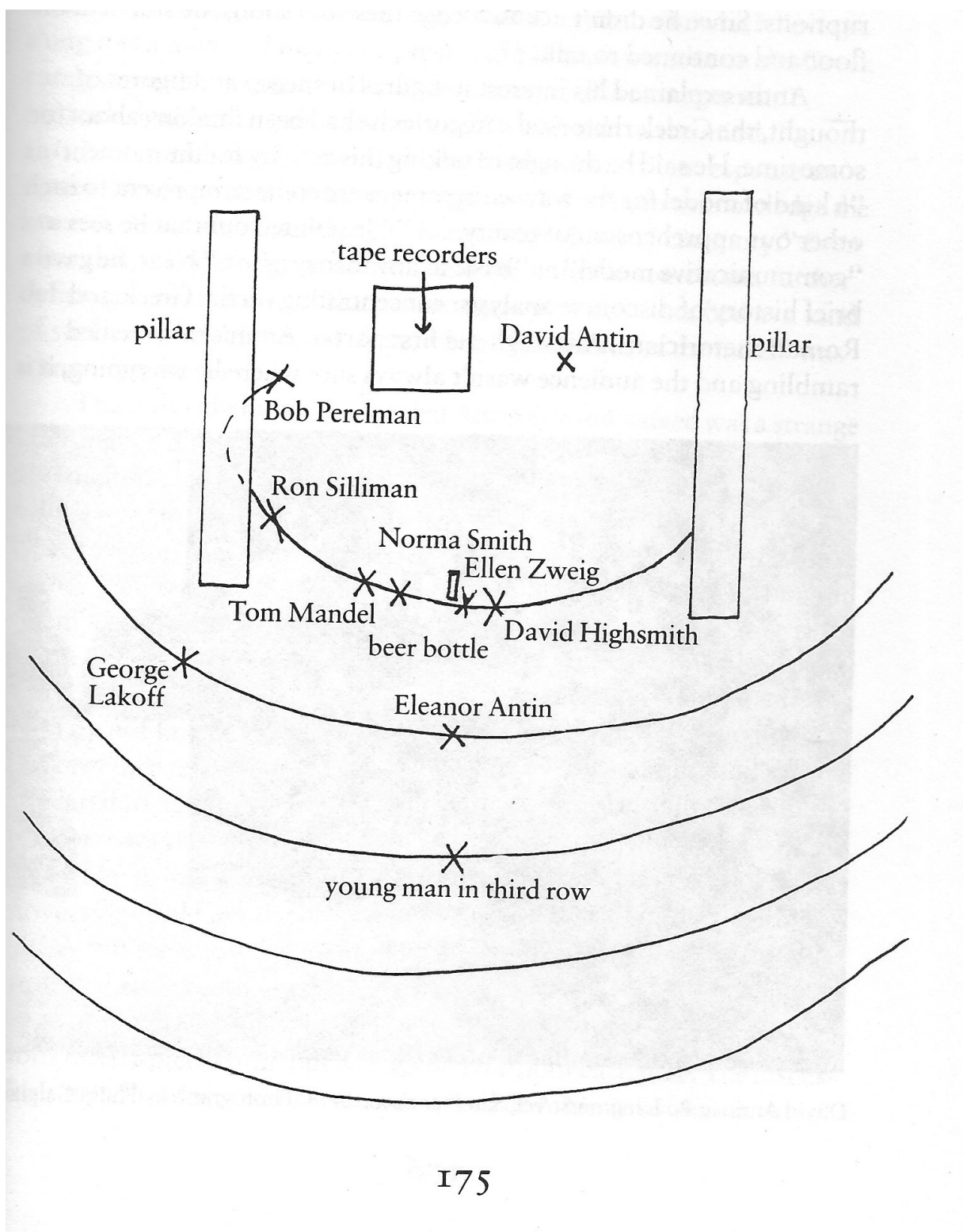Author photo.

tape recorders

David Antin

pillar

pillar

Bob Perelman

Ron Silliman

Norma Smith

Ellen Zweig

Tom Mandel

David Highsmith

beer bottle

George
Lakoff

Eleanor Antin

young man in third row

175

Fig 2.3: Ellen Zweig, 80 Langdon diagram, *The Poetry Reading: A Contemporary Compendium on Language & Performance,* Eds. Stephen Vincent and Ellen Zweig (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1981), 175. Author photo.

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