

## CELEBRATION AND CRITIQUE OF 95 YEARS OF *LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS*

### YVONNE RAINER'S *ROS INDEXICAL*

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#### **An Intertextual Approach to the Western Dance Canon**

*Le Sacre du Printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*), originally choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in 1913, has been reconstructed and reimagined by hundreds of choreographers over the past century. Among the ballet's attractions are the challenge of working with Stravinsky's dissonant score, Nijinsky's intriguing inversion of traditional balletic turn out, the work's sensational storyline, and the glamour of immersing oneself in the work of the legendary Ballets Russes. The riot that accompanied the ballet's first performance in Paris makes it an especially iconic moment in dance history. Some believe the dance work was so far removed from traditional ballets that it actually marked the beginning of the modern dance era. Many choreographers have reexamined the narrative by redefining the sacrificial virgin or the meaning of primitive. Other artists have critiqued stereotypes of gender roles, and some have simply re-imagined this history with personal aesthetic choices. All who approach *The Rite* engage in an inescapable dialogue with its one hundred-year history and with other artists who have contributed to its conceptual, ideological, and aesthetic possibilities.

British dance scholar Stephanie Jordan observed in her "*Le Sacre as a Dance: Recent Re-Visions, Or How To Make It New*," that choreographers working with *The Rite of Spring* previous to Millicent Hodson's 1987 reconstruction for the Joffrey Ballet, were often thrilled by the score and by Nijinsky's treatment of it, while those working after often worked with a "fresh awareness of the burden of its past" (Jordan, 2012). Yvonne Rainer's 2007 revision, *RoS Indexical*, which premiered at the Hudson Theater in New York City, is overtly about *The Rite* as a dialogue with the past, about encountering its tracework of evidence and thought. In the process, Rainer reveals her own artistic ideology through endless choreographic complexities.

*RoS Indexical*<sup>1</sup> is saturated with historical references. Rainer quotes Hodson's reconstruction as well as alludes to contemporary works that rework the *Rite* canon such as those by Pina Bausch and Michael Clark. She utilizes additional source movement material such as Sarah Bernhardt's silent films and the comedic gestures of Robin Williams, who Rainer refers to as a "kinetic genius" (Crimp, Rainer, Griffin, 2007, p. 328). Rainer presents us with a revised template, an index, through which we may view a multitude of histories, and then question the manner in which they have been constructed. She begs us to interpret and question the validity of historical truth, the phenomenon of recreations and reconstructions, and the iconic cliché that this ballet has become. What is *The Rite*, exactly, what has adhered to it and fallen from it over the years? Rainer provides an awareness of what a dance canon, as a set of shifting possibilities attached to historical moments, might suggest. She has constructed a historical template taken from disparate source material, one that carries the possibility of creating a very rich and complex experience for the spectator.

Upon encountering Rainer's *RoS Indexical*, I was immediately captivated by the multi-layered choreographic approach, which left me questioning the intricacies of her work as well as the phenomenon of the dance canon. Rainer's use of overt and covert references calls for each viewer to imaginatively piece together the various sources she presents in her index in order to find his or her own individual meanings or versions of truth. She provokes the viewer to question the very foundation on which she stands. Why did Yvonne Rainer, who spent a lifetime deconstructing traditions, decide to rework this modern ballet? Does the world really need yet another *Rite*?

In order to gain a better understanding of these questions and the complexities of her work, I immersed myself in the world of *The Rite of Spring*, reaching far beyond my initial expectations. I closely examined the segments of *RoS Indexical* available on the Internet, creating my own assumptions regarding the missing pieces. I also learned the available fragmented segments in order to gain a somatic experience of the work, a more intimate knowledge. Performing the work became a part of my own corporeal archive and resulted in my unique understanding of the historical and kinesthetic subtexts located within the work.

Further into my research, I was lucky to obtain a full-length copy of the dance work. Viewing *RoS Indexical* in its entirety led to a more thorough understanding of the overall progression of the work and challenged some of my earlier assumptions. Through an extensive review of literature, I sought to explore her work both directly and ideologically, turning to diverse dance theorists as well as the few scholars who had examined *RoS Indexical*. I found a strong correlation between my research methods

and that of Rainer and of Millicent Hodson: each of us pieced together fragmented information in order to reconfigure the whole.

