

FILM SECTION
MUSEUM OF ART
CARNEGIE INSTITUTE

COLLECTION SCREENINGS
TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 1978
8:00 P.M.

A FILM BY YVONNE RAINER

LIVES OF THE PERFORMERS (1972) 90 min., black and white, sound.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

"In 1956 I came to New York to study acting. Serious involvement in dance and choreography ensued when I started studying with Martha Graham and subsequently with Mercer Cunningham. Also studied ballet with Mia Slavenska, James Waring, Peter Saul, and others, and composition with Robert Dunn and Ann Halprin. Began choreographing my own work in 1961. In 1962 Steve Paxton and I formed the workshop that spawned the Judson Dance theater, a generative force behind the modern and "post-modern" dance activity in America in the 60's. In 1970 I helped form the Grand Union, a co-operative New York-based performing group.

"My choreographic works have been seen throughout the United States and in many European cities. They have made use of large numbers of people -- both skilled and inexperienced in dance techniques -- and incorporated speech, objects, films, slides, and elaborate choreography to music. By 1972 my growing interest in film resulted in a 16mm feature-length narrative film entitled "LIVES OF THE PERFORMERS", which I wrote and directed. In recent work I have continued to explore the relationship of language and image. Film and slides play an increasingly important role in my performances as a necessary visual and fictional dimension."

More recently she has completed FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO... (1974) and KRISTINA TALKING PICTURES (1976), both of which she has presented here at the Museum.

The following statements by Yvonne Rainer are excerpted from an interview conducted by Liza Béar and Willoughby Sharp (published in AVALANCHE, Summer 1972, pp. 50-59). Where essential, the questions have been included in these excerpts. The interview primarily concerns Rainer's thoughts on her performance pieces; the following passages have been selected for their direct bearing on her film LIVES OF THE PERFORMERS -- which had just been completed when this interview took place.

l.b.: In a statement of March 19th, '68, you wrote, "It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various activities, alone, with each other, with objects, and to weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the superstylization of the dancer." Recently, at the Whitney in April and at L'Attico in June, there seems to be more of a concern with exploring psychological interactions among characters. How come?

Y.R.: The first thing that occurs to me is that there have been similar concerns in my work from the very beginning and at various times my emphasis has been quite different. With the emergence of minimal art, and being in a very reactive position in relation to dancing, getting rid of the star quality of the performer seemed very important. But even at that time -- in THE MIND IS A MUSCLE -- there was something on the program which did not coincide with the dancing -- one of the interludes or in-between sections of the dance -- and it was a conversation between a man and a woman on tape about a movie and the psychological interactions in the movie, and in the course of this conversation there emerged a relationship between the man and woman talking.

w.s.: If you're pointing to Minimalism I'd like to know specifically what you mean.

l.b.: You mean you were under the general cultural influence...

Y.R.: Eeyeah, it was a movement, and it seemed very vital -- phenomenology and objecthood... in terms of dancing and performing it took the form of , (and I wasn't alone in this), it took the form of non-theatricality. A refusal to project a persona, but thinking of oneself in dancing as simply a neutral purveyor of information.

w.s.: How had you thought of yourself before?

Y.R.: Before that there had been a very marked dramatic content in my work and in my own performance. The early solos were just fraught with all kinds of female projections. Very neurotic -- weird. Like I imitated women in the subway. I had screaming fits. I was sexy. I was always being someone else on the stage. And I remember coming under criticism for that among my peers at Judson. I was -- in the scale from theatricality to its opposite -- I was definitely toward the theatrical end of the spectrum. What I was doing was taking things from life, and transposing them in a dramatic form. (...)

(...) In the most recent period, I'm concerned with performance again, and with different kinds of performance, and with the idea of a performance as a background or a justification for other things. I'm concerned again with the performer as a persona. I'm now involved in trying to develop a certain kind of narrative, and since my work in a broad sense is always autobiographical, my present point of departure...when I start dealing with fictional devices, the easiest way for me to think about character is from my own point of view. What is my role? I am this performer, I am a dancer. I am a director, directing dancers. In my movie -- LIVES OF PERFORMERS -- this comes out. The director, the dancers -- these actual roles lend a certain credibility to what otherwise I would have to invent totally from my imagination, which I'm not prepared to do. I kind of have my feet in two different places, I go back and forth between documentation and fiction. (...)

l.b.: Is the movie a way of bringing out certain interests...

Y.R.: That I can't in performances? Absolutely. Psychological innuendo that it's impossible to convey in live performances, such as the psychological message in the face. I mean the close-up, I think, is going to become my medium. The reaction shot. The face.

l.b.: And what is the relation of close-up to the words that are spoken?

Y.R.: It can be a corollary or elaboration, but it's a much stronger coefficient with words than dance is with words. The question is, since I'm not interested in acting, how do I get messages across that involve characterization? So there are choices I have to make. Depending on what the image is, and whether I'm using film or live performance, I must decide whether the performers read the verbal material or improvise with the stuff, whether the audience reads it, whether they read it on slides or on film...Using text with live performance exclusively is limited because then you get closer to a standard play format, which I'm not interested in. I don't have any of this argument or dialectic with the theatre that theatre people have been having for the last ten years. In fact, I'm taking up things they abandoned a long time ago, a very basic speaking of lines and very simple actions. Character building through implied stereotypes. Not through acting, but through text, a kind of soap opera in its concern with simple emotional situations. I'm not all concerned with the psyche of the actor that has motivated a lot of the theatre experiments of the last decade, with the actor as a real person, with avoiding acting stereotypes or type-casting and all that. In fact, I'm getting back to some kind of "archetypecasting" in a way, in GRAND UNION DREAMS, and in LIVES OF PERFORMERS. Valda as this Other Woman...yeah, it's melodrama in a sense, like the Lulu stills. (...) A friend of mine said, "Hadh't it ever occurred to you to deal with their lives, you know. I mean if you're going to deal with biographical reality." Maybe it's arrogant but I really don't think anyone else's life can be as interesting as mine. Or I can't deal with anyone else's life as interestingly as I can with my own. And so the performers become projections of various aspects of things that pertain to me. (...)

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