

# Pendleton's Rainer

Adam Pendleton's decision to shoot his 2016 portrait of Yvonne Rainer in black and white opens up the possibility of a formally seamless appropriation and reframing of the 1978 black-and-white film of *Trio A*, Rainer's most famous choreographic work, first presented in 1966. The 2016 film presents, in its vérité segments, Pendleton and Rainer facing each other across a table, sharing a meal in a New York diner. At times they are shown standing, to improvise simple dance moves. At one point, Pendleton gives Rainer a script to read that includes her own words and those of others, a reading that is extensively intercut with segments of the *Trio A* film. In terms of the montage operations to which the 1978 film is subjected, however, the redo here is heavily seamed. The movements of a much young Rainer dancing *Trio A* are never allowed to flow uninterrupted. Indeed, I would argue that Pendleton's appropriation, nesting, and recoding of Rainer's film footage—using most of *Trio A*—functions through a systematic signification of *seaming* that is communicated by the heavy sampling of this recorded dance.

*Just Back from Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer* premiered at Anthology Film Archives on January 9, 2017 as part of the commissioning biennial Performa, and it now exists in a gallery-distributed edition. Featuring the legendary theorist-performer of Minimalism's heyday (and thus invoking her stature as the radical conscience of that mostly male and predominantly white movement), Pendleton's film both honors Rainer's brainy, unabashed feminism and stands for a new generation confronting Minimalism's seventies episteme.

Rainer's insistence that Pendleton appear in *his* portrait of *her* was a canny negotiation.<sup>1</sup> It both distinguishes *Just Back from Los Angeles* from Pendleton's other portrait films and allows for a sometimes tense balance of power to play out between the portraitist and the portrayed.<sup>2</sup> Pendleton's inclusion, of course, also makes his body subject to the camera's gaze, presenting the film as a collaboration between its ostensible subject and putative author. Given this, the "quotations" from *Trio A* assert themselves as both *authorized* and *authored* by Rainer, even as Pendleton dramatically recasts them, thereby bringing Rainer's history forcefully into the present. At several points in the film, we see Rainer teaching Pendleton moves from Steve Paxton's *Arm Drop*, as the younger artist tentatively engages in this game of trust with the more experienced dancer/videomaker/theorist. Since Pendleton is black and Rainer white, these choreographed sequences also stage a racial interplay, with Pendleton's dark, young arms moving gently against Rainer's pale, aging ones. This interaction produces the imagery of trust and cautious engagement—across generations, between artists, among art forms—that lies at the film's core.

The structure of the film is simple, nesting its cuts and discursive claims in a *mise en scène* of realist documentary: the setting is Rainer's favorite Chelsea diner, where the two hold a measured conversation. Sometimes we see Rainer and Pendleton from outside the diner, with noise from the Manhattan street drowning out anything they might be saying. Sometimes we are inside with them, the soundtrack dominated by the script that Pendleton has given Rainer to read.<sup>3</sup> The diegesis unfolds over sandwich (Rainer) and salad (Pendleton), accompanied by the tinny jangle of silverware, cutaways to wall clocks, and brigades of ketchup and napkin

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1. This detail was revealed only during the Q&A at the premiere of Pendleton's portrait. See Angela Brown, "Radical Juxtapositions": Adam Pendleton and Yvonne Rainer in an Exchange of Memory and Motion," *Artnews*, November 11, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/01/11/radical-juxtapositions-adam-pendleton-and-yvonne-rainer-in-an-exchange-of-memory-and-motion>.
2. Pendleton's other film portraits include *BAND* (2009, shot during a recording session of the post-punk group Deerhoof,

intercut with appropriated footage from a Black Panther documentary from the seventies), and *My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard* (2011–14, documenting Hilliard, a founder of the Black Panther movement, as he walks around Oakland).

3. For the entire script, see Adam Pendleton, "Just Back from Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer," *e-flux journal* 79 (February 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/90874/just-back-from-los-angeles-a-portrait-of-yvonne-rainer>.

