Yvonne Rainer and Lydia Ogwang after a screening of Privilege, February 26, 2023

LO: Yvonne, thank you so much for being here. I like to start this off with what I call an easy question, but I don't know if there are any easy questions in relation to this film. When we were speaking earlier, you mentioned you hadn't seen this film in a little while, so I want to start by asking what is it like to watch *Privilege* (1990) again now? Not only now as an artist, 33 years since it was made, but also as a person. There's a lot to dig into there.

YR: Well, that's complicated. I hadn't seen this for quite a while. But I am amazed at how much I was willing to take on, I am amazed at my own — what, audacity? I don't know what you might call it — in putting these different things together. In the same vehicle, to talk about menopause in the mouth of a white woman — a surrogate for me, of course — and racism, white racism; mixing it up, which has always been the way I deal with making films. It was one reason I left dance after 10 years and started making films, so that I could mix up autobiography with what I was reading, and politics, and daily life — film offered these possibilities. Every film is a different example of ways of cutting and playing around with traditional narrative techniques. Like sync sound intertitles, and in the later films, using professional actors and dealing with characterization. I'm amazed I found different ways of dealing with this way of making films from early on. In the first, *Lives of Performers* (1972) — I was playing around with sync sound, cutting, and all the things you can do in film that is much harder on an open stage... I don't know, am I answering the question?

LO: Absolutely. You've dug into a lot of things that I was going to ask about. You mentioned the different disciplines that you are incorporating in this film. There's a lot of, for lack of a better word, "information" coming at the audience in different ways. Who was your intended audience for this film?

YR: My intended audience? My intended audience is myself, basically. And I know that coming out of a politically radical or liberal background, my audience pretty much agrees with me. I mean, I'm not trying to convert a more conservative audience. And I have accumulated followers who share political and social inclinations. So, it's you guys.

LO: Because it is such a complex work, what is the end goal for you? Is it some sort of understanding for yourself? Is it to communicate something outward? To make change in the world around you? There's the question of political efficacy, all those things.

YR: I should add I'm very aware my audience is predominantly white, and always has been. I've been criticized as a dancer when I returned to dance — and more recently, myself and my contemporaries from the '60s, my milieu, were attacked for our seeming exclusion of a Black audience. I don't know whether I'm answering your question but continuing in this vein I have never made very extensive efforts to broaden my audience. More recently in terms of my dance history, I realized that the Black dancers were going uptown to Alvin Ailey [American Dance Theater] on Broadway, and we whites were in the Judson [Dance Theater] basement. And anyone who came got their work on the programs. And although some of the participants in the Judson programs were going down South with the buses to broaden the opportunities for voters of color, and I went on anti-war protests and all of that, I didn't really expect the kinds of politics and particular social issues I was dealing with to attract a broad audience, partly because I was always in this experimental mode. The films are hard to follow if you only go to Hollywood movies. You have to keep with them. That was always part of the project, to draw on traditional narrative conventions, but then break them, break them, break them, over and over. You have to relax and then pay attention, and then maybe you relax. They're demanding films. I know that, I always knew that, and it was a good part of my motivation.

LO: In a terrific interview with Lynne Tillman you mention something that really struck me, that back in 1990 you had a contemporary who was a Black person who was dismayed to see that the film didn't make as big of an impact as she would've wanted it to. You expressed concern about whether Black people would even be able to see these films, or come out to watch these screenings? I think there is a question of access to what you were speaking to, but I'm also curious about how things may have changed, in terms of the reception of or access to your work between 1990 and now. Are you having more diverse audiences? Are you getting chances to speak to people who are beyond your milieu, as you say? Who are further from your own experience in terms of age, race, ability, all of that?

YR: Well, I'm still pretty lackadaisical; I mean, I leave it up to the sponsors to advertise the work and bring in the audience, but I'm very pleased that every 10 years or so, there's a whole new generation of people of whatever race or background who are interested, and come, and don't walk out. Did anyone walk out of this film? Yeah. Often in the old days I would sit in the back, and sure enough, there would be walk-outs. It was just too cut-up and demanding, what I was doing… I'm very pleased to see all of you.

LO: I want to talk about dislocation as a narrative tactic, because you do a lot of this, and in different ways, in each of your films. The obvious one in Privilege is having Novella Nelson take on the role of Yvonne Washington. What draws you to this tactic? What is it about that as a storytelling device that you've found so enigmatic over your film career?

YR: Yvonne Washington, of course she is reciting things that I had brought to the script, things I was reading about race and other political matters, and that set up [Jenny, played by Alice Spivak] as the victim or the object of the accusations of Yvonne Washington. Novella Nelson represents what I was reading and trying to digest in terms of political, racial, social history, but Alice represents a lot of my own history. They were used to present some of the contradictions of living in this country.

LO: Are there any questions from the audience?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi. I know you were drawn to the medium because of all the possibilities of playing with these cinematic devices, but did you know from the outset of this film that you were going to work with these techniques such as intertitles, archival footage, actors? Or did the process shape the final product?

YR: As with most of my films, they're totally scripted. I don't make many changes. I make a lot of changes in the editing, but figuring out the material I'm going to use is always preceded, often by a couple of years, by the process of creating the script. The most pleasurable parts of my years of filmmaking were the writing of the scripts and the editing. That was always a private practice. Babette Mangolte taught me editing in the first two films. After that, it was always a solitary endeavor.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: In the opening credits, it says, "A film by Yvonne Rainer and many others." I felt you really made an effort to show the perspective of people in different social positions, backgrounds, and give them a voice. As a director, to give up that space felt empowering. I was curious how you got to that point, to make that decision?

YR: Oh. Well, that's a different aspect of the work. Everything that comes out of these performer's mouths has gone through my mind. I mean, it's come out of my reading and experience and my autobiography. But maybe I should explain the complexity of my growing up. My father was an Italian immigrant, came here when he was 20. Left school at the age of 10 or 12 to become a stonemason's apprentice. My mother was born in Brooklyn, and her parents were Polish Jews — probably left in the late 1890s because of a pogrom. By the time she came, friends of hers knew all these anarchists who had emigrated, and my father was part of that group. So there were these contradictions in my house of political radicalism, living in an all-white, working-class, Protestant neighborhood, being asked by my playmates where I was from because I was slightly darker than they were. I would blurt to these kids that I didn't believe in God — it caused a lot of trouble. And my mother, she was always unwell in various ways, I won't go into that. So, my experience, the contradictions of my childhood and adolescence, are in this film in various ways.

LO: It feels like you are comfortable with ambiguity, in what you're saying. You grew up with a lot around you.

YR: Ambiguity and contradictions, yeah, it seemed the only way to go… I don't know. And now I'm very discouraged by what's going on in this country, and since the awful president we had before the present one. It's a strange country, to say the least.

LO: We're out of time, but I did want to end on a positive note. Do you have any positive words to end on?

YR: Courage! Courage! Be active. Read the New York Times, or other radical or progressive stuff you can get your hands on. Join groups if you can. Protest. Write letters. Give money.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Watch Yvonne Rainer films!

STATEMENT, November 6, 1990 by Yvonne Rainer

My films can be described as autobiographical fictions, untrue confessions, undermined narratives, mined documentaries, unscholarly dissertations, dialogic entertainments. Although my subject matter may vary from film to film, I can also generalize about intent and purpose: To represent social reality in all its uneven development and fit in the departments of activism, articulation, and behavior to create cinematic arrangements that can accommodate both ambiguity and contradiction without eliminating the possibility of taking specific political stands, to register complicity, protest, acquiescence with and against dominant social forces — sometimes within a single shot or scene — in a way that does not give a message of despair; to create incongruous juxtapositions of modes of address and conventions governing pictorial and narrative coherence so that the spectator must wrestle meaning from the film rather than lose him/herself in vicarious experience or authoritative condensations of what's what.

And lately, after rereading Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind*, I've been thinking that my films, to some degree or another, can be seen as an interrogation and critique of "straightness," in both its broadest and most socially confining sense: Straightness as a bulwark, as protection, as punitive codes against deviations from social norms that define and enforce the parameters of sex, gender, race, class, and age. Straightness as it pops up in psychoanalytic theory no less than at the breakfast table; straightness that clouds the liberal imagination congratulating itself on its tolerance; straightness that kills, cripples, and curtails the lives of gays, Lesbians, blacks, women, the poor, and the aging; straightness that equates strength with bloodshed. To be continued . . .

Sally Banes: The first thing that I wanted to ask is, what is your acting background? You told me that as a child you played Christopher Columbus. Was that your first acting experience?

Annette Michelson: Yes, it was in first grade, when I was six. I remember being Cinderella somewhat later to music by Mozart, singing verses to the first movement of what I later came to know as the *A Major Piano Sonata*. That must have been in second grade.

S.B.: Did you have aspirations to be an actress at that point?

A.M.: No, that came much later, by the time I was twelve or thirteen. In junior high school I played Cecily in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. So, by the time I was thirteen or fourteen I decided that I was going to be an actress; the theater was something I wanted to give my life to. By the time I was fifteen or sixteen, I began to have grave doubts. Actually, acting did not seem a very elevated kind of task. I was reading a great deal and was very interested in literature, philosophy, music, and aesthetics. And it seemed to me there was something menial about the task and role of the actor and about the status of the actor – perhaps deservedly so.

S.B.: Were you learning method acting?

A.M.: No one had taught me acting. I had read Stanislavsky and that was, in fact, very important to me. The theater that I was interested in was that of the Elizabethans, Pirandello, Chekhov, and I thought if there were a way of establishing distance from the role and incorporating an analytical, critical comment into the acting, that might be it. So for some time I toyed with this, but I didn't really find it. I would go for Equity Library castings and discover that none of the actors around me had ever heard of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It was a very lonely time, and I believed that in Europe it would be totally different.

S.B.: Did you act professionally in Europe?

A.M.: Yes, I did. I did some things there from time to time. I was really bad at knocking on people's doors, timid and proud.

S.B.: What about film acting?

A.M.: It didn't interest me. I was not all that interested in films at that time.

S.B.: When did you become interested in films?

A.M.: Just a bit later, but very gradually. Like everyone, I had been fascinated by films as a kid. They were part of one's environment, but not really a subject of interest. I didn't become really interested in films until shortly before I went to Europe – in my late teens. I began to take an intelligent, intellectual's interest in film but it was not a passion. It became apparent to me in Paris, where I settled, that I was witnessing a real theatrical renaissance. Circumstances brought me immediately into contact with Genet and with Roger Blin and the group of actors around him, that is to say, with the milieu of Artaud's friends. But by that time I was becoming quite disaffected with theater for myself. It was no longer something I wanted to do at all. I began to respect the extraordinary tenacity and courage of those people who were working in the theater, whom I admired, but I also pitied them – they seemed practitioners of a dying art. My interest in the theater as a horizon of innovation was not revived until my return to America in 1965, when I encountered Performance Art – the work of Yvonne, in particular – and, somewhat later, the work of Richard Foreman.

S.B.: But at that time Rainer was trying to divorce herself from the theatricality of dance.

A.M.: Yes, but I mean that I was less interested in theater than in the evolving forms of performance as one began to find them here. And Yvonne's work was not without theatricality at that time in any case. In fact, it seemed to adapt itself well to the theater on those occasions which actually used theatrical frameworks.

S.B.: How did you get into film acting?

