

KIRSTEN MAAR

ARTIFICIAL SPECULATIONS ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

INGVARTSEN AND YVONNE RAINER

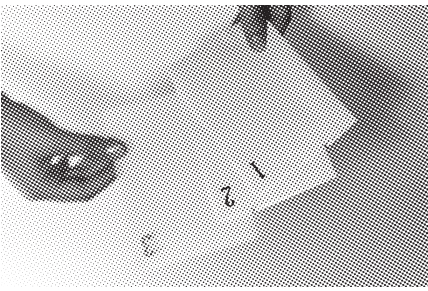
postscriptum:

In these ecologies every single element modifies the system.

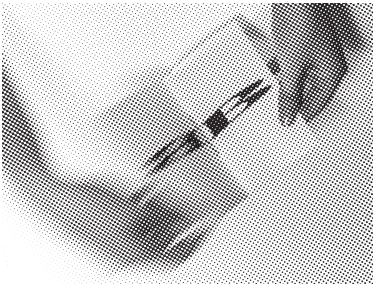
Antonioni's film, read as a critique of capitalist society and the ecological catastrophes it has provoked was inspired by the Whole Earth ideas of the 1960s. He develops a scenario, in which the daily commodities are freed from their fetish character. Between matter and idea they are floating and blurring the boundaries between animate and inanimate, thing and object, affect and effect. As such the dance of things could be seen just as another form of the sublime—as a form of experience at the threshold of mere human consciousness.

ARTIFICIAL SPECULATIONS ON THE NATURE OF THINGS — THE CHOREOGRAPHIC WORK OF

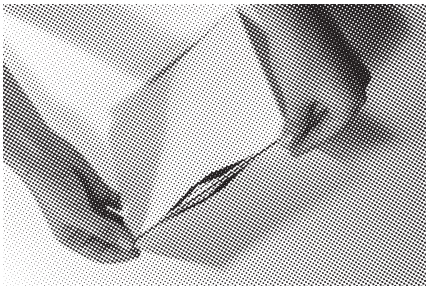
METTE INGVARSTEN
AND YVONNE RAINER



KIRSTEN MAAR



reciprocal turn



issue # 2

KIRSTEN MAAR

In her Lecture Performance *Speculations* Mette Ingvarsten describes the last scene from Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriski Point* from 1970: the explosion of an elegant bungalow built in the midst of a giant rock in the Californian Desert. The explosion is shown repeatedly from different perspectives. When this sequence is over, a dance of things emerges: to the music of Pink Floyd the objects of everyday life like a cornflakes box, a refrigerator, clothes, etc. are floating in slow motion in front of the blue sky.

It doesn't seem arbitrary that Ingvarsten evokes specifically this scene in front of our imaginary eye, since it reminds her own choreography *The Artificial Nature Project*, where she stages a «post-apocalyptic scenario»:¹

The beginning of the performance starts with a complete blackout on stage, this darkness seems to last for a very long time, but little by little I can distinguish small movements: small silver particles move onstage, they rise and fall, and form figures, like a swarm of fireflies they are moving through space, they transform into a landscape, into a sculpture or else, glittering—a bit they remind the early residual images on TV.² Gradually the lighting gets more differentiated

¹ Mette Ingvarsten: «The Artificial Nature Project. A running commentary on the performance by Mette Ingvarsten», in: Gabriele Brandstetter, Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar (eds.): «*Topographien des Flüchtigen. Choreographie als Verfahren*», Bielefeldt 2015 (i.E.).

² See also: Anna Carolin Weber: «Welcome to the Jungle of Gender», in: dies, Marie-Luise Angerer and Yvonne Hardt (eds.): «*Choreographie – Medien – Gender*», Berlin/Zürich 2013, p.185-201, 195f.