Rainer's intertextual approach is the result of her interpretation of these histories, but she provides room for spectators to find their own connections to the historical traces. I borrow this idea of "historical traces" from Ann Cooper Albright's article, "Matters of Tact: Writing History from the Inside Out," in which she discusses her experiences kinesthetically and academically tracing the history of Loie Fuller. In Albright's reflection on her research process she states, "Some traces are more visible than others, some more easily located. But all traces – once noticed – draw us into another reality. *Someone passed this way before*" (Albright, 2003, p. 11). When looking at Rainer's revision, we witness a work that traces the imprints of the many choreographers who have walked the *Rite* pathway. Therefore, we can acknowledge the ongoing lineage and *RoS Indexical*'s place as a descendent of this dance work.

True to her postmodern ideologies, Rainer questions the very nature of historical truth. What is a historical truth when it has been selected and edited by others? Rainer has an active interest in history and the manner in which we construct meaning. As Alexandra Carter, dance historian and scholar, explains in *Destabilizing the Discipline*, "the study of history is a creative act. It involves the imaginative piecing together of various accounts in order to produce meaning" (Carter, 2004, p.14). In *RoS Indexical*, Rainer is not investigating one moment in time, rather she is imaginatively looking at a history stretched over time. Therefore, her work serves as an intertextual index. To further explain this point I turn to Lena Hammergren's examination of intertextuality in "Many Sources Many Voices." She states that, "the intertextual approach focuses on

the object of analysis – for example a text, a dance, a film – in relation to other texts, dances etc., as well as in terms of the relationship between the interpreter and the object of study” (Hammergren, 2004, p. 25). When looked at individually, each *Rite of Spring* proposes a new choreographic possibility or addition to history, but when looked at as a whole, we find a different realization, the entirety of this choreographic discourse.

So I return to the question, why has Yvonne Rainer, who spent a lifetime deconstructing tradition, decided to rework *The Rite of Spring*? I believe that she is simultaneously critiquing the Western dance canon as well as celebrating the nature of Nijinsky’s avant-garde choreography and the many years Millicent Hodson spent reconstructing his work. Nijinsky’s choreographic approach to the *Rite of Spring* deconstructed the tradition of ballet, similar to Rainer’s deconstruction of modern dance. There is a direct relationship between these two artists resulting from their explorative contributions which led to the evolution of the art form. At the same time, Rainer critiques the phenomenon of the dance canon. She questions the exhaustive repetition of reworked *Rite*’s, particularly within the realm of modern dance, a community invested in rebelling from tradition.

### **Re-introduction – Exposing the Mythic *Le Sacre du Printemps***

In a few minutes my children the curtain will rise and from that moment there will be no turning back. You are about to make history. Farewell au passé. Welcome the new age. You have all surpassed yourselves and we love you for it. And remember, whatever happens...keep going.

(The audience settles as the curtain rises)

I can't help feeling they've made their minds up already...

- Serge Diaghilev – BBC docudrama *Riot at the Rite*

Rainer's contemporary revision of *The Rite of Spring* runs approximately forty-two minutes. The work is fragmented, quickly shifting from one source to the next. *RoS Indexical* unfolds in accordance with Nijinsky's (or shall I say Hodson's) choreographic narrative and Stravinsky's musical composition. For example, when we hear *Mystical Circles of the Young Girls* we see a direct movement reference to that particular section of the reconstruction. Although, as quickly as a reference appears it is gone, replaced by other source material which leaves the narrative unconnected. Rainer has created a postmodern revision through her examination of *The Rite of Spring* as a historical entity.

The bodiless stage is adorned with one small table, four chairs, three sets of headphones, and a lone vintage couch resting in the distance. We hear the voice of "Serge Diaghilev" (as played in the BBC docudrama *Riot at the Rite*), setting the tone for the performance. Four dancers - Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers - ranging from thirty to sixty years of age, enter the stage and sit down at the table. Rainer purposely chose to work with a small group of women with differing ages because of the information and experience that their individual bodies provide. She stated in her essay "1000 Words," "They are not a traditional ensemble, and in turn each one is very different in the way she projects, with relative ease or difficulty, executes the same material" (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). The four women are costumed in retro workout attire, clothing that many dancers would wear to a technique class, such as yoga pants, t-shirts, sweat bands, sneakers, and vintage baseball socks. The

color scheme of the costumes closely resembles that of the original reconstruction with shades of white, red, yellow, and gray. This casual costuming decision is perhaps one method Rainer utilizes to bring this ballet down off the pedestal on which it has been placed.



Video still from Babette Mangolte's video of Yvonne Rainer's *RoS Indexical*, 2007. Dancers: Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers.