A.M.: When I was in Paris, and beginning to think of starting to earn some money, the first thing I did was some film dubbing. But it was very dull work, and the people were impossible, and I gave it up very quickly. The first actual film work that I did was for *Noviciat* (1964), a film of Noël Burch's. I played a supporting role in it, and then also when he came to post-synchronize the film he found that the voice of his leading actress did not suit the part. So I recorded and dubbed her role, in addition to playing my own. And I remember being very proud because among the things that I had to do was to simulate the sounds made by the heroine during an erotic dream. I enjoyed that and thought my work very accomplished. So that was the first film I did. I should say, however, that I did work in a performance of Yvonne's, *Continuous Project-Altered Daily*, presented at the Whitney Museum in the spring of 1970. And then much later, for Michael Snow. When Yvonne saw *Rameau's Nephew*, she remarked on what I think she called my presence in that film and said, "Ah, some day... "

S.B.: When did she actually ask you to be in Journeys? When did it all start?

A.M.: She mentioned it in 1977 while living in Berlin; she had come back to visit New York and said that she was thinking about the film, and inquired whether I would be interested when plans were more complete. Then I went to Europe for a year in 1978 and one day she telephoned and said: "Would you be free around that time next year?" She then gave me a copy of the script and wanted to know if I was interested. I was obviously more than half convinced before I got it.

S.B.: Before you got the script. Did you know anything at all about the role?

A.M.: Nothing at all. It's not my custom to ask artists about their work while they're at it. If they want to volunteer, that's fine. But she didn't, and I'm rather reticent about that kind of thing.

S.B.: What was it like working under her as a director? What was the rehearsal process like? How long did it take you to learn the text?

A.M.: It took me all the time we had. Essentially, I learned the script between mid or late December '78 and June '79. What that meant was – first of all, reading the script quite carefully and trying to understand it as well as I could, then learning it as a kind of intricately articulated score. I was sick that year for the first time in my life and had a long period of convalescence. And this was, in a number of ways, an ideal occupation of a convalescent. First of all, I had plenty of time, and then when one is convalescing, responsibilities are lifted from you. So I had a very clear mind; I could give it a lot of time and thought, with no external pressures. Also, it meant working toward something that was going to happen when I was better. And with a good friend.

S.B.: I'm thinking in particular about the disjunctiveness of the text.

A.M.: It was very interesting. I had not, for a very long time, had to memorize anything, except in recent years, Russian grammar. But as I began to learn the part – and also because I knew the author well (this is someone whose work I had followed for 15 years, supporting it in any way I could. This was a new form of support, and that was important to me.) – it began to become clearer it's not so totally disjunctive as it may appear. Certainly, there are non sequiturs. But there is, nevertheless, a sense that you get when you know the text very thoroughly, of a very strong rhythm, structure, and dynamics. It was difficult work. I memorized it very well, I think, but I was subject, until the last, to certain gaps and confusions. It's not that the text was so difficult to memorize; the order was, because the order was not always logical, and there was not at every point a sense of identification with the part. I spent a lot of time on it, as it was not easy, and I became interested in the process of memorization itself. The process of memorization involved, in addition to the text, mastering changes of tone, of pitch, of timbre; the pauses were regulated, to the second if possible. One counted three and one-half here, and five there. And it was not four and it was not six. It was very set, totally determined; this was by far the most difficult aspect of the task.

S.B.: So Rainer very closely directed that aspect of it. It wasn't your interpretation?

A.M.: It's hard at this point to know. As far as the pauses were concerned, those were hers, they were not mine. But Yvonne had chosen me because she sees me as someone with a certain kind of presence and vocal command, what she laughingly calls my "Laurence Olivier side." But having chosen this performer, she wanted to set a structure that had to be respected in almost every detail. Our dialectic of freedom and necessity was somewhat utopian – extremely difficult to maintain. It was like learning to play a musical score; a certain technical proficiency was assumed and minuteness, accuracy, the precision, the totality of respect for directorial instructions narrowed the margin for interpretation. What this did was to break and render somewhat more disjunct – to objectify, if you like – a performance which might have become laden with nuance, over-subjective. It was a way of establishing distance. There were, in fact, times – very occasionally – when my view of a given line would transpire through an intonation or a faint smile, which Yvonne would then suppress. In rehearsal I tended at times to smile, and the smile was ironic; it did involve a certain critical distance from the line. And every time Yvonne saw me smile, she would say, "Don't smile, why are you smiling?" It became apparent to me later that this smile was the trace of my own distance from what I was saying. That's not the distance Yvonne wanted, which came through direction of gaze, but mainly through inflection, pacing, pauses, change of tessitura, change of mood, change of volume – all of the parameters acoustical, vocal-since as you know I was sitting, I was not moving. She saw the role, however, in one sense, as a character more solemn and wholly implicated.

S.B.: But there were times that you looked up or down, and of course that's very important in Rainer's work – the averted gaze, as in *Trio A*. Was that orchestrated too?

A.M.: Yes, and orchestrated is indeed the word. As I said, the precise relationship between my own histrionic impulse and that discipline is something that's a little difficult to formulate in precise terms, but it certainly was a major factor.

S.B.: Back to the filming process, how many takes per scene?

A.M.: Who knows? One would have to tell you what the filming was like. As you know, it was done in London, with a splendid English crew. The cameraman Carl Teitelbaum came with us from New York. And we shot almost entirely in Whitechapel Gallery, which had the loft-like kind of space that was needed. The number of takes was variable, but I would say there were a great many for almost every sequence. Easily between five and eight or nine, which I think is probably a lot for a production of this budget level. One reason for the number of takes was certainly that I occasionally flubbed my lines or was distracted. But very often it was because there were modifications of the camera setup. And that has to do, I think, with Yvonne's very particular way of working with her cameraman, which I was most interested to observe. It also had to do with the fact that two of my interlocutors, the woman and the child who played the analyst, were wholly inexperienced. And one of them, in particular, the woman, who has the largest segment of that analyst's role, had real difficulty in adjusting to the exigencies of this particular work situation.

S.B.: How much did she really do besides sit there and listen? Mostly you see her back.

A.M.: True enough, but that proved not to be very easy. She's a professor of sociology in London, an intelligent Polish emigre. And she was nervous and unsure as to whether the way she was doing nothing was correct. And of course, she had lines as well. I think that in the film she does come off very well, indeed.

S.B.: And Chad Wollen must have gotten restless?

A.M.: No, Chad wasn't too restless; he was okay. Yvonne was, at all times, an extraordinarily disciplined, patient, helpful and generous person to work for. She is, of course, also very demanding. By that I mean that she has a totally precise notion of what she wants and nothing else will do. Although she is very good at seeing that what she wants may not be entirely feasible, and gracious about renouncing in those cases where it is necessary.

S.B.: What kinds of things would she want that wouldn't be feasible?

A.M.: Well, certain effects from actors. She's good at finding compromise solutions when she has to. It struck me that working for Yvonne involves aspects of what work with Sternberg must have involved conjoined with what I do know work with Bresson is like. Both have reputations as manically obsessive directors. I have watched Bresson work and I know that the legend is unjustified. Essentially, what he wants is so extremely simple – a certain quality of concentration – that he finds it very difficult to get. (As for von Sternberg, one can only hypothesize, although one can read a lot out of Dietrich's performances under his direction, particularly in a film like *Shanghai Express*.) Well, we were working – I in particular – with a long and difficult text. The takes run to between three and eight minutes. My every movement – even my hand movement – was regulated. (I tend naturally to move my hands a bit too much as I talk.) And the camera was straight on, all the time, with a minimum of props. So that reduction involving immobility, fixed camera-angle, frontality, limited number of props and therefore a limited number of hand gestures possible. The extreme control of the facial muscles, meant total submission to discipline for the actress. And indeed, one of the interesting aspects of this entire experience from a personal viewpoint was that I did submit. For the very first time in a long time, as wholly as I could, to the will of another single individual. This doesn't happen to me very often, and certainly not very willingly.

S.B.: How was it, to do that?

A.M.: As I've said, it was very interesting. It was possible only because the person involved was someone for whom I had great esteem and affection. And because I had the sense of involvement in something of real importance and interest; otherwise, I could not have assumed and sustained that commitment. And perhaps, as well, because I had a central role in it; there was considerable narcissistic gratification involved.

S.B.: You were going to talk about Rainer's relationship to the camera crew, and how she worked with them.

A.M.: Yes. She worked very closely with the cameraman. Nothing was done without being seen by Yvonne. Her eye was in the viewfinder all the time. The pace was slow because of that, too. I think that Yvonne's extreme closeness to the cameraman, the constant control, meant that we also tried different solutions, accounting for a certain number of takes. These things were not all decided off the set or between work sessions.

S.B.: Do you think this film is more political, or has more of a certain kind of content than Rainer's earlier films? She uses the text in a more complicated way than she did in past films.

A.M.: A lot of people, particularly people who like the film, seem to feel it's very different from her other films.

S.B.: You don't?

A.M.: I'm not sure that's still a question for me. How can one not see the continuities in her work? For example, the techniques of radical juxtaposition, which you and I know from her work as a choreographer, prevail. Those wonderful works from the Judson period involved techniques like that – dancing while someone reads a text from an ancient diary. This film rings fresh changes on that kind of thing. As to other forms of continuity, *Kristina Talking Pictures* is not all that present in my mind, but I also feel that this film provides development of certain aspects of that film.

S.B.: My big question about the film and politics is your interpretation of the patient's attitude toward politics when you were constructing that role.

A.M.: There is a way in which I didn't quite think of it as a role or character, but as a component of Yvonne's segmentation, a subdivision of a complex discourse. So, I don't think of the character as having an attitude toward politics as such. If the patient is a character, she is a woman in therapy. But it seems to me that she is more accurately described as a convergence of a certain political iconography and a concern with the restored integrity of the self.

S.B.: What do you mean by political iconography?

A.M.: First of all, the monologues are, as you know, constructed on a principle of collage. The part never became really easy to remember, but the monologues grew easier as I discerned the kinds of logic, of strategy, of effects and the syntax at work in the structure of the role it is paratactic, sequential. There is at no time, in the part that I play, a real meditation on the political as such. The political is posed in terms of issues of moral choice. The patient is not meditating on the conditions, the function, and the consequences of political action as such. That does not seem to be the tenor of the part. The political imagery is drawn partly from the tradition of Russian female anarchists, terrorists of the 19th century, already that of a romantic literature, juxtaposed, intercut at one point with a series of portraits of female movie stars. We can infer a displacement of interest, or, if you like, of identification, passing from the movie star to the performer of the terrorist task. Also, in my role, the political statements are largely culled from reading and from literature. They're all in quotation marks, as it were. There is a second-degree presentation of the political, derived from literature and from a history already incorporated into that of romanticism.

S.B.: I'm thinking about statements like "There's no case of a man following his wife into Siberia."

A.M.: That is not a strong political statement. It has a feminist resonance, but surely, it's not a strong political statement.

S.B.: It seems like evidence for a feminist position. Do you feel that the patient, insofar as you consider her a character at all, takes a feminist stance in the world?