KIRSTEN MAAR

kind of expressivity. «It seemed very appropriate for me at this time to use a whole other point of view about the body – that it could be handled like an object, picked up and carried and that other objects and bodies could be interchangeable.» Instructions like «try thinking of yourself as a barrel»⁵ prove that interest. Rainer's concern to give movement an object-like quality, led her to question: «How to use the performer as a medium rather than a persona? Is a *ballet mécanique* the only solution?»⁶ With this reference to Fernand Léger's film from 1924, in which the singular elements of dance as «ornaments of mechanization» were re-arranged again and again, the circle closes to Antonioni's choreography of things in filmic images – even if admittedly the movement quality of the things differs substantially from the mechanical movement in Léger's *ballet mécanique* to the atmospheric, levitating in *Zabinski Point*. The turn-back to Rainer's work in the sixties is not arbitrary, since Ingvarthsen referred to this heritage already some years before in her Yes-Manifesto:



YES-MANIFESTO

- Yes to redefining virtuosity
- Yes to «invention» (however impossible)
- Yes to conceptualizing experience, affects, sensation
- Yes to material investment of the body or rather a body practice
- Yes to expression
- Yes to un-naming, decoding and recoding expression
- Yes to non-recognition, non-resemblance (could this be some sort of first degree referentiality)
- Yes to non-sense/illogic
- Yes to organizing principles rather than fixed logic systems
- Yes to moving the «clear concept» behind the actual performance of
- Yes to methodology and procedures
- Yes to «selectionism»
- Yes to editing and animation
- Yes to style as a result of procedure and specificity of a proposal (meaning each proposal has another style/specificity, and in this sense, the work cannot be considered essentialist)
- Yes to multiplicity, difference and co-existence⁷

ARTIFICIAL SPECULATIONS ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

⁷ Mette Ingvarthsen: «Towards a Practical Understanding of Theory», in: *maska open work*, # 5-6 aut./win. 2005.

¹² Only to mention a few, very different ones: Body Mind Centering by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen, Alexander Technique, Ideokinetics by Mabel Todd, Feldenkrais, Klein Technique, Skinner Releasing Technique, which are partly also used in a therapeutic field, or finally Contact Improvisation, developed by Steve Paxton.

(embedded in choreographic constellations) also the practices and techniques themselves change. Intentionality and the subjective access to the object are put into question as well as the subjection under the object. Many younger choreographers seem no longer interested in a conceptual neutrality, but in dimensions of affect and sensation, as Ingvarthsen formulates in her essay from 2005. As in art history the dichotomies between a merely conceptual and the expressionist are put into question. With Spinoza and Deleuze dancers and choreographers explore, how things and «corpora» are involved in the emergence of ideas and concepts as well as social and political connections. If the capacity to act is not only situated in the human body, how do other corpora then affect us, which effects do they have on us, what kind of experience do they allow? And how do they change the notion of the materiality or quality in dance? It is no coincidence that many choreographers go back to the practices and techniques the Judson choreographers worked with and developed further in the late 60s and 70s.¹² Even Rainer, who might be considered as one of the most conceptualist of her peers: Despite her refusal to give the artwork an illusionistic center or interior she already in 1965 described body, weight, mass,

INGVARTSEN AND YVONNE RAINER

KIRSTEN MAAR

Latour goes one step

beyond: In reference to Heidegger

he tries to revitalize the interrelations between thing and the public, he describes an accumulation of things as an assembly, as a site of the public, where the relationships between the actants are negotiated over and over again. Before Deleuze and Guattari had tackled these interrelations of heterogeneous elements. In *Thousand Plateaux* we find the notion of assemblage and a clear vision of what a body or an assemblage of bodies/ corpora and actors/ agents can do. In the overlappings of bodily states, semiotic processes and different practices and in the movements of transferal these agents affect others through their specific force – a potentiality, which lies between active and passive. But is this really an option to give up any notion of subjectivity? Especially in dance as an art form, in which the body (not only traditionally) is always involved – as an agent or a medium condition – implicit knowledge is acquired in practices and such contributes to processes of subjectivation. These practices help to obtain a specific kinesthetic awareness, they create an extended body, which is capable to radiate and to sense beyond its physical boundaries, and by this way get into relation even with the far surrounding. But in the face of the things

ARTIFICIAL SPECULATIONS ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

assistants for the material to move, any dichotomy or hierarchical subject-object-correlation is put into question. Certainly the acts of appropriating objects had always been marked by the failure of the functionalist paradigm, already within the attempt of appropriating objects the state of the subject becomes precarious. This resistance of the object already challenges the traditional models of agency, as a linear and unidirectional manipulation of the object by the subject, and introduces instead a kind of alienated determination, which contributes to situations of ambivalence and the unpredictable. The connection between subject and objects conventionally ascribes a merely passive force to objects, (in spite of some rare animistic, ghostly or surreal situations), as a form of agency, which does not merge within the regime of the visible, but withdraws from a regime of linear logic and instead challenges the imagination of the beholder. Assemblages of agencies are to be considered in a sense of potential events, they activate the beholder and contribute to rethink relationships of power and agency.