Three of the dancers place the headsets over their ears and begin humming Igor Stravinsky's iconic musical composition. Catterson, following suit, joins into this collective tune, attempting to recall the score's intricacies with the assistance of her peers. Overwhelming the ensembles' humming we hear the soundtrack of a fictitious audience member repeatedly blowing a whistle. Stravinsky's score slowly drowns out all other sounds as the dancers leave the table and position themselves upstage left, indicating that the dance is about to commence. Once again we hear "Diaghilev's voice saying, "Here we go..." and with this statement, we are introduced once more to another chapter in *The Rite of Spring's* history.

The unrelenting repetitive chords of *The Adoration of the Earth* begin as the dancers stomp in a circle; one stomp forward and three stomps back with variations of

the arms that accent Stravinsky's discordant score. The movement is recognizable to any dance appreciator who is familiar with Millicent Hodson's reconstruction of Vaslav Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Not only familiar, it is almost an exact replica, excluding a larger number of dancing bodies and variations on the arm movements. Rainer does not hide this reference to the "original," but rather overtly displays this past history. The ritual continues until a soloist, referencing the three hundred year-old woman, breaks apart from the collective with two virtuosic leaps facing the audience. Ironically, in referencing the three hundred year-old woman, Rainer selected the youngest dancer, Emily Coates, to perform this solo. Her vitality is openly shared with the audience; her red curly hair and agile body accentuate the stark angles and pigeon toed stances. She quickly rejoins the collective ritualistic stomping as Stravinsky's chords pick up once more. The score is overtaken by the sounds of rioting as heard in the BBC docudrama, but the dancers persist in their ritual, seemingly unaffected by the sea of protests drowning out the musical composition on which they are meditatively relying.

The BBC docudrama *Riot at the Rite*, featuring the Finnish National Ballet, sparked Rainer's attraction to *The Rite*, and provides her entry point into the discourse that surrounds it. The dramatization features a fictitious remaking of the original *Rite of Spring*, featuring all of the historical characters from Nijinsky to Diaghilev and even to Romola Pulsky (Nijinsky's lover). Rainer's work as both a choreographer and filmmaker has disregarded and protested the narrative over the course of her career. As she explains in *A Woman Who*, "I used to (and still do at the drop of a hat) fulminate against the manipulations of dominant media, against the passivity of the spectator created by the seductions of the narrative, against the kind of cinema that 'sends the mind away'"



(Rainer, 1999, p. 127). The dramatization is just that...a seductive manipulation by the media, an exaggerated dramatic account of this legendary history. Although it is fictional, unfortunately this type of film can often become part of the general public's collective memory regarding an event. Tobias Ebbrecht, film scholar and professor at Potsdam's Film College, investigates the historical fantasy in his article "Docudramatizing History on TV." Ebbrecht (2007) explains that the combination of documentary and fictional modes "has the function of creating a reality effect for the viewer, which elicits a feeling of authenticity" (p. 40). Rainer sought to disrupt this "authenticity" through her own revision of the historical game.

Douglas Crimp (2007), who wrote the introduction to Rainer's essay "1000 Words", examines her use of the docudrama, explaining that "Rainer's substitution of the TV program's sound track for Stravinsky's music as *RoS Indexical's* score signals her intention to mock the hallowed status of the scandal bestowed on the ballet" (p. 327). It is important to note that while she is critiquing this scandalous legend, she is simultaneously paying homage to Hodson and the many years she spent tirelessly piecing together fragments of information in order to reconstruct *The Rite of Spring*. Although, she acknowledges that "the very notion of reconstruction....is a fuzzy one...relying on photos, drawings, and hearsay, we can create only an imagined approximation" (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 327). Perhaps the only "authentic truth" we can find as spectators is our personal truth found through lived experience.

I believe that Rainer was intrigued by the fantasy the film created, which was so far distanced from the reality of the true history, if it is even possible to know a "true history." Perhaps she felt removed from this monumental moment for modern dance

because over time, and through other's visions, the ballet has become a glorified history. *Riot at the Rite* represents a superficial engagement with that moment in time.

Through my lived experience of learning *RoS Indexical* and by watching the few segments of this work available on YouTube, I also felt this same superficial engagement with Rainer's work. I felt distanced from the movement, learning it through a tiny computer screen – watching, stopping, writing, moving, rewinding, and watching again – a painstaking process of piecing the work together one movement at a time. I found myself continually questioning my methods of learning. Am I embodying the intricacies of her movement? What subtext am I not acknowledging? Surely I was only grasping the work at a surface level. I was, of course, once removed from her work, learning her movement with my past experiences guiding the process, tracing the digital imprint that she had left behind.