A.M.: Let's say, a feminist discourse develops through her, but it is not essentially political. Let me explain. Take the statement, "No man has followed his wife into Siberia." And take another – the passage which I always enjoyed doing and which I think people also enjoy watching, or hearing: the aria about the relationship with Samuel Beckett. It seems to me the culmination of the feminist direction of the text, but it is, of course, a lament, rising to a cry of rage. I was encouraged to deliver it with as much rage and aggressiveness as possible. And to end by yelling a rejection of the notion of the female castration. That is: "Furthermore, my cunt is not a castrated cock, it is, et cetera." Just before this, interestingly enough, the feminist demand is stated in terms of consumption. She says you can talk about theoretical issues, "...commodity-fetishism and object-cathexis. But when the chips are down who do we find in Bloomingdale's spending the sperm?" One might read this as implying that the feminist claim, whatever it may be, is independent of other considerations, that it transcends them. I do think that we must finally acknowledge the fact that in *Journeys* we have a film which is not political, but rather pre-political. The place from which Yvonne continues to speak is not that of political analysis or action. The film's uneasiness and humor, both, are contingent on one's sense of the subject's dilemma, a stasis of anguish, an inability to invent or adopt the terms of another praxis. But this is the problem of the modernist artist in America.

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Excerpts from A Likely Story by Yvonne Rainer, A lecture delivered on September 3, 1976

If I may shift to a more personal narrative for a moment, let me insert here that my own involvement with narrative forms has not always been either happy or wholehearted, rather more often a dalliance than a commitment. The reason lies partly in the nature of the predominating form of narrative film. The tyranny of a form that creates the expectation of a continuous answer to "what will happen next?" fanatically pursuing an inexorable resolution in which all things find their just or correct placement in space and time; such a tyranny, having already attained its epiphany in the movies (I think of *Gertrud*, *Senso*, *Balthazar*, *Contempt*, *Lulu*) such a form has inevitably seemed more ripe for resistance, or at least evasion, than for emulation.

My own forays into this territory border on a kind of banditry, the need for which has slowly evolved out of a dilemma imposed by subject matter. This dilemma has become more clarified for me on the completion of each of my three films, presenting itself in the form of basic, though variously oriented, questions asked-and not always answered-by each of these films and having, I would hope, wider application than my own work.

Can the presentation of sexual conflict in film or the presentation of the experience of love and jealousy be revitalized through a studied placement or dislocation of cliches borrowed from soap opera and melodrama? Can specific states of mind and emotion or subtleties of social interaction be conveyed in film without being attached or by being only provisionally attached co particularities of place, time, person, and relationship? And can such subject matter be presented without being "acted out" -in both the theatrical and psychoanalytic senses-via simulated dialogue and gesture? Are faces such as belong to Katharine Hepburn and Liv Ullman the only vehicles for grief and passion? Can a film achieve comparable impact through means other than these faces? And why in the world would one ever want to achieve an effect comparable to that wonder of art and nature, the smile fading from Hepburn's face? (...)

Can something-say, a tiger-at a narrative level be at once illustrative of the heroine's vocation, symbolic of unkown danger, representative of endangered species-and at the same time function as an object of choreographic and cinematic pattern-making? Or does this something-say, a tiger-once having been assigned its narrative raison d'etre, refuse to be relegated to what may seem by comparison a limbo of purely formal filmic construction? Or, on the other hand, can this filmic construction infuse new life into an old story, create new meanings and levels of interpretation? (Witness Critical Mass)

Is it entirely Quixotic to entertain notions of a work that might accommodate both a cone of light, and a wedge of pie being eaten by an escaped Brazilian political prisoner in the San Juan Hilton at 5:30 P.M. August 5th before meeting his brother-in-law, who has the keys to...

Will generational, or multifold techniques of reproduction of pictorial, kinesthetic, and behavioral material, or techniques for diffusing and fracturing the re-presentation of the real-will such techniques bring about a rapprochement between nonnarrative film and narrative and the irritation-cum-intellectual-deprivation that so often goes with film-as-pure-research? But now I had better stop asking questions. I've already started to rig the game. And besides, it isn't as if there aren't already lots of films that have achieved this-at least for moments on end.

Yvonne Rainer introducing Kristina Talking Pictures in Camera Obscura: a journal of feminism & film theory, 1976

Kristina Talking Pictures is a narrative film in as much as it contains a series of events that can be synthesized into a story if one is disposed to do so. (A European woman lion-tamer comes to America and takes up choreography.) The film can also be characterized by its discursions from a strict narrative line via reflections on art, love, and catastrophe sustained by the voices of Kristina, the heroine-narrator, and Raoul, her lover.

Within its form of shifting correlations between word and image, persona and performer, enactment and illustration, explanation and ambiguity, *Kristina Talking Pictures* circles in a narrowing spiral toward its primary concerns: the uncertain relation of public act to personal fate, the ever-present possibility for disparity between public-directed conscience and private will.

Having just put your check to Amnesty International in the mailbox, you are mugged... or discover you have cancer... or perhaps you betray an old friend. Nothing can ensure that we remain honorable, nor save us from betrayal and death.

In the next-to-last shot a love letter is recited.
So you see, things aren't all that bad.

I. Jonas Mekas interviews Yvonne Rainer, 23 December 1973 II. Excerpt from the epilogue of Feelings are Facts by Yvonne Rainer III. Program notes by Ruby Rich for a screening at the Art Institute of Chicago Film Center, February 1976

I. Yvonne Rainer's second full length film, *Film About a Woman Who...*, (her first film was called *Lives or Performers*) ran at the Whitney Museum, December 11 through December 17. What is *Film About a Woman Who...* all about? I don't know. But there are two women (with a brief appearance of a third one, Yvonne Rainer herself) and two men. None of them are named by name. They are always referred to as "she" and "he". "She" was and probably still is in love with "him". The film tells about their tortured relationship. I had a conversation with Yvonne Rainer. I asked her if she is still interested in performances.

Yvonne: I don't feel I have given up performance ... In my performances or so-called shows, I am only the performer. I can't conceive of being a director who's not involved. It's a way of making something in a kind or intuitive way. But it doesn't have anything to do with enjoying performing anymore. It's more and more of an effort to appear in front of people. But it has something to do with a process of making – that continues to be important to me. I'm still not sure what that is but I can only define it in relation to the process of making a film where it was a revelation and a totally new experience and pleasure to be totally outside of what I was making; I mean, looking through the peephole, the knothole of the camera lens...

Jonas: (I refer to the fact that in *Film About a Woman Who...* one never knows to which man or woman the narrator or intertitles refer; two women could be looked at as two sides of the same woman, if one wants to; the same with two men. Yvonne reminds me that in *Lives of Performers* all men and women were identified by names. I mention that while *Lives of Performers* seemed to be autobiographical on a "professional", performer's level, the new film seems to me much more personal, beyond the performer.

Yvonne: I feel, and I think it's apparent, that I am using autobiographical material as the source for a lot of things that you see in both films. But... by the time the script was written I ceased to identify with that material. For *Film About a Woman Who...* I had a very strict script. For *Lives of Performers* I had a very loose scenario.

Jonas: (I note that what interested me in both films was the form of the film, that a great variety of autobiographical material was fused together and manipulated, by means of formal strategies. Then I voice that I was disturbed by the ending in *Film About a Woman Who...*. I found the man in the film totally negative and despicable. Whereas the woman I found positive – she was going through a process of awakening. Still, at the end of the film, the woman states (in the intertitles) that now that she has made her feelings clear to him, she can go back to him and love him again. I note that the end is Dostoevskian.)

Yvonne: Let me explain something... You don't know who the "he" and the "she" are. They are four people, two men and two women. Do you assume that the "he" and "she" are always the same "he" and "she"? Because it could be that after the end, the "he" who slaps "her" across the face is not the same "he" who "laughs out loud" and not the same "she" who now that she knew and understood, was free to love him again. It could be a totally different "she". You see, on the one hand that ending is very conventional, it's about a very sudden climax and then a very sudden resolution; and then – the ending. I was playing on endings, on endings of narratives, endings of films, melodramas, I mean that "he" hit her across the face, is more melodramatic than anything else in the film. Maybe I am trying to have my cake and eat it too. I mean, there is a thread of a certain kind of conflict throughout the film, but it's... There are also all these strategies that constantly keep you from identifying with any one of the people that you are seeing and any one of the people that you're reading about (in titles) or hearing about. So maybe what you suddenly did, for some reason, was bring all these separate paragraphs together and assign them to one "he" and one "she" which may be the hazard of that technique...

Jonas: (I note that *Lives of Performers* contained more distance from the content. There was much irony and humor in it. *Film About a Woman who...* is humorless, almost grim. Again, I mention Dostoevsky, Bergman, Strindberg.)

Yvonne: That is a constant question that I must ask myself in the treatment of any one bit of material, how close do I want the audience to be to that, and humor is a way of removing oneself from pain. I think one does that. In this film it was a very conscious attempt to get the audience and myself much closer to the pain of that material and not disguise it or maintain the same kind of removal that I had in the previous film. And maybe that is what you object to in Bergman, what characterizes more conventional filmmaking, more conventional melodramatic, psychological narrative filmmaking. And it is a very delicate kind of balance or tightrope that I feel I am walking now, and I feel this risk constantly and it's a constant dialogue or discourse I have with myself, how absurd will I make this material. Because the constant is a certain emotional, loaded material that I choose to deal with. And the reason I went into filmmaking was because in dance I could not directly deal with that material. I couldn't deal with it via my body. The body is about the body, you know. And film because it deals more with language or at least the way I chose to approach it...

Jonas: Your people do not react to each other, they have no emotional contacts, they have no emotions; they don't speak to each other, their faces and eyes are frozen in one expression most of the time, they are blank, they never look at each other, at best they stare; they are all dressed in either black or white, and the backgrounds are bare too, black or white, sets with no detail, just background: if outdoors-then maybe just a beach, white beach with black sky and black water; the film is shot in black and white, etc. etc., All this adds up to a lot of suffering and a lot of torment and a lot of austerity...

Yvonne: Which is a way of removing from the content...

Jonas: You have titles which say: "I shall become still, feign death" and "It's time for me to be silent, methodical, resentful, gloomy."

Yvonne: That's a whole series that begins with "How bad could it get" and then there is a list of states of mind. Well, I feel I'm getting down to a certain nitty-gritty of disturbance and this was the challenge of the film. It's grim, yes... I am trying to decide my limits, you know. I certainly don't want to do a Bergman kind of treatment of this material. For one thing, I am not very interested in acting at this point. So, I have to find other techniques, different ways. The ideas of passion, of love and ambivalence as represented in the convention of acting we find it harder and harder to take seriously as high art. It's a very strange situation. So, all these very complicated and ambiguous strategies must be devised to enable us to get reinvolved in very familiar situations. I mean. I keep thinking, I am making something between – I know you hate *Cries and Whispers* and Bergman keeps coming up, and you are not the only one who has suggested Bergman to me – but between Bergman and Hollis Frampton's *Critical Mass* where a man and a woman are arguing. I mean. that film is horrifying, you know, ultimately, as it goes on – but it's compelling at the same time, because of the technique. I realized recently why I am making film and not video. It came up when a gallery was doing a show of video, and they wanted to transfer *Lives of Performers* to videotape, and this was the first time I was confronted with this prospect. I mean, I had thought of the film being shown on a TV network, like films are, but to be shown as a videotape in a gallery – I suddenly realized that I am making films because I come out of a performer's tradition in which something is looked at by a group of people sitting together in a public place, and there remains for me this association with video as a one-to-one kind of experience, because of the furniture quality of the machine, as the source of image. There is not this kind of public sharing of the medium. Film to me still belongs in a theatre, in a theatrical situation, not in someone's living room.

Jonas: Hmm... hmm. Some people in cinema are trying to reverse this kind of thinking .... At this point, you see, film and video have come very close together, in that respect. Film has become practically a living room art or experience, and video, what with the video projectors has practically become a theatrical, group experience. And then we have the whole home movie thing. Two days ago, I watched your film in my room, with four friends, just five of us.