INGVARTSEN AND YVONNE RAINE

8 Yvonne Rainer: «Some retrospective notes on a dance for 10 people and 12 matresses called *Parts of Some Sexes*, performed at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut, and Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March, 1965», first published in: *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter 1965.

In her «Quasi Survey of Some Minimalist Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity midst the Plethora, – or

The text clearly refers to Rainer's famous *NO-Manifesto* from 1965:

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 whiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.⁸

In her examination of Rainer's aesthetics and the influential Judson heritage, Ingvartsen instead asked for modes of expression, which would be less psychologically motivated but generated through bodily practice and specific situations. In her pieces of that time like *Manual Focus*, 50/50, or *to come* she dealt with the deformations of extreme and spectacular modes of expression, tied to specific situations as a rock-concert or sexual activity. But to better understand the renewed interest in affect and sensation, let's first step back again to the 60s:



THE CHOREOGRAPHIC WORK OF METTE

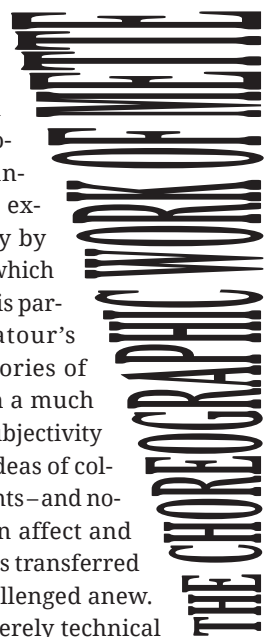
an
Analysis of *Trio A*⁹

Rainer compares the minimalist (art-)object and dance. She explicitly wants to minimize or even eliminate elements like phrasing, development, climax and variation as well as character, virtuosity and substitute them by energy equality and «found» movement, by the equality of parts, neutrality, task-(like) activity, etc. Most perfectly these requirements were summed up in the task «being a neutral doer». Rainer's rejection of the «narcissism of traditional dancing» led her to first of all question the role of artistic subjectivity, a thought which was central to several art practices and theoretical issues at that time. The terms anti-emotion, anti-human, anti-art resonate in these statements.

One might consider in how far such conceptions of an object-like body could be interpreted as a form of a «particularly revealing form of 1960s artistic anti-humanism»¹⁰. Certainly the notion of anti-humanism must be modified. Attacked was the belief that dance or art could transmit any universal or essential values, as well as the belief in artistic, respectively authorial subjectivity and the holy act of creation. The refusal to subject oneself to a determinate interpretation and to sabotage

the fixed, communicational function of the art object as most famously described in Susan Sontag's essay «Against Interpretation» from 1966, is also mirrored in the philosophical developments of this time, in the transition from Sartre's existentialist philosophy to a structuralist and deconstructivist approach as in Barthes, Derrida or Foucault. The human being does no longer serve as measure, it is no longer at the center of art production, but still the object is always an object of spectatorship.¹¹

Whereas anti-humanism in the 60s was still to be considered in a rejection of former expressionist and narrative tendencies, the actual theoretical and artistic moves against anthropocentrism and the interest in extending the notion of choreography by introducing things and their agency, which at first glance seems to be quite close, is particularly influenced by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and the theories of New Materialism, and is situated in a much broader «ecology». Authorship and subjectivity are now tackled for instance by the ideas of collective assemblies with different actants – and notably just by the renewed interest in affect and sensation! When the potential to act is transferred to things, subjective authority is challenged anew. In situations where the actors are merely technical



9 Yvonne Rainer, 1983.

10 Carrie Lambert-Beatty: «Being watched. Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s», Cambridge 2008, p.168.

11 Ibid.