I also felt distanced because of the fragmented video clips of the work available to the general public on YouTube. What is missing? How do these sections connect? What cannot be captured through a video camera? I was desperately searching for meaning through small bits of information and was reminded of Hodson's many years of work reconstructing Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Attempting to embody *RoS Indexical* from a two-dimensional monitor was a challenge and I found that I was left with more questions than answers. What of the original integrity and energy is lost when experiencing life through the media? What is a history when others have edited it over time? Why do we so easily believe a reality that has been in the hands of others and passed down to us? Historical knowledge is always partial as the recorded accounts of people or events are actively chosen by those constructing a given history. Nothing can

replace a first hand experience and even those who experience the same event at the same time have different memories and interpretations of it. Perhaps this is yet another complexity in Rainer's work.

### **A Semiotic Reference – The Act of Excavating Meaning**

As mentioned earlier, Rainer has created a choreographic index utilizing many diverse sources as she reconfigures them into a contemporary template. Some of these references are openly acknowledged, but perhaps there are more covert references laden within the work. I find the opening humming of Stravinsky's score to closely resemble Jerome Bel's self-titled work *Jerome Bel*. In this performance, one dancer enters the stage and writes "Igor Stravinsky" on the wall and for the entirety of the performance hums Stravinsky's musical score. Andre Lepecki's (2004) writing on the workings of contemporary European artists argues that this singing wasn't just, "a pun on history, on dance history's obsession with the modernist narrative of heroic ruptures and geniuses, but also a remarkable pun on representation, for the singer does not sing a proper transposition of the orchestral score for voice" (p. 176). I suggest that the connection between these two artists, Rainer and Bel, goes beyond merely a surface level recognition and beyond their making puns on history.

In addition to citing Stravinsky, Bel also references Thomas Edison, as one nude dancer writes his name and holds a single light bulb. These two performers mentioned provide the spectators with an immediate bank of knowledge as they are a construct of general knowledge. As Una Bauer states, these iconic "originators are unproblematic as signs." She further explains this as a "sign equivalence – by which I mean a reliance on the ease of quick thought, of operations of immediate mental connection – the

moment of instant recognition of the very general facts of Western cultural history” (Bauer, 2008, p. 36). I believe this “sign equivalence” is another crucial component of Rainer’s work as she too is working in a manner that invokes instant recognition. However, her work does not deal directly with general knowledge of the public but rather with general knowledge of a selective and privileged art community that relies on an understanding of historical dance works, the canonical *Sacre*, to explore Rainer’s choreographic complexities.

Bel was inspired by Roland Barthes’ *Writing Degree Zero* and wished to transform his theory into a performance. In doing so Bel attempted to “represent neutrality on stage or a zero degree of signification.” Bauer argues that, “what he [Bel] is actually doing is creating a particular sign construction that produces a movement of thought (in the audience) that deals with the representation of neutrality.” This movement of thought is further explored as Bauer (2008) examines our perceptions in relation to this work, or the “game” of the work as she states,

Because neutrality, or the zero degree of signification, refuses us the satisfaction of its full presence, it is read as a sign, as an attempt, unfixed in an actualization of that attempt. And therefore the play with representation, the perception of representation as the game is ensured (p. 39).

Inevitably, we will find our own associations through our movement of thoughts to the signs Bel presents.

Both Rainer and Bel are working very closely with semiotic theory. Bel focuses on symbiotic signs as a method of representation as well as the neutrality of signs. Meaning is therefore found through context, the manner in which the sign is presented

and interpreted.<sup>2</sup> Rainer is focusing on indices, in this case collections of signified events which, when examined collectively, take on a different meaning. Here, meaning is found as the signifier, *RoS Indexical*, directly points to the signified, or the longstanding history of the *Rite of Spring*. Both of these contemporary artists uphold a critical dialogue with history, bringing iconic innovators and events into the foreground of our perception; one through the use of symbiotic signs and the other through the traces of indexical signs. They are also both playing with the context in which we, as spectators, create meaning from sources, whether those sources are neutral signs or overt references.

If examined through the lens of Bauer, Rainer is no stranger to invoking “a movement of thought” in both dancers and the audience. Her 1960’s work *The Mind is a Muscle* creates this “movement of thought” as the concentration needed to perform this sequence of movement requires an actively engaged body and mind. The audience is mindfully provoked, depending upon the context through which the work is presented, as well as the movement theory that the work promotes. *The Mind is a Muscle* was not intended as an entertaining spectacle. It questioned the status quo of dance, refocusing dance as an intellectual as well as physical challenge.