Yvonne: But for me that's not an ideal situation. I mean, you don't usually do that. You do that because you are a critic.

Jonas: Nooo...

Yvonne: For me... I don't quite accept it yet. I'd say that I am making films for a group in a way that I make performances. I don't make performances for one person. And I know, I am quite sure that that kind of thinking goes into my decisions.

Jonas: How long is your film?

Yvonne: One hour and 40 minutes.

Jonas: Who is the distributor?

Yvonne: Castelli-Sonnabend.

Jonas: Permit me to ask a cliche question, a question that students usually ask a visiting artist: Why did you make this film?

Yvonne: In my mind the question is: What are you trying to do? What are you trying to say? And my answer to the question that I have posed is – and I can't say it without slightly smiling self-consciously – the answer is: I've tried to make something that may enable both of us to face our life and death with courage.

The day after our conversation I received the following notes typed by Yvonne:

I have never thought that as one of the prime celebrants of non-narrative cinema you might be biased against neurotic difficulty (as well as narrative) as cinematic subject matter. And when the humor is removed, or reduced (which we decided had happened when comparing *Lives of Performers* with *Film About a Woman Who...*), is this subject matter "harder to take" because the questions posed have more to do with life than with art? Compared to *Woman Who...*, *Lives...* is utterly delightful. Compared to *Lives...*, *Woman Who...* is ponderous and labyrinthine. At this point I do not prefer one over the other, nor would I feel justified in defending the later one as an "advance" on the mere grounds that I am closer-in time- to its creation.

The simple truth is that in the working out of *Woman Who...*, I decided to abandon the prime strategy that characterized *Lives...*, namely, the treatment of emotional torment as if it belonged in an absurd trade manual of cliche. And, as a consequence, I took on risks that I knew would be incurred by moving in closer to that content.

So... if you (the spectator) don't laugh, do you cry... or withdraw? If the performers are not seen laughing at themselves-and does their laughter tell us (the spectators) that the author does not expect us to take the torment "too seriously"? – does that indicate that the author is "more serious" about the torment?

Despite Barbra Streisand's profound statement that "Individually they may be a bunch of asses but together as a whole they are the ... wisest thing." psyching out audience response, after a certain point, is a futile, perhaps even dangerous, occupation for a non-commercial filmmaker. (Coming from a performance tradition may account for my being more concerned with it than most.) Yet it must be said that in deciding to "get more serious" about the emotional difficulties of my characters, I was in part motivated by a desire to create a different kind of unrest in the minds and bosoms of my audience. So, above all, let no one accuse me of having lost my sense of humor!

First published in Mekas column *Movie Journal* in the Village Voice

II. At the end of 1974, upon the completion of *Film about a Woman Who...* (like *Lives of Performers*, shot by Babette Mangolte), I wrote to Jonas Mekas, "...in the working out of *Woman Who...* I decided to abandon the prime strategy that characterized *Lives...*, namely, the treatment of emotional torment as if it belonged in an absurd "trade manual" of cliche. And, as a consequence, I took on the risks that I knew would be incurred by moving in closer to that content."

My writing has repeatedly posed these "risks" — and what I perceived as the attendant necessity of "moving in closer" to narrative conventions ("the embarrassing wars around searching for proxies of experience") — in terms of my own ambivalence. Teresa de Lauretis expatiated the possible reasons for my "suspicions" of narrative in a complex essay in her book *Technologies of Gender*. Taking a feminist tack, she points to the contradiction in feminists' desires for the authorial voice of narrative "when those notions are admittedly outmoded, patriarchal, and ethically compromised" and to the necessity for "a critical reading of culture... and a [feminist] rewriting of our culture's 'master narratives'" — a more analytic version of my mantra, "having my cake and eating it too." Writer Audre Lorde once said something like, "You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools." By the late 1970's I would have rebutted,"You can, if you expose the tools."

Some people have called my early films "pre-political" and "pre-feminist." Nevertheless, *Film About a Woman Who...* became a focal point for more than one brouhaha in the feminist film theory wars of the late 1970's and early 1980's. The battles raged over issues of positive versus negative imaging of women, avant-garde versus Hollywood, distanciation versus identification, elitism versus populism, documentary versus fiction, transparency versus ambiguity, accessibility versus difficulty, and so on. I sometimes found myself fending off partisans from both sides of the barricades."

First published in Rainer's autobiography *Feelings are Facts*

III. Best known for her extensive work in performance, work that has spanned over a decade of concern and moved from the influence of Graham through the teachings of Cunningham to the invention of a unique minimalist lexicon, over the past few years Rainer has focused increasingly on the films that had always constituted one element of her work. Consequently, *Film About a Woman Who...* presents the happy difficulty of drawing upon a rich multiplicity of traditions not often available to the filmmaker or film audience. A viewer grounded in Russian Futurism, Meyerhold, Duchamn. John Cage, modern performance, and recent photographic modes, finds material in the film that speaks to that awareness. A viewer schooled wholly on film itself finds a virtual compendium of conventions, with ample reference to *Psycho*, *Red Desert*, the language of melodrama, the posing of soap opera. By the same token, a viewer up on the facets of Rainer's own life, past work and New York setting finds constant evidence of the autobiography that generates the fictions. In her extraordinary synthesis and reinterpretation of form, Rainer succeeds in fashioning a film which, consumed in 105 minutes, rises again phoenix-like to demand attention and contemplation for a long time to come. In retrospect, *Film About a Woman Who...* is likely to assume a position as one of the truly seminal films of our decade.

Rainer's film represents a critical juncture in the battle long waged between Hollywood's narrative tradition and the avant-garde American cinema's very different history of formal experimentation. The animosity has been mutual, with few exceptions. Just as Hollywood has maintained an antagonism to formal concerns and narrative innovation (based on box-office standards as well as a Horatio-Alger-inspired anti-intellectualism), the formally sophisticated avant-garde has fostered an equal level of hostility to the intrusion of personal, emotional, or overtly narrative content. While this separatism is understandable in terms of the relationship, both aesthetic and economic, between the two camps, it results in a dichotomy as archaic as philosophical mind/body cant.

Film About a Woman Who... commits this dilemma of narrative structure to the forefront of its concerns. Certain European filmmakers working in feature film have similarly concentrated on narrative problems — notably Godard, whose influence Rainer cites, as well as early Fassbinder, Straub/Huillet, Rivette — but few Americans have indicated an equally serious coning-to-terms. (...)

Parallel to this animosity between Hollywood and the avant-garde has been the continuing cold war between the politically radical and the artistically radical. The unfortunate combination of a politically radical statement, whether Marxist or feminist, within a formally reactionary aesthetic poses an increasingly urgent problem. The set of battle lines has divided along the issue of humanism versus formalism. In our decade, feminists have often identified artistic formalism as cold, anti-humanist, and masculine; Marxists have just as often perceived formalism as Pretentious, elitist, and ruling-class-identified. Proponents of formalism, in turn, tend to cite philistinism, anti-intellectualism and aesthetic naivete in answer to these political challenges. (Of late there has been a new recognition that message and presentation are indissoluble, that a radical concept is undermined by a conservative framework and vice versa, in other words, the very lesson of the Russian revolutionary filmmakers.) The lack of resolution is a painful one. While Rainer does not label herself a feminist, it is no coincidence that it is a woman who has placed a Priority on uniting these two long disparate elements. For the major contribution of the women's movement to the arts has been its insistence on the inclusion of emotion as a prime value. To women, whose emotions and instincts have so long been denied as fraudulent, the revival of emotion as a proper and indeed necessary subject of artistic concern has always been a major feminist platform. As feminist critics have begun to reevaluate film history, two basic methods have emerged, the American/sociological approach and the European/theoretical pre-ference. Ironically, both methods validate Rainer's position in *Film About a Woman Who...*, yet the. film has been the object of much feminist attack. (...)

Though accurate only on a simplistic level, it is nevertheless tempting to see Rainer as working to create a melodrama for our time, peculiarly suited to satisfying the fragmented and demanding hungers of the modern urban psyche. Sensitively retaining the enduringly valid emphases of the genre, Rainer subordinated them to new formal concerns. In a conversation with Lucy Lippard, Rainer predicted that there was no way back to emotional involvement in art without some kind of removal element to set it off: "It's like wishing for a lost innocence." Our overwrought society, unable to find remedies at a simple level, demands that its art make as many connections as possible between personal and cultural experience and insight. Yvonne Rainer, with her uncompromising formal explorations and acute auto-analysis, offers one alternative to the damaging quagmire of hostile posturing afflicting current cinematic theory.

APPENDIX TO THE SCREENING OF 'FILM ABOUT A WOMAN WHO' AT 18:30 ON 14/11-2024 IN PALADS DURING THE YVONNE RAINER RETROSPECTIVE ARRANGED BY TERRASSEN

Review of The Man Who Envied Women by Barbara Kruger, 1986

"I've never seduced a virgin or intruded upon a valid marriage," declares a man who admits to the gentility of his social relations. "You can ask me about the peculiarities of my shit, just don't ask me how much money I have in the bank," confides a man whose discretion extends only to his finances. "It's possible to have the whole story of Oedipus playing in your head and still behave properly at the dinner table," suggests a man with more than a soupçon of analytic grace.

Who is this man who appropriates and dispenses wisdom with the aplomb of an encyclopedia salesman, who collapses upon the altar of learning like a Rosicrucian floored by the Enlightenment? He is Jack Deller, the focus of a new film by Yvonne Rainer and, as the title declares, The Man Who Envied Women, 1985. He is portrayed by not one actor but two (William Raymond and Larry Loonin), who embody this mass of doubled trouble with the self-betraying rigor he so rightfully deserves. But what's his story? Well, according to Rainer, Deller's an academic kind of guy whose class lectures zigzag between interminable rhetorical mimicry and desperate, anecdotal accountings of his brushes with greatness, his demiacquaintances with the authors whose words he mouths.

But what about those envied women? Where are they? Although women do appear on the screen they are mainly heard, not seen. They are represented by their voices, which encircle Jack and his musings with a daisy chain of acerbic commentary and tragicomic confessionals. One of the voices belongs to the woman who has just ended a five-year relationship with Jack, and it is her no-nonsense but nonsensical voiceover that holds court over much of the proceedings. Sharply ridiculing Jack's womanizing, she suggests that his theorizing is just another weapon in his arsenal of conventional seductions. Jack, meanwhile, sits in front of a backdrop of old movies, or walks down crowded streets to overhear knowing women give him and his ilk the once-over with joking ease. While his own speech is a folding together of swipes from Michel Foucault and Raymond Chandler, and much in between, the entire film looks a bit like an elaborate marriage of Jean-Luc Godard and Paul Mazursky (honeymooning in TriBeCa). Thankfully, the nuptials are interrupted by Rainer, whose rendition of the self-adoring, intellectualizing, pussy-chasing, pontificating, self-pitying male kvetch puts everything into a wisecrackingly ridiculous perspective.

