

The Aesthetic Lives of Performers: Rethinking Intermediality in the Films of Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann

Shana MacDonald, University of Waterloo

Abstract

This article reads together the work of Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann, as situated between film, performance, as well as dance and painting, considering what their work reveals about a specific intermedial feminist aesthetics developing at this time. It argues these traits in their work are not isolated commonalities but are shared with a wide range of feminist artists working in the 1960s and 1970s and are still echoed in contemporary feminist art. Further the article proposes to think through these intermedial relationalities as a mode of feminist aesthetics. It argues Schneemann and Rainer successfully extend the position of the female body in cinema beyond the traditional role as object to include both an embodied form of authorship, and a complex, affective performance of woman onscreen and provides the historical foundation and influence for my reading of the embodied, intermedial experiments found in feminist experimental film and media in the ensuing decades. The comparative reading of Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* and Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* index the artists' shared positioning of their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films. In my analysis, this aesthetic innovation actively engages with the different embodiments of the artist/performer, the bodies onscreen and the embodied spectator the films address.

The 1960s were a rich creative period in the early careers of both Yvonne Rainer and Carolee Schneemann. In this decade both Rainer and Schneemann established themselves as internationally recognized artists, performing and exhibiting for the first time many of their best-known works.¹ Schneemann and Rainer developed their formative aesthetic styles in response to major shifts unfolding in the New York art world at the time, including minimalism, Fluxus,²

¹ See Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who... Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1999); Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy: Complete Performance Works & Selected Writings* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co, 1979); Teresa de Lauretis, 'Strategies of Coherence: Narrative Cinema, Feminist Poetics, and Yvonne Rainer', in *Feminism and Film*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 265–86.

² See 'Experimental Women in Flux: Selective Reading in the Silverman Reference Library' <<https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/womeninflux/>> [accessed 20 February

Happenings, and performance art.³ They were thus informed by a space of artistic experimentation whereby artists 'were actively re-imagining what the work of art could be'.⁴ For Schneeman and Rainer, as Elise Archias importantly notes, this included a materialist oriented exploration and challenge of more traditional forms of modernism through their bodily practices.⁵ Further, it is important to point out how from early on in their careers, both artists notably incorporated different media into their environments, performances, events and choreography, including the use of moving image technology in conjunction with live bodies. This incorporation of an intermedial aesthetic is central to Schneemann and Rainer's work including their respective films *Plumb Line* (1968–1971) and *Lives of Performers* (1972).

This paper offers a comparative analysis of their work, considering how their film works in particular draw on their engagement with performance, dance, sculpture, and painting in order to advance their direct critiques at the representational codes and cultural conventions they sought to undermine. This comparison considers the types of formal experimentation they each engaged with and how this led to their different negotiations with Modernism, language, and gendered representation. My use of the term intermedial describes aesthetic works that construct an engaged relationality between different media. The 1960s mark the emergent use of cinema and moving image screens within visual art environments. This emergence is characterized most often as 'the beginnings of an "intermedia" condition', or a loosening of the borders between film and art practice.⁶ This emergence produced 'hybrid filmic objects, installations, performances and events' in place of traditionally separated forms of film, painting or sculpture.⁷ This sense of intermediality is present in expanded environments created by Schneemann and Rainer's art events, performances and films throughout the 1960s and are foundational for their respective film works in the 1970s and beyond. Their early work with intermedial environments and performances directly challenged modernism's attachment to medium specificity and in particular the constraints of the static frame within painting, theatre, which they both integrated and exploded within their respective approaches to film.⁸ Rainer and Schneemann explored the

2020] for more information on Rainer and Schneemann's participation in Fluxus (and sometimes alienation from) at this time