*RoS Indexical* is so overly saturated with historical references that it is quite possible for a knowledgeable spectator to become overwhelmed in a sea of thoughts. Both of these artists are actively creating choreographic structures that provoke the minds of the spectators. In his essay “Concept and Presence The Contemporary European Scene,” Andre Lepecki discusses Rainer’s influence on Bel; he clarifies, that Rainer has served as an “activator of possibilities” in Jerome Bel’s artistic development

through his studies (Lepecki, 2004, p. 174). Perhaps now Bel serves as an influence in Rainer's work. I believe that Rainer is going beyond simply referencing Bel's work, also paying homage to the contemporary method he utilizes to reconfigure and question the manner in which we find identity and meaning.

### **A Multitude of References – The Index**

Viewing *RoS Indexical* is similar to channel surfing on television, and rightfully so as most of Rainer's references were sourced from television or video clips. One moment you will be lost in Hodson's reconstruction, witnessing the exhaustive and abusive physical demands of her movement: pigeon toed stances, repetitive stomping, stark twisted angles, and distorted flailing bodies. The rhythmically challenging movement reacts to Stravinsky's unpredictable musical composition and the meditative state of the performers is evident as they negotiate the intricacies of the score and the riotous audience drowning out music on which they are relying. At one point in the performance you can actually hear the voice of Nijinsky (as played in *Riot at the Rite*) yelling counts to the dancers to assist their hearing the orchestra.



Video still from Babette Mangolte's video of Yvonne Rainer's *RoS Indexical*, 2007. Dancers: Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers.

Just as quickly as this legendary reference appears, it vanishes, replaced by other disparate sources of movement, such as Michel Clark, Pina Bausch, Robin Williams, and Sarah Bernhardt (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). These breaks from “Nijinsky’s” movement seem to be a welcomed guest on the dancers’ bodies as muscular tension begins to drain from their limbs. We find more contemporary references through movement qualities such as sustained jazz walks, circles of the pelvis, light ball change steps, and released movements. Also hidden within these breaks are exaggerated gestures. At one point one of the performers even stops for a mimed cigarette break. During other moments throughout the performance, the dancers physically react to the imaginary riot – mimicking throwing tomatoes or batting away their hateful protests.

The docudrama *Riot at the Rite* not only served as an initial inspiration and sound score for Rainer’s revision, it also serves as a choreographic template. The film often switches between the performance of the Finnish National Ballet and scenes from the reenacted riot. Rainer utilized these edits choreographically. As she explains, “when the camera cuts away from the stage to the audience, my dancers retreat to an ordinary couch onstage, sitting on it, or using it choreographically” (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). The couch breaks are necessary for the physical demands of the taxing movements. Exhaustion is evident through the dancers’ rapid breathing and flushed faces as they rest their feet, stretching them to release any discomfort.

As the first half of the performance winds down, we hear the voice of Diaghilev congratulating the dancers. Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers walk behind the vintage couch to retrieve their water bottles, drinking quickly to

relieve their parched throats. They return to sit on the couch and remove their shoes to rub their aching feet. The performers then place family sized tissue boxes on their feet as though they were comfy slippers alleviating the pain caused by the repetitive Nijinsky-esque stomping. Here Rainer has brought this work “back to earth,” as she presents the honesty of this performance (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). We see thirsty dancers drink and massage their sore feet. She openly displays bodily acts that dancers would typically do during intermission hidden behind the wings, unseen by spectators. The dancers are not then supernatural mystical beings...they are humans who have the same bodily requirements we do, and just so happen to attend to those requirements during the performance.

### **The Sacrificial Virgin – Dancing Herself to Death Again?**

Still wearing their oversized tissue box boots, the dancers shuffle away from the ordinary couch. Just as they are preparing themselves for the next leg of the performance, sixteen banners, designed by Joel Reynolds, drop from the sky. The banners are in a slow constant rotation for the second half of the performance, providing thirty-two words or phrases that contribute to, or guide, the spectators “movement of thought.” Some of these signs directly refer to the past histories of this work such as “savage,” “suffer,” and “terror.” One of the banners reads “aargh” which could be a possible audience reaction. Another reads “sofa” and serves as a direct reference to the history unfolding before the audience. Rainer provides the audience additional fuel for their thoughts, contextual information for the mind to ponder, as the performance continues.



Nontraditionally, and true to her form, Rainer does not focus on the narrative role of the sacrificial virgin. One of the few references to the virgin is a banner reading “Who Me?” Seeing this sign float through space I am reminded of the many dancers who have played this role throughout time. As my imagination wanders I can hear the “chosen one” saying “Why in the heck do I have to be the one to die so that spring can bless our lands?” What a ridiculous notion! A notion Rainer has chosen not to indulge in too deeply.