Jack and his detractors constitute only a portion of the film. The rest is divided into other slices of life, from the struggle for a chunk of Manhattan real estate to a scrutiny of America's machinations in Latin America and a consideration of the power of photography, advertising, and journalism; from the issues of women and aging to a questioning of the effectiveness of theoretical writing. But this scrutiny of theory seems weird, and it's a different kind of weirdness than Rainer's usual mix of quirky irrepressibility and pleasurable ambiguity. Something else is at work here that allows Rainer, who usually skirts the traps of damnation and paranoia with aplomb, to indulge in a tensely poised reactive mechanism that can easily be appropriated by those whose relationship to theory is stalked by intimidation. Her suggestion (through the reenactment of texts by Foucault and Meaghan Morris) that theory is a discourse grounded in an oppressive, univocal mastery should definitely be considered. However, it should also be remembered that the master speaks in many tongues, one being that which fears theory and the commentary that arises when language turns back against itself—when it baffles, juggles, and outplays the constructions and declarations of power. Rainer's scrutiny of theory is not a call for rampant anti-intellectualism, nor is it a witch-hunt that views ideas as unstaplers of one's own power, whether that power is wielded in legislative committees, on the battlefield, or in the pages of art magazines.

The Man Who Envied Women, like most of Rainer's films, is always "ostensibly" about something. In other words, it engages models of juxtaposition and selection that reveal what might be the film's "real" engagement as opposed to what it proposes as "real." Doubling and tripling characters, disheveling tableaux and pillaging stories, Rainer disperses the cinematic illusion of "reality" into a shower of possibilities and ostensibilities. Playing the game with the canniness of a card shark, she shuffles the deck, bilks a few suckers, and reminds us of the shifty base of "value," whether it defines sexual relations, real estate, or human life. Rainer is not trying for some kind of well-mannered correctness or a masterly, fatherly notion of "transcendent intellectual clarity"; rather, she tends toward a type of tumbling process, an unbalancing of power, language, and the body. Avoiding goals, she cheats the conventions of realistic narrative and makes a mockery of masterly language. The Man Who Envied Women exudes a profusion of verbiage that is funny, brave, rude, and benevolent. The masters can make of this what they will, and some of us will continue to provide their lofty inabilities to grasp the goof with an accompaniment of knowing laughter.

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Yvonne Rainer, Notebook, 1981–1983

To live alone.
To arrive at a social gathering alone. (Desired by no one?)
To go outside in clothing not suited to the weather.
To say something that can be traced to someone else.
To have nowhere to go Saturday night.
To have no interest in Jacques Lacan.
To have no friend with a summer cottage.
To have no family.
To be dirty, to smell.
To have no interest in people.
To be gossiped about.
To be sexually betrayed.
To be ignorant of current popular music.
To be disloyal to a friend.
To gossip.
To grow fat.
To become middle-aged.
To lose one's beauty.
To be enraged.
To be deserted by a husband or lover.
To be inordinately ambitious.
To have more money than your friends.
To have less money than your friends.
To be different from your neighbors.
To not understand what is said to you.
To not recognize someone.
To forget a name.
To lose one's powers.
To go down in the world.
To be bored with one's friends.
To be thought of as superior to what one knows oneself to be.
To discover what one thought was common knowledge about oneself is not.
To discover that closely guarded information about oneself is common knowledge.
To have less knowledge than one's students.

Thoughts On Women's Cinema: Eating Words, Voicing Struggles by Yvonne Rainer, 1987

Polemics and manifestos having always served as spark plugs to my energies and imagination, I've been surprised when, following their publication, such statements were taken with what seemed to be excessive seriousness. Thus, in the mid-'60s, when I said "NO" to this and "NO" to that in dance and theater, I could not foresee that these words would dog my footsteps and beg me to eat them (or at least modify them) for the next twenty years. Such may be the case with my more recent stance toward/against/for narrative conventions in cinema. Raised, as I have been, with this century's western notions of adversarial aesthetics, I continue to have difficulty in accommodating my latest articulation of the narrative "problem" — i.e., according to Teresa de Lauretis's conflation of narrativity itself with the Oedipus complex, whereby woman's position is constantly reinstated for the consummation or frustration of male desire. The difficulty lies in accommodating this with a conviction that it is of the utmost urgency that women's voices, experience, and consciousness — at whatever stage — be expressed in all their multiplicity and heterogeneity, and in as many formats and styles — narrative or not — from here to queendom come and throughout the kingdom. In relation to the various notions of an avantgarde, this latter view, in its emphasis on voicing what has previously gone unheard, gives priority to unmasking and reassessing social relations rather than overturning previously validated aesthetic positions. My personal accommodation becomes more feasible when it is cast in terms of difference rather than opposition and when the question is asked, "Which strategies bring women together in recognition of their common and different economic and sexual oppression, and which strategies do not?" The creation of oppositional categories of women's film or video, or, for starters, film and video, begs this question.

For what it's worth, here is a list of useless oppositions. Documentary versus fiction. Work in which the voices carry a unified truth versus work in which truth must be wrested from conflicting or conflicted voices. Work that adheres to traditional codes versus work in which the story is disrupted by stylistic incongruities or digressions (Helke Sanders' *'Redupers'*, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *'Riddles of the Sphinx'*). Work with a beginning, middle, and end versus work that has a beginning and then turns into something else (Marguerite Duras's *'Nathalie Granger'*). Work in which the characters run away with the movie versus work whose characters never get off the ground (Rabina Rose's *'Nightshift'*). Work in which women tell their herstories (Julia Reichert and Jim Klein's *'Union Maids'*) versus work in which they parody them (Ana Carolina's *'Hearts and Guts'*). Work that delivers information in a straightforward manner (Jackie Ochs's *'Secret Agent'*) versus work in which information accrues slowly, elliptically, or poetically (Trinh Minh-ha's *'Naked Spaces'*). Work in which the heroine acts versus work in which she does nothing but talk (my *'Journeys from Berlin'*). Work in which she triumphs versus work in which she fails (Valerie Export's *'Invisible Adversaries'*). Work in which she is a searcher or dominatrix (Bette Gordon's *'Variety'*, Monika Treut and Elfi Mikesch's *'Seduction: The Cruel Woman'*) versus work in which she is a victim (Lynne Tillman and Sheila McLaughlin's *'Committed'*). Work whose heroines you like (Connie Field's *'Rosie the Riveter'*, Julie Dash's *'Illusions'*) versus work whose heroines repel you (Doris Dorrie's *'Straight to the Heart'*, Chantal Akerman's *'je, tu, il, elle'*). Work in which you nearly drown in exotic signifiers of femininity (Leslie Thornton's *'Adynata'*) versus work whose director can't figure out how to dress the heroine, so removes her altogether (my *'The Man Who Envied Women'*). All these films share a potential for political purpose and historical truth.

I could go on ad infinitum with these divide-and-conquer oppositions. There is one other example I'm not going to give equal footing with the others but will mention in passing only insofar as it bears a deceptive resemblance to the others: Films in which the heroine marries the man versus films in which she murders him. We have only to look in vain for recent films by women that end in marriage to realize what a long way we've come, give or take the baby. Marriage at the beginning maybe, but at the end, never. I challenge anyone to name one in recent memory. Murder, on the other hand, is a different story. As Joan Braderman pointed out last spring at the 'Gender and Visual Representation Conference' at the University of Massachusetts, in the past ten years a substantial number of women's films have been produced that focus on a murder of a man by a woman or women. To name a few: Akerman's *'Jeanne Dielman'*, Marlene Garris's *'A Question of Silence'*, Dorrie's *'Straight to the Heart'*, Sally Heckel's *'A Juror of Her Peers'*, Margaretha Von Trotta's *'Sheer Madness'*.

The phenomenon of man-murder in women's films points to the problematic of representing men. Do we wreak revenge on them (if for no other reason than the cinematic sway they have held over us for so long), turn the tables on them, turn them into celluloid wimps, give them ample screen time in which to speak self-evident macho bullshit, do away with them by murder within the story, or eliminate them from the story to begin with? Do we focus on exceptional men who escape the above stereotypes, or do we weave utopian scenarios in which men and women gambol in egalitarian bliss? Lynne Tillman and I pondered the question of whether it is politically useful to allow ourselves to be fascinated with men in our films even as we discussed the strange fascination with the 1986 World Series that had befallen the two of us along with every woman we know.

Following one screening of *'The Man Who Envied Women'*, a well-known feminist who subscribes to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory asked me why I hadn't made a film about a woman. I was flabbergasted, having been under the impression that I had done just that. But she, taking the title literally and taken in by the prevailing physical presence of the male character, had discounted the pursuing, nagging, questioning female voice on the soundtrack. By staying out of sight my heroine is never caught with her pants down. Does this mean the film is not about her?

It's also been noted that my female characters are not heroines. I would qualify that: My heroines are not heroic. They are deeply skeptical of easy solutions and very self-critical, constantly looking for their own complicity in patriarchal configurations. But neither are they cynical or pessimistic. The moments I like best in my films are those that produce — almost simultaneously — both assertion and question. Early on in *'The Man Who Envied Women'* the assertion that women can't be committed feminists unless they give up men is uttered as part of a conversation, overheard by a man in the foreground, by a woman who is testing her female companion by quoting yet another woman whose relationship to the speaker is not identified and who never appears. The two speakers are also anonymous and are never seen again once this scene is over. I, the director, am not trying in this scene to persuade my audience of the rightness or wrongness of the statement. What is important is that it be given utterance, because in our culture, outside of a convent, giving up men freely and willingly — that is, without the social coercion of aging — is a highly stigmatized act or downright taboo. The linkage of giving up men, in this scene, with commitment as a feminist, however, is distanced and made arguable through the device of having the spectator become an eavesdropper on the conversation along with the foregrounded male character, then distanced once more through quotation. "She told me," says this minor, will-o-the-wisp heroine, "that I would never be a committed feminist until I give up men."

Whether an utterance comes across as feminist prescription, call-to-arms, or problem- articulated-ambiguously-to-be-dealt-with-or-not-later-in-the-film is always on my mind in the collecting and framing of texts. If the experience of watching certain kinds of social documentaries is like watching the bouncing ball come down at exactly the right moment on the syllables of the familiar song, watching a film of mine may be more akin to "now you see it, now you don't." You never know when you're going to be hit on the head with the ball, and you aren't always sure what to do when the ball disappears for long stretches of time.

Which brings me to what might be called a method of interrogating my characters and myself when I set out to make a film. Thinking about this has been facilitated by rereading Bill Nichols' essay, 'The Voice of Documentary' which poses certain questions that are relevant to both fiction and documentary. To what degree are we to believe a given speaker in a film? Do all the speakers convey a unified vision of a given history? Do the speakers emerge as autonomous shapers of a personal destiny or as subjects conditioned by the contradictions and pressures of a particular historical period? To what degree does a given film convey an independent consciousness, a voice of its own, probing, remembering, sustaining, doubting, functioning as a surrogate for our own consciousness? Do the questioning and believing of such a film question its own operations? Does the activity of fixing meaning in such a film refer to relations outside the film — "out there" — or does the film remain stalled in its own reflexivity? Is reflexivity the only alternative to films that simply suppose that things were as the participant-witnesses recall or state them, or as they appear to the spectator, in the case of fiction films?

Finally: Should a film whose main project is to restore the voice and subjectivity of a previously ignored or suppressed person or segment of the population, should such a film contain argument, contradiction, or express the director's ambivalence with the film either directly, or indirectly, through stylistic interventions? Obviously, we can't afford to be prescriptive about any of this.

My own solution runs to keeping an extradiegetic voice, a voice separate from the characters and story, fairly active in every scene. It need not take the form of a narrating voice, although it often does. Sometimes it takes the form of a Til Eulenspiegel-like disruption, as when an anonymous woman enters the frame just before a troubling bit of sexual theory is enunciated, peers into the camera lens, and asks all the menstruating women to leave the theater. Sometimes it operates like a kind of seizure, producing odd behavior in a given character, as when the analyzed in Journey to Berlin speaks in baby-talk. Often it comes across in reading or recitation, which has the effect of separating the voice of the character from that of the author.