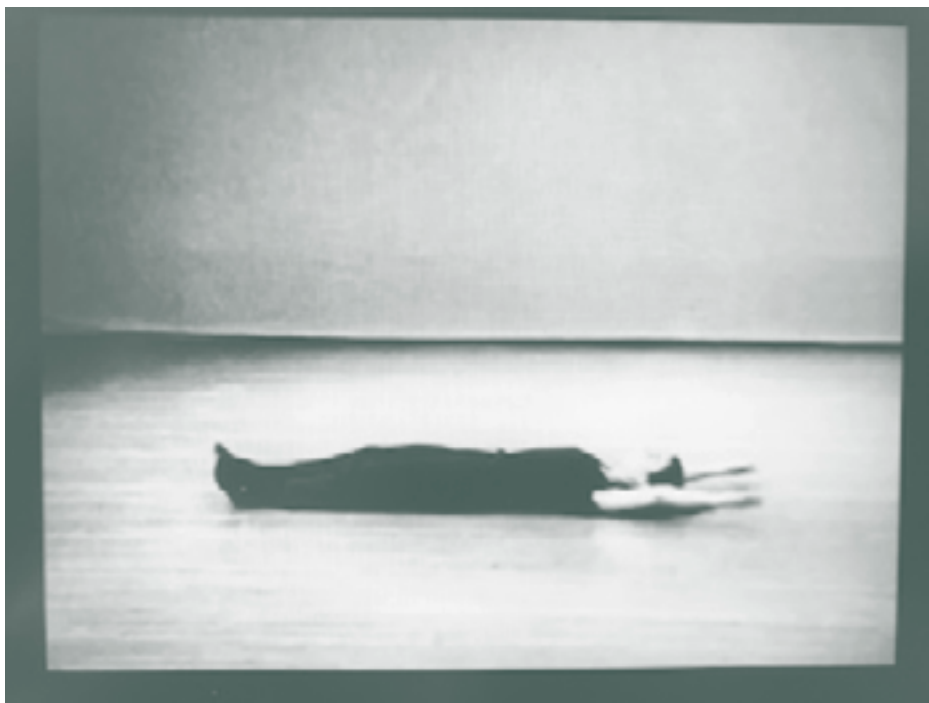


fig. 1 *Above*, Screenshot from Adam Pendleton's film *Just Back from Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer*, 2016–17, showing a sequence from Rainer's film *Trio A* (1978). This sequence is accompanied by Rainer's voice-over reading Pendleton's script: "Tanisha Anderson, when they slammed her to the ground, remaining on top of her until her body went limp."

fig. 2 *Below*, Still of Yvonne Rainer in Adam Pendleton, *Just Back from Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer*, 2016–17. Single channel black-and-white video, 13:51, overall installation dimensions variable. [No. 65472.01] Courtesy of Pace Gallery and artist. © Adam Pendleton.

dispensers. The arc of the film is ruled by Pendleton's canny script, with Rainer's voice layered over cuts from the sampling of *Trio A*. The older Rainer reads over the younger Rainer who is executing the stringent moves of her muscled mind.

Minimalism's commitment to a (tacitly white, male, upper-class, hegemonic) universal body, which was explicitly questioned by Rainer's work and theorizations over several decades, is both elicited and critiqued in Pendleton's meta-narrative.<sup>4</sup> Rainer's principled interventions presented flesh as a major tool of conceptualism (*The Mind is a Muscle*),<sup>5</sup> where everyday movement was taken up and recombined to form new configurations, a salient move in a context dominated by male artists producing industrially fabricated objects intended to "seize space" on Manhattan streets that were in the throes of corporate development.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Pendleton's script (which includes excerpts from Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Black Lives Matter, as well as words from Rainer's own writings) forges a new narrative. Via Rainer's own aesthetic of montage and the younger artist's consistent practice of appropriation, Pendleton's Rainer contests the operations of abstraction with an insistent incursion of the real.

The real here is the racialized body, which is subjected to an incessant public violence presented in the piece via Rainer's voice narrating Pendleton's script, ultimately fashioning a melancholy dirge—or *melos*—out of the murders of African Americans at the hands of police.<sup>7</sup> We hear about Michael Brown (Ferguson), Eric Garner (New York), Ezell Ford (Los Angeles), John Crawford III (outside Dayton), and numerous others, before the list culminates with Tamir Rice (Cleveland), who was killed on a playground while his sister

helplessly looked on. Pendleton's precise cuts laminate the narrated violence inflicted on these otherwise offscreen bodies, recounted over the visible body of the Amazonian Rainer: lithe, white, and in full control of the abstract geometries she built into *Trio A* (fig. 1). Rainer's assertion of autonomy for her gendered, desiring body in one historical moment of liberation is contrasted with her voice narrating the vulnerability of other, racialized bodies still very much in need of liberating. The seaming in Pendleton's film is thus not a suture—neither sense nor easy meaning can be made of the liberty of one body and the murder of another, the freedom for one to lie down as a formal gesture, and the compression unto death by racist agents of the state for another. The fissures open up via form (the "quotation" wedges between the visual-verbal, along axes of visibility-invisibility, and speech about silencing). But they also operate within the narrating subject, as Rainer chokes up, faltering in her ability to speak these words. Pendleton acknowledges the quiet violence of asking her to read this list of murders (as well as the provocative move of having her read Carmichael fulminating about the "white liberal"), saying simply, "thank you for reading it." (fig. 2).

Appropriation is both homage and critique; Pendleton's redo of the filmic record of *Trio A* exemplifies this double-edged sword. The power of the cuts, semantic seaming, and montage fuses Rainer's considerable legacy with the causes she has done so much to articulate: justice, equality, and the freedom of all bodies to move and love as they wish. In the end, Pendleton honors this legacy by laminating it with our utter failure to achieve these goals in the real.

4. Carrie Lambert Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2008).

5. This is the name given to a 1968 dance, as well as a kind of manifesto of Rainer's position in the early sixties: "If my rage at the impoverishment of ideas, narcissism, and disguised sexual exhibitionism of most dancing can be considered puritan moralizing, it is also true that I love the body—its actual weight, mass, and unenhanced physicality." Yvonne Rainer,

*The Mind is a Muscle*, Anderson Theater, New York, April 11, 14, 15, 1968. Program notes. See also Rainer and Catherine Wood, *The Mind is a Muscle*, One Work series (Afterall, 2007).

6. The goal of Minimalism as a "seizure" of urban space is addressed by Christopher Ketcham, *Minimal Art and Body Politics in New York, 1961–1975* (PhD dissertation, MIT, 2018).

7. The *melos*, or source of "melody," in Pendleton's film is also the root of our

national melodrama, that "broad aesthetic mode" for figuring race in America and crafting "moral legibility" from our ongoing, necessary dramaturgy of racialized violence and our need to become moral agents in resisting and accounting for it. See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Thanks to Ann Reynolds for our discussions on this.