Throughout the performance the role of the virgin is hinted at, for brief periods of time, but the role continually shifts between the performers, denying us the satisfaction of a clear narrative. For example, during the “Mystical Circles of the Young Girls,” the dancers execute a weaving pattern; two dancers, Pat Catterson and Sally Silvers, move along the outskirts of the circle, quickly passing each other in the middle as if afraid to be caught in the center. This correlates with the progression in the reconstruction, as the dance is leading up to the selection of the sacrificial virgin. The weaving pattern ceases as Catterson throws her arms out to the side as if signaling “stop,” while the “chosen one,” Sally Silvers, falls to the floor. Ironically, Rainer has chosen one of the oldest dancers in the troupe to fulfill the virgin’s role for this moment in the dance.

During the second half of the performance this role is shifted often, being portrayed at one point or another by every performer in the ensemble. As the final scene of the performance reaches its climax the energy collectively builds and it appears as though each of the performers is dancing herself to death. With the final chords of Stravinsky’s iconic score, Emily Coates gracefully swan dives onto the couch as the stage fills with darkness. Is she then the virgin who sacrifices herself? Or

perhaps these final movements have an alternative meaning. I find Emily Coates' final swan dive to serve as a reference to the canonical ballet *Swan Lake*. In almost every restaging of this ballet, the final swan dive does not change as the ballerina delicately dives to her death. I believe that this final movement of *RoS Indexical* serves Rainer's critique of the canonical nature of specific dance traditions.

### **The Riot – A Premeditative Legend?**

Stravinsky's score has been replaced by sounds of a riot, this time not a recording; the audience is actually yelling in protest. The dancers are positioned in the center of the stage as Coates engages in a series of pedestrian gestures. The audience breaks through the fourth wall and enters the stage, overwhelming the dancers, pushing them back toward the couch. Most of these audience volunteers are in street clothing, but if you look closely, two participants are dressed in the traditional Pagan costumes that closely resemble those found in Hodson's reconstruction. The two costumed participants carry Coates away, as the rioting audience moves off the stage. I find that the costumes are arguably the closest element of "truth" found in the reconstruction, as Hodson (2001) was able to obtain the original wardrobe through the closed Theatre Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum and diligently remade the dresses for her ballet commissioned by the Joffrey Ballet. By referring to these costumes in *RoS Indexical*, I find that Rainer is making a statement regarding the degrees of authenticity that may be located in Hodson's reconstruction.

The riot itself is perhaps the reason that this ballet has stood the test of time. Artists are attracted to diverse pathways that rebel from tradition. On May 29, 1913 *The Rite of Spring* accomplished a break from tradition so vast that the audience rioted in

protest, inciting an overnight legend. Even the dancers protested the unnatural sensations of this movement during the painstaking hours of rehearsal with Nijinsky as they, according to Millicent Hodson (2001), “did not abandon their ballet technique for Nijinsky’s ‘primitive’ steps without a struggle” (p. 17).



Video still from Babette Mangolte's video of Yvonne Rainer's *RoS Indexical*, 2007. Dancers: Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers

Some believe that it was the Stravinsky's discordant composition that evoked the riot; others believe that it was Nijinsky's untraditional choreographic design, and still others believe it was a combination of the two. Some believe that it was the actual make up of the audience that caused the riot, a division between the conservative and avant-garde populations<sup>3</sup>. Jean Cocteau, an avant-garde poet present the evening of the riot stated that, “the audience only played the role that was written for it”<sup>4</sup> (Solomon, 2011, p. 69). Noemie Solomon (2011) further examines the riot through Cocteau's lens in her essay “Conducting Movement: Xavier Le Roy and the Amplification of *Le Sacre du Printemps*,” arguing,

*Le Sacre du Printemps* not only foresaw the inclusion of the audience in the work....but also the possibilities for connecting, overlapping, and challenging the

various artistic operations that take place simultaneously, thus presaging an early twentieth-century 'happening'. (p. 69)

So in this light, perhaps the riot was not such a surprise after all. Diaghilev could have purposely arranged all of the proper elements in order to create a lasting legend, another glory for the Ballet Russes. Is Rainer making a larger historical statement with her reenacted riot? Could she be signaling the premeditation of this riot? When viewing the audience enter the stage, there is an air of humor as they carry Emily Coates out of the space. This comical lens is a critical element in Rainer's choreographic approach, leaving the audience smiling as she hints at the historical past. Here, the audience is quite literally playing the role that Rainer has written for them, reenacting the legendary *Rite* riot.