At this historical moment we still need to search out and be reminded of suppressed histories and struggles: prostitutes, housewives, women of color, lesbians, third-world people, the aging, working women. The method of representing these histories is a separate and equally important issue. I see no reason why a single film can't use many different methods, which is something I've been saying for years but didn't come close to realizing until *'The Man Who Envied Women'*. In this film fictional and documentary modes come into play more fully than in any of my previous work, offsetting the calculation of my still-cherished recitations and readings with the immediacy of dramatic and documentary enactment. These last are, admittedly, the strategies that offer the spectator the most powerful sense of the real. But reality, as we so well know, always lies elsewhere, a fact that we nevertheless endlessly seek to disavow and from which we always retreat. I shall continue to remind us of that disavowal by challenging reality's representational proxies with assorted hanky-panky. I hope others continue to do likewise and otherwise.

First published in the Independent (US) 10, no. 3

Excerpt from the epilogue of Feelings are Facts by Yvonne Rainer

"The shooting of my fifth film, *The Man Who Envied Women*, was marked by the coming together of cinematographer Mark Daniels and my French production manager, Christine Le Goff. They evidently hit it off while working on the film, Mark eventually moving to France to shoot documentaries and live with Christine. I still derive a certain satisfaction from their union, as I had up to then felt that working with me could not lead to professional advancement or personal fulfillment beyond the immediate situation. Just as I had to start from scratch every time I launched a new project, I was sure that a Rainer film was a comparable dead-end for those associated with it. So, you can imagine my surprise and satisfaction when I discovered their liaison.

(...)

Murder and murder of 1996 was another story. The diary I kept of the interactions between Martha and me in the early days of our domesticity was a virtual cornucopia. I set about transforming it into fiction: sharpening the dialogue, rearranging and whittling events, casting myself as the drag puppeteer/master of ceremonies. Kathleen Chalfant and Joanna Merlin played Mildred and Doris, two battling dykes who finally bore only a passing resemblance to Martha and me, with the exception that the Doris character was diagnosed with breast cancer and lost her left breast to surgery, which is what happened to me in 1993. (No recurrence as of this writing twelve years later.) The sets for *M & m* were the result of my having seen an installation by Ilya Kabakov at the Pompidou Museum in Paris and a collaboration with production designer Stephen McCabe. They veered from the funky realist disarray of Doris's cold-water flat to the "radical juxtaposition" of McCabe's inspired boxing ring, its canvas floor stenciled with cancer statistics.

As I sat in the editing room for six weeks lovingly toiling over my murder footage on the Steenbeck, I sensed it would be the last time I edited a film in this manner, perhaps the last time I would make a feature film. 1 had received my share of once-in-a-lifetime big grants; the awards program for individual artists formerly administered by the National Endowment for the Arts had been wiped out; and I was in the last group to receive grants from the American Film Institute. Getting *M & m* off the ground had been a killer: To fill key crew positions I found myself interviewing NYU-graduates who had never heard of me and were asking questions like, "Have you ever made a feature film?" I couldn't see myself going through this kind of indignity again. Peter Wollen once said to me: "They let you make five." Before the whole cultural and economic climate in the U.S. changed for the worse for low-budget narrative filmmakers, "they" let me make seven.

After traveling the usual rounds of film festivals with *M & m* I settled with relief and deep satisfaction in to writing poetry for a year, during which time a semester of teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago saved me from the tedium of writing grant applications. Following is a poem from a series of about thirty (I have no idea of their value; they have never been published):

FLAMINGO LODGE, FL
The heavy air
the shrill call
the unseen bird
the piercing reeds

I am as heavy
with foreboding
impervious to the light
as the sound
of one palm frond scraping

"Oh, that's just another pelican"

Thoreau said,
"If I could,
I would worship
the parings of my nails.

APPENDIX TO THE SCREENING OF 'MURDER and murder' AT 18:30 ON 21/11-2024 IN PALADSBIOGRAFEN DURING THE YVONNE RAINER RETROSPECTIVE ARRANGED BY TERRASSEN

I. Yvonne Rainer Muciz Lover by Douglas Crimp, 2006. II. Jonas Mekas on Lives of Performers, May 4, 1972 III. Yvonne Rainer, Part Two: Lives of Performers by Annette Michelson, February, 1974

I. One mispronunciation is spelled m-u-c-i-z, "muciz." Rainer came to call this her "mucus rant." The monologue begins with a description of *Trio Film* before the film itself had been made:

> "The most flagrant omission today [in the Lincoln Center Performance Demonstration] is a film that will be shot in a large white living room with two large white sofas and two large white nudes—one male, one female—and one large white balloon about four feet in diameter. The film is neither pornographic nor racist. The nudes never touch. They are either separated by the balloon between them or are apart in space. They walk with the balloon between them in and out of the frame. . . . Many variations on balloon- male-female relationships within a very narrow format. It is not a symbolic film, although obviously these descriptions suggest possibilities for metaphorical reading."

Eventually Rainer comes to the antimusic portion of her monologue:

> "That's right, I would like to say that I am a music-hater. The only remaining meaningful role for muzeek in relation to dance is to be totally absent or to mock itself. To use "serious" muzach simultaneously with dance is to give a glamorous "high art" aura to what is seen. To use "Program" moosick or pop or rock is to generate excitement or col- oration which the dance itself would not otherwise evoke."

The medium in which Rainer sees this bad symbiosis most clearly is, not surprisingly, film:

> "True: mussuck is rarely far (in time) from an above-ground film image, but in this case a hybrid beast has emerged which I shall designate as "movie-museek," a form that extends the image and merges with it rather than calling attention to its own quality or lack of quality. A conse- quence of this kind of subordination is that the closer movie-moozeek approaches cliché and mediocrity the more clarified its function in successfully interacting with the film image.... [M]ediocre music did not reach its zenith until the movies began to exploit the colossal talents of composers such as Dimitri Tiomkin and Henry Mancini. The range and depth of the explorations by these men into the hack-neyed nuances of sound stereotype and feeling-form correlations stagger the imagination. Their work makes all previous work in the same genre seem stunted and unambitious."

Rainer's change of mediums so that she could take on the repressed melodrama of her own life was multiply determined: by a six-week trip to India during which she followed the touring Kathekali troupe, by reading Shulamith Firestone's early feminist polemic Dialectics of Sex, by befriending the French cinematographer Babette Mangolte, who had recently moved to New York City. But her sense of permission to use film to take on the melodrama was filtered through her experience of the film avant-garde—she cites particularly Maya Daren, Andy Warhol, and Hollis Frampton. The ambivalence of her approach is captured in the opening shot of *Lives of Performers*, a type- written title card. Taken from Leo Bersani's introduction to an edition of Madame Bovary, the text reads, "Cliché is, in a sense, the purest art of intelligibility; it tempts us with the possibility of enclosing life within beautifully inalterable formulas, of obscuring the arbitrary nature of imagination with an appearance of necessity." *Lives of Performers* is a narrative of the "nuts and bolts of emotional life" "ignored or denied in the work of [Rainer's] 60s peers" done as a series of clichés, choreographed by the camera, the performers, and text. It culminates in what is announced in a title as "Final Performance: Lulu in 35 shots," a series of staged tableaux-vivants modeled by the actors and dancers of *Lives of Performers* on film stills illustrating the script of G.W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, which had recently been published in the United States.15 Each tableau is held as steady as possible by the performers for twenty seconds, after which they break to form a new tableau; as they begin forming it, there is a cut, and we see the next tableau. This entire section of the film is silent through tableau 28, after which the Rolling Stones' *No Expectations* is heard in its entirety. This is *Lives of Performers'* only music, a striking fact given that the film is full of dance images: rehearsals of *Walk, She Said*; photographs of Rainer's first narrative dance work *Grand Union Dreams*; a choreographed "succession of [three characters'] turnings toward or away from each other"16 in a schematic enactment of a man's indecisiveness; and, most famously, Valda Setterfield's solo with a ball—also from *Grand Union Dreams*, but here photographed at the Whitney Museum—choreographed after Nazimova's film version of Salome's dance. The Rolling Stones' music accomplishes in *Lives of Performers* just what the Camera Obscura collective suggests in its interview with Rainer in 1976:

> "Music in your films often plays a seductive role. For example, you show images without any sound, and they have a certain duration. As soon as the music comes in, the sense of time is radically different. You sense that the pacing of the image track will have a coherent relationship to the soundtrack. You (the audience) are no longer responsible (and feel relieved). The time passes faster, as it is marked and now quantifiable. So that you get a very sharp contrast when you are watching a silent image track, a silent screen in motion, and then suddenly emotive and rhythmic music is added. It's extremely effective in making the audience aware of the concepts of duration and expectation."

What is missing from this otherwise discerning analysis is that the sense of change of pace wrought by the music is, in fact, the sense of an ending. Of course, in *Lives of Performers* we already know that the end of the film is immanent because an intertitle has told us that we are watching the "final performance" and that that performance will consist of thirty-five tableaux. Still, the ten minutes of silent tableaux that we experience before the start of "No Expectations" seem long and slow, and "No Expectations" leads us, paradoxically enough given the song's title, precisely to the expectation of the film's end. The song is the musical strain that swells up to announce that the film has come to an end.

First published in *Grey Room*

II. The evening, for me, became a meditation on the cliche', on melodrama, on memory, on feelings, on language. It also had something very personal. It all pointed to some very personal experience of Yvonne herself, with man-woman relationships, doubts, re-evaluations, reconsiderations, questionings. It was a very personal looking into the meanings of one's actions, expressions, movements. Yes, it was a very personal piece about certain areas of experience that are not touched too often by artists because they are very difficult to tackle, formally. This content can be caught only by a certain kind of form, a form, that is very very dangerous, a form that can collapse on you any moment, leaving you with a pile of nothing. A form that needs a certain kind of fusion of the utmost rigidity and the utmost openness, and this kind of openness has always been one of the peculiar gifts of Yvonne's genius."

First published in Mekas *Movie Journal*
in the *Village Voice*

III. This is Rainer's first film, completed in the early summer of 1972. Its feature-length or running time is 120 minutes. It constitutes, of course, the decisive move back and away from the abandonment of directorial and compositional modes of work which had animated her two years of association with *The Grand Union*. Work on *Lives of Performers*, however, presented Rainer with a new modality of collaborative effort, and a gratification intensified by the production of a work which, though temporal, is remanent. Her principal, nonperforming collaborator for *Lives* was Babette Mangolte, whose exceptional skill as camerawoman is inseparable from the interest and success of this work on film. Lives departs from a rather long and complex "scenario" composed of material Rainer had been collecting for about a year. The tact of Mangolte's camera movement, her editing, evoke another subtly articulated presence, steady and graceful. Her lighting, moreover, endows the bare loft space, its paper screens, the props, the nakedness of things with a singular, reserved elegance.