### **Bringing it back to Earth – Approaching the Cliché of Avant-Garde History**

*The Rite* has become a glorified history over the past one hundred years, the avant-garde cliché; it has been approached by an unaccountable number of choreographers as an entryway into a more prestigious level of their choreographic status. Because of the cliché that it has become, Rainer approached this work with the goal of bringing it, as she explains in her essay "1000 Words," "down to earth both historically and aesthetically" as it has become "an entry in the pantheon of dance history" (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). In doing so she simultaneously critiques and pays homage to this history as she relates the past to our contemporary era. And while she is critiquing *The Rite of Spring* canon, she is also, once again, validating its significance in dance history's timeline. Now, *the* Yvonne Rainer, postmodern icon, has created another chapter in this exhausted history.

The many choreographers over the past one hundred years who have reworked *The Rite of Spring* have re-imagined and redefined the possibilities that it holds. They have done so, attempting to carve out their own individual visions. Isn't that what most artists are looking for...the new idea? Yvonne is not necessarily looking for the "new idea" here, she is embracing the many histories of this work, showcasing the spectacle in order to provide us a new awareness when viewing these histories. In approaching the work in this fashion, I would argue that Rainer has stumbled upon a new possibility for *The Rite of Spring*, weaving ideological questions, histories, and her contemporary lens together in her own index. As Rainer explains, "I've been using the term re-vision to describe what I'm doing here. It's my vision, bringing all these matters of re-creation, remaking, reconstructing, history, and faulty memory overtly (and covertly) into play" (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 327). After viewing *RoS Indexical*, it will be a difficult task to view any other new chapter of *The Rite* without thinking of the imprint that Rainer has left behind.

So here we are...one hundred years later, still analyzing this work, still remaking this work, still celebrating this work that has become the cliché of avant-garde history. In this 100<sup>th</sup> year anniversary Carolina Performing Arts and The Institute for Arts and Humanities at UNC-Chapel Hill has begun a year long celebration, "The Rite of Spring at 100," featuring performances, courses, scholars, and visiting artists ("The Rite of Spring at 100," n.d.). The University of Washington has created a similar year long event, "The Rite of Spring Centennial Celebration," offering a series of events in dance, music, history, lecture, drama, and art ("Rite of Spring Centennial Celebration," n.d.). Many art companies are paying homage to this moment in history as well, such as: The

Joffery Ballet, San Francisco Symphony, San Francisco Ballet, Omaha Performing Arts, and Compagnie Marie Chouinard. This only scratches the surface of those engaged in this global celebration. Is it not cliché that we are still celebrating this work? Is this clichéd celebration yet another layer of the onion that Yvonne explores through her choreographic re-vision? True to her artistic nature, Rainer rebels against traditional concepts, just as she did with *Trio A* and *No Manifesto*. She embraces the past through critical examination in order to bring this glorified work back to earth, and does so with a touch of humor.

### **The Act of Revising**

Rainer's revision of *The Rite of Spring* serves as a source text index tracing the imprints of a variety of dance histories. I find that this index provides the space for individuals to locate their own references within it. After all, ideas are migratory in nature, patterns resurface and the medium slowly evolves over time. Each spectator comes into a performance with their own archive of knowledge to relate to the unfolding work. As each audience member holds a different bank of knowledge, I suggest that each individual will have a very diverse experience as he or she views the work and the references held within it in a different manner.

Marcia B. Siegel's review of *RoS Indexical*, "Promo Retro Rite" was featured in *The Hudson Review* in 2008. In describing the opening scene of the dance work, she states,

Facing each other chattily like lunch companions, they began humming under their breath, as if they were trying to remember a tune, to get it back. On tape, the overture of *Le Sacre du Printemps* was playing. The friends caught bits of its

phrases, lost track, agreed on wispy melodic threads, much as Stravinsky's 'Introduction' does.' (Siegel, 2008, p.158)

One can easily say that this is an accurate description of the opening scene of *RoS Indexical*, but in my experience, with my archive of dance history guiding my thoughts, I see a similarity to Jerome Bel's autobiographical work *Jerome Bel*.

Through her description of the conclusion of the dance work, as Emily Coates executes a swan dive onto the couch, Siegel finds a reference to *Les Biches* choreographed in 1924 by Bronslava Nijinska. She is reminded of the couch in "Diaghilev's next great transgressive ballet," a dance work that "proposes unconventional gender relationships including a lesbian duet." She further argues that in referencing *Les Biches* at the climax of the dance work, Rainer "denies us the pleasure of a woman dancing herself to death, and rewrites the history of *Le Sacre du Printemps* yet another time" (Siegel, 2008, p.164). While I agree that Rainer is rewriting *The Rite* yet again, as I discussed earlier, I found these final moments to serve as a more direct reference to the canonical ballet *Swan Lake* as opposed to *Les Biches*, a final act of critique related to the Western dance canon. Rainer has presented a very complex work that sends scholars down many avenues in their quest for meaning. Siegel and I have both found meaning in this work, but that meaning is not the same for either of us as we are relying on our personal archives as well as our research pathways.