The film is composted of parts, sequences or pieces which give it the total, compositional aspect of a "recital." And it cannot with any justice be described as an integral whole; its parts, while not wholly disjunct from one another, function as variations upon a number of given themes and strategies. Rainer's first use of disjunction is for the creation of a semblance of fictional continuity out of situations which are, nevertheless, experienced as largely discrete with respect to the notion of an enveloping fictional whole. The film then begins to project a series of variations upon its themes and strategies. The text, partly projected in titles, partly read off-screen, chronicles the complex interrelationships developing among performers during a period of rehearsal. One must remember that fragments of this scenario had been performed "live" together with commentary at the Whitney Museum, and that evidence of or reference to these presentations is present in the film—largely through the recorded laughter of a knowing and appreciative audience, recorded at performance time. The result is a very complex temporality. One has the retelling, by off-screen voices of past events, fictive in nature involving fictive versions, as it were, of the real performers who in recalling, under their own names, the events of that fictive past, make reference, from time to time, to real performances (that of *Grand Union Dreams*, or of *Inner Appearances*). The temporal complexity of this sort of superimposition will on occasion be intensified by the sharing or shifting of roles. A dialogue begins between Yvonne and two performers, Fernando and Shirley, later joined by Valda and John. Yvonne, the director, provides certain information, while Fernando and his fellow-performers discuss the nuances in shifts of feeling and of commitment which animate their complex interrelationship. These, while constantly being explicated, in that idiom of somewhat manic autoanalysis which characterizes life and love in a therapeutically oriented culture, are not always clear. John's role is particularly shadowy, and Yvonne announces at one point that she is going to assume his role. Although literary texts and cultural heroes are from time to time quoted and evoked, there is really one single mode of intellectual discourse which informs the "action" of this film and its "characters": that of psychoanalysis, in its latter-day, revisionist modes. Much of the material presented, then, in *Lives* is the stuff of bourgeois drama—and comedy—the succession of tiny crises and realignments, the small agonies and apperceptions of a milieu existing wholly within the area of performance and rehearsal, its cross analysis of motives and intentions expanding to fill its entire psychic space.

I have, in the first part of this study (published last month), referred to the reflexive character of the New Dance; and the manner in which its consumingly autoanalytical character is to some extent contingent upon the intense restrictedness of the social space in which it flourishes. Rainer, in this first film—as in the performances which preceded it—plays on psychological ambiguity as if, venturing for the first time to create characters, she wishes to preserve their concrete point of origin in a nonfictional esthetic context. Performers, then, preserve their names in the tangle of purely invented interrelationships. *Lives* of Performers is, among other things, the construction of a series of rather joyless marivaudages, in which protocols and autoanalytic exchanges are invested with the high-minded austerity of Sohoesque life. These ambiguities obviously spoke to a small though growing circle of enthusiasts with the trivial seduction of a roman à clef. Filled with allusions to private and not-so-private problems and agonies—some of these articulated, one suspects, through quotations from private journals and/or psychotherapeutic revelations, and apperceptions—the film's structure proposes, far more interestingly, the uses of such material, how they can be distanced, the extraction of the formal potential of these constraints and ambiguities. *Lives* begins, then, with a quotation from the writings of Leo Bersani on the nature and value of cliché, as a principle of intelligibility. One will not feel, as the film progresses, the full and clear deployment of this principle, but one will feel its intermittent presence, as the formalizing agent which replaces that of myth.

The first sequence of *Lives of Performers* is, however, not a performance, but a rehearsal by Rainer and her colleagues-characters for a future performance at the Whitney Museum. The repetitive character, a formal constituent, of the particular movement being rehearsed is echoed or confirmed by the camera's movement, perhaps the most active and sustained of the entire film. This movement describes, in a steady series of pans and tilts, a repeated quadrilateral form, discrete, but steady and relentless. The sound track is not audible until part of the way into this sequence, and it is slowly evident that the dialogue is extracted from another, quite different moment in rehearsal. It is as though Rainer is giving instructions (1, 2, 3, 4 . . . the beginning), setting the pattern for camera movement.

In this opening sequence, Rainer and Mangolte establish a series of variations upon a factor that is, of course, particularly interesting—central, in fact,—to dance film: the synechdocal mode of movement articulation through the ratio obtaining between close, medium, and long shots. Rainer and Mangolte are, on the whole, quite free and varied in their handling of group dance movement. One can isolate shots, for example, in which the total screen space is framed by a close-up of head and torso with extended arms, or by feet, at the bottom right or left of frame. The range of shot sizes from this end of the spectrum to that of long shot is full and complete. And there would seem to be a sense in which this variety is particularly appropriate to New Dance. One knows that Nureyev, in supervising the recent film and television versions of major works by Petipa, insisted upon the steady maintenance of the long shot. And there is a way in which the qualities of poise, of presence, ballon, fullness of gesture which characterize the balletic style in general and Nureyev's in particular, require the use of the long shot and the long take. That dance demands the spatio-temporal continuity of mise-en-scène to manifest itself in its completeness. For it is quite evidently not the fictions of *The Sleeping Beauty* or of *Don Quixote* which solicit, indeed impose, an integrity of cinematic illusionism. It is rather the representation of the balletic reality of the dancer moving in theatrical space which insists upon it. (...)

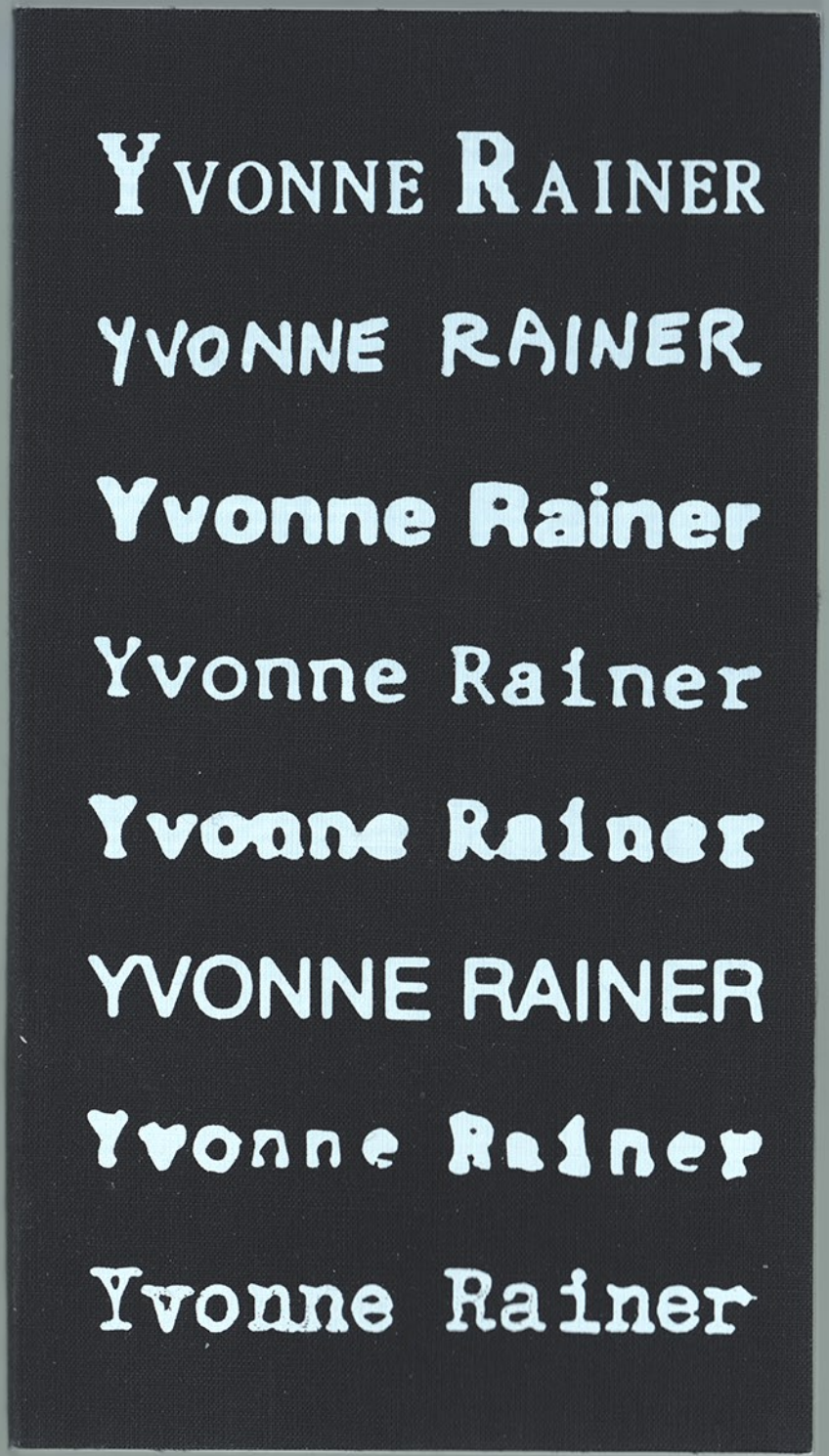
They are part of another fiction, and we sense from the trajectory of glances, the tension of bodies, the sudden changes in costume accessories, the extremely artificial studio lighting, that, in fact, they constitute another fictional world in which the impulses of cruelty, guilt, violence are played out in an entirely different register of intensity. They are, in fact, enacting moments drawn from another film, *Pandora's Box*, made by G. W. Pabst in 1928, after Wedekind's drama. They have moved, then, from the formalization of an archetypal domestic triangle seen as choreography, to the projection of a filmic work, seen through photography. For the tableaux are drawn, not directly from film, but rather from the stills accompanying the edition of the film's script published in 1971 by Simon and Schuster. The notion of cliché as organizing principle, as replacement for archetype, as mode of a possible fiction, has been radicalized and literalized in this final sequence: the psychological drama is wholly objectified in attitudes which succeed each other in silence, drawn from the photographic reduction of a moving picture. Music follows, and *Lives of Performers* is at an end.

First published in *Art Forum*

APPENDIX TO THE SCREENING OF 'LIVES OF PERFORMERS' AT 18:30 ON 27/11-2024 IN PALADSBIOGRAFEN DURING THE YVONNE RAINER RETROSPECTIVE ARRANGED BY TERRASSEN

Trio A

When it's right
nothing's like it
the pieces fall
into place
not a flicker
of doubt
mars the flow
of arm
into hip
into knee
into floor
then midsection
hollowed in triumph
the whole apparatus
its discrete minds
not impeding
the forward momentum
of practice
of object
no ritual here
the weight of the body
is material proof
that air is matter
and mind's married to muscle


YVONNE RAINER
YVONNE RAINER
Yvonne Rainer
Yvonne Rainer
Yvonne Rainer
YVONNE RAINER
Yvonne Rainer
Yvonne Rainer

PRIVILEGE

AN

YVONNE RAINER

FILMOGRAPHY

TERRASSEN AT LAST BOOKS

Content

All I can say is that my films, beginning in the early 70's, were all made when my imagination as a choreographer was winding down — I felt that dance was too limited to deal with political and social issues that could more fully be encompassed by the medium of film — My seven experimental feature-length films ultimately dealt with social oppression, inequality, and environmental and feminist issues and other matters that required a combination of the explicitness of verbal language combined with radical juxtapositions (to use Susan Sontag's term) of images in order to go beyond the range of my choreographic training and previous work — In the early stages of such filmmaking, I used friends and students, while later I employed professional actors — By 1995 I knew that I would no longer be able to cover the increasing expense of such work, so for awhile I wrote poetry — Then in the late 1990's, much to my surprise, Mikhail Barishnikov called and invited me to make a dance for his small company — I did not hesitate to accept and never looked back — Aside from script-writing and editing, which were solitary practices, my innate technological limitations and dependence on others' expertise had always frustrated me as a filmmaker — Returning to dance seemed the way to go.

— Yvonne Rainer

Wed, Aug 28, 2024, 9:02 PM

Preface

We are writing this on November 7, 2024. Last night, our retrospective of Yvonne Rainer's films opened with a screening of *Privilege*, on the same day as we woke up to the results of the US election. After the screening, much of the audience lingered in the cinema, engaging in conversations with each other across the rows. The sense of doom and dread had given way to something invigorated, hopeful and combative. After a while we were ushered out as *Venom: The Last Dance* was about to start.

Privilege was shown in a screening room built in the year of the film's release (1990) in the iconic Palads cinema in Copenhagen, which also hosted our own first screening five years ago. The room was added under the roof of this historical site almost eight decades after it first opened in 1912, when the former Copenhagen Central Station was converted into a movie palace.

Palads is deeply rooted in "the century of cinema", throughout which cinema was not only the dominant mass medium but

also the dominant metaphor. Today, the cinematic metaphor (of spectacle, illusion, distraction) is as critically present as ever, while the institutions of cinema as a mass medium and a collective experience are either in ruins or facing gentrification, as is the case for Palads itself.

Gentrification blues aside, such a situation presents an opening for a roving cinema such as ours to perform an intervention into the very apparatus of the moving image. Seize not the means of production but the means of projection: A crumbling movie palace turned multiplex can be the site of an Yvonne Rainer retrospective; all screenings can be for free, and the rooms can be packed out. The films can feel as urgent – if not more so – as when they were first made. The cinema is still a space that can be occupied by both *Privilege* and *Venom: The Last Dance*.

It is for all these reasons and more that Palads is, for us, an ideal site for a retrospective dedicated to Yvonne Rainer: an artist who came to cinema neither

by chance nor by choice, but through a detour from a different art form (as she explains elsewhere in this filmography), and departed it again via the same route 25 years later, leaving us with the seven feature films and a handful of shorts that we organised to screen at Palads from November 6–28.

Consider her titles: *Lives of Performers*, *The Man Who Envied Women*, *Kristina Talking Pictures*, *MURDER and murder*, *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, *Film About a Woman Who ...* and of course *Privilege* – objective, formal, precise but also playful, often from a female vantage point. These are films where there is always something urgently at stake. They want to talk to you about something that matters, and continues to matter. Rainer has always insisted on the cinema as the intended space for her films. Coming from a performer's tradition, her films are imagined "to be looked at by a group of people sitting together in a public place".

In the communal spirit of her work, Terrassen has invited a number of writers,

artists and filmmakers – along with Yvonne Rainer herself – to respond to her films in free form. The texts appear in the order in which the films were screened.

Our gratitude goes to Yvonne Rainer and all those who contributed, those who worked to restore the films, and everyone who came to see them with us.

— Terrassen
November 7, 2024

Valérie Massadian

Privilege

(1990)

Paris, Oct. 2024,

Chère Yvonne,

If only you knew ... if only you knew how,
35 years later, your *Privilege* still marks
the skin and leaves behind traces.
How it carries still, and with such accu-
racy, the breath that blushes the embers
of the fire that carries us all.
If only you knew how it heats my blood
and makes me want to blockade some
fancy avenue in one of the kingdoms of
capitalism to project it on a wall, right
there in the street, for everyone to see
and hear.
Your films grate, Yvonne, and that's why
I love them.
Your films disturb, Yvonne, and that's why
they're important.
Thirty-five years later, I have bad news.
The steps forward have been tiny. Just
phrases again and again.
That hurricane in people's heads that
we've been hoping for so long to rock
the world?
Still far away, despite our cries, our battles,
our films, our texts or our wounded bodies.

More than 50,000 women worldwide
were killed by their partners last year.
And when you have the audacity to talk
about femicide, people scream at you and
call you hysterical. You see, nothing new.
In your so-called empire of democracy,
41 states ban abortion, with only limited
exceptions, and 13 ban it outright.
With their hands on our genitals, they're
killing us again
In *Privilege* you/she says

"Man equals human, hero,
the active principle of culture,
the establisher of distinction, the
social being, the mythical subject.
Woman equals immutable matter,
procreative earth, landscape, monster,
spinks, medusa, sleeping beauty,
inert obstacle to its
transformative striving"

In your country, like everywhere
Women are killed because they are women
Blacks because they are blacks
Arabs because they are Arabs.

It's you and your biting *Privilege*, pressing hard on that ancestral hematoma, that make me paint it all black. Sorry.
I'll finish with something that's happening here. Terrifying and important.
There's a woman, her name is Gisèle Pelicot.
She and her husband had lived together for fifty years.
He was arrested four years ago for filming up women's skirts in a supermarket.
That's when Gisèle's life turned upside down.

That's when she had to understand that for over ten years, her husband had drugged her and had her raped under chemical duress by more than a hundred men.
On the husband's computer, neatly arranged, his files:
"ABUSE"
"NAME OF THE RAPIST"
"DATE AND NATURE OF THE ACT".

Fifty Mr. Everyman were identified, thanks to the videos and photos so well sorted by her husband. Fifty good family men, of all social classes, between 26 and 74 years old ...

While the courts wanted the trial behind closed doors, Gisèle demanded it be made public, and she won.
While the court wanted the videos and photos to remain behind closed doors, Gisèle demanded that they too be made public. She won. *"Shame must change sides,"* she said.
Her husband, the only one not in denial, immediately declared at the trial
"I admit the facts in their entirety. I'm a rapist, just like everyone else in this room. They all knew, they can't say otherwise".

"Rape was an insurrectionary act,"
says a man in *Privilege*.

I'm telling you Gisèle's story because it's not so much her courage that I admire, it's her will, the strength of her will. To say, to show, to shatter every word, every comfortable little construction that some people hide behind.
Because when a "foreigner", let alone a "non-white", commits rape, they all open their big mouths, trampling once again on the body of the victim they clearly don't care about.

Here, though, they're just like them. These fifty rapists could be them and it's unbearable, but Gisèle forces them to deal with it.
And she's standing tall, undefeated & strong! For herself and for all of us.

"I'm not expressing anger or hatred. I'm expressing my determination to change this society." I'm telling you Gisèle's story, because for me your films, and *Privilege* in particular, are inseparable from life.
Because each of your shots, whether they clash with, challenge or embrace each other, does nothing but question real politics, life, truth.
To you, Yvonne, and all of us, the Many Others, thank you for the strength your films give us; for their freedom, their audacity of form, of words, gestures and fractures, which nourish us and make us hungry for more!

Yours, V.

Translated from French by Stephen Mosbech

Contributors

Yvonne Rainer is a choreographer and filmmaker.

Mira Adoumier is an artist and filmmaker.

Amelia Groom is a writer, art historian and theorist.

Emily LaBarge is a writer and critic.

Babette Mangolte is an artist and cinematographer.

Valérie Massadian is a filmmaker and photographer.

Iman Mohammed is a poet.

Ursula Andkjær Olsen is a writer and poet.

Frida Sandström is an art historian and critic.

Emily Wardill is an artist and filmmaker.

Terrassen is a nomadic cinema organised by a constellation of people currently including Jeppe Sengupta Carstensen, Maria von Hausswolff, Therese Henningsen, Anne-Gry Friis Kristensen, Mads K. Mikkelsen, Mikkeline Lerche Daa Natorp, Jakob Ohrt, John Skoog, Wilfred Wagner, Frederik Worm and Tinne Zenner.

Colophon

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Terrassen
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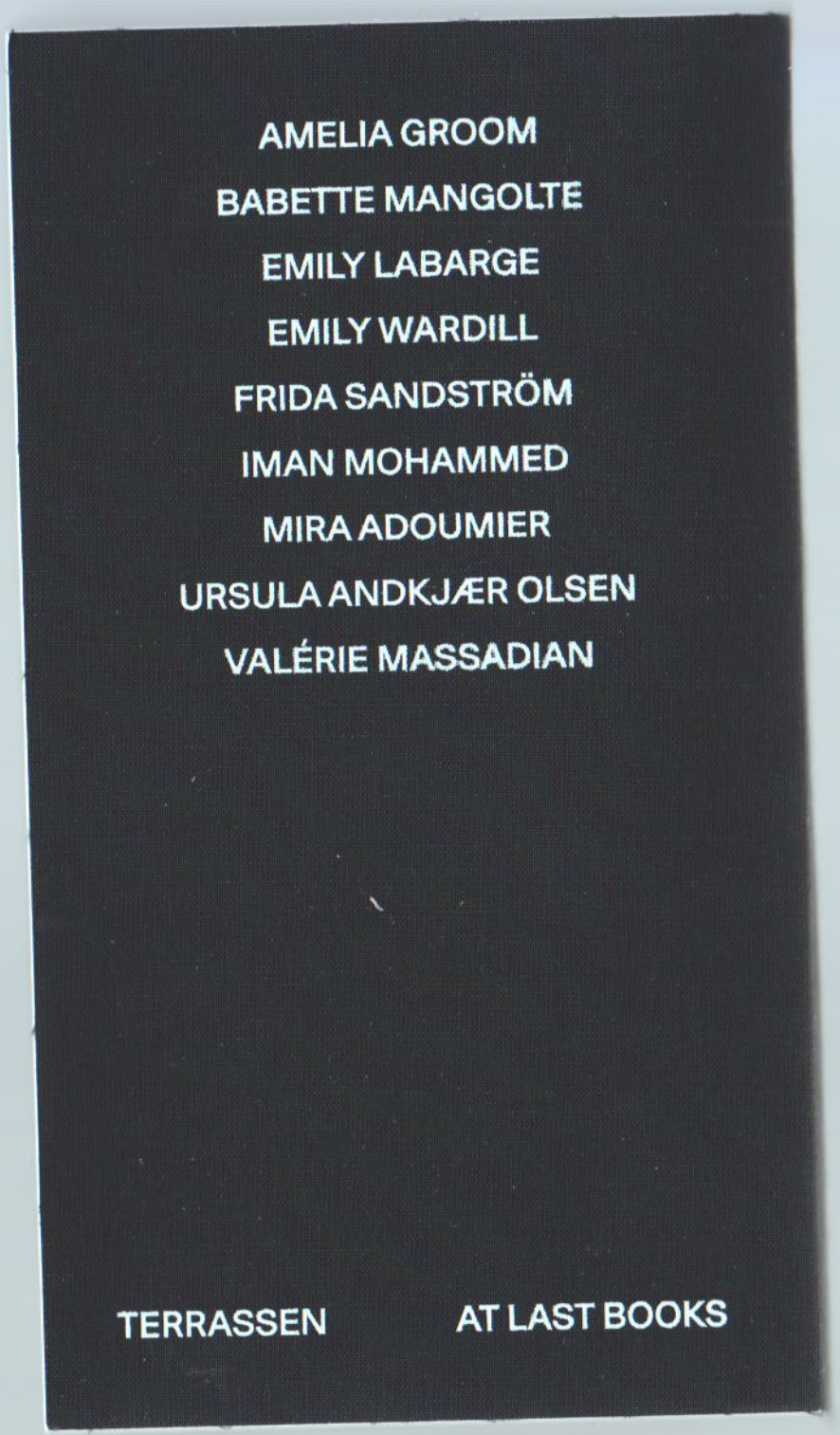
DK-2200 Copenhagen N
Denmark

At Last Books
Sturlasgade 14 J
DK-2300 Copenhagen S
Denmark


AMELIA GROOM
BABETTE MANGOLTE
EMILY LABARGE
EMILY WARDILL
FRIDA SANDSTRÖM
IMAN MOHAMMED
MIRA ADOUMIER
URSULA ANDKJÆR OLSEN
VALÉRIE MASSADIAN
TERRASSEN
AT LAST BOOKS