In presenting her wishes for the audience, Rainer explains, "I hope it will create a many layered experience of dealing with your own knowledge, expectations, associations, with all these fractious elements suggesting the very impossibility of an

authentic template” (Crimp et al, 2007, p. 328). I believe it is safe to say that a knowledgeable audience member will have a very complex experience with this work. *RoS Indexical* makes us question authenticity, memory, history, authorship, reconstructions, reworkings, and legacies left behind. The key word here though is *knowledgeable*, as this work is exclusive for the privileged art spectator. This is not to say that one who is not accustomed to the dance theater will not enjoy the work, as it was designed thoughtfully, created a lived experience through the reenacted riot, and actively integrated comic elements. However, the average audience member will not be able to recognize the complexities explored in this essay: the acts of homage to Nijinsky and Hodson, the elements of critique of western dance canon, or the questionable nature of memory and history. These are known acknowledgments of an arts educated spectator.

So how accessible is *RoS Indexical*? Literally speaking, only four minutes and thirty eight seconds of this history is available to the general public through YouTube. The known history of this work is then fragmented as well, displaying only segmented clips of the dance. In my initial research phase I relied heavily on these fragmented histories in my attempt to find meaning. I came to assumptions and found meaning from the little amount of tangible evidence available. I was fortunate enough to receive Rainer’s blessing for my research and she guided me to her videographer Babette Mangolte who graciously sent me a full version of *RoS Indexical*. But then again, here I am, privileged as an active graduate student engrossed in my scholarly studies of the art form. When finally able to view the work in its entirety, I was astounded at how many of my assumptions were wrong. What does this say about the manner in which



we construct meaning from disparate sources? And what does this say about the elitism of *RoS Indexical*?

We are constantly negotiating a variety of sources to reconfigure our allusion of truth, our personal meaning. Many of these contemporary sources include YouTube, the Internet, and television - sources that have actively been selected and edited by others. What is a truth when it has been in the hands of others who have been subjective in their selection of material (the same as I have been subjective in my selection of material for this writing)? The finding of “truth” is a very personal act. We navigate a multitude of sources, assimilating fractious elements into our personal bank of knowledge in order to create personal meaning. These ideas seem to follow suit with Rainer’s intentions for her revisions, which suggest “the very impossibility of an authentic template.” Perhaps the only authentic template is one of our own corporeal archive, which we continually revise with each passing day.

So does the world really need yet another *Rite*? Many contemporary choreographers obviously feel that they still have something to contribute to the ongoing conversation, although from viewing many versions of *The Rite* I’m not sure they are all enriching the dialogue, as some seem to be simply prolonging it, exhausting it. The world does not need another *Rite of Spring* that simply restages the work with a different movement vocabulary...it then turns into just another overdone *Swan Lake* or *Nutcracker*. However, there are a handful of choreographers who re-imagine this work offering new thought provoking possibilities, actively contributing to the forum. I believe that the longer the intertextual dialogue continues, the more difficult this task becomes, as choreographers cannot find an original entryway into the discourse. I find that Rainer

has surpassed this challenge, providing a complex “movement of thought” within the spectators which allows them to question, to acknowledge, and even to laugh, which is not a common occurrence for this iconic drama. *RoS Indexical* offers new possibilities; it is a breath of fresh air in a very long-winded conversation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "indexical" means at least two things in this work. First, is the set of signs that refer to and open up *The Rite of Spring's* history--like the index of a book, pointing to various histories of the work. The second is a specific category of signs (indexical signs come to mean because they point to something specific, jumping turned in= *ROS* or sacrificial virgin = *ROS*). The other categories of signs are icons (which come to mean through physical resemblance to the signified, i.e., cross) and symbolic (or signs that have arbitrary relationships to what they refer to i.e., Morse code – the relationship must be learned).

<sup>2</sup> For a more extended and detailed account of Jerome Bel's self-titled work, *Jerome Bel*, see Bauer 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The Rite of Spring* is the classic example of *Succes de scandale* or “success by scandal.” It is important to note that the riot at the opening of *Le Sacre du Printemps* was not the only one of its era, as others performances also utilized this logic in order to create success.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Cocteau as cited in Noemie Solomon's “Conducting Movement: Xavier Le Roy and the Amplification of *Le Sacre du Printemps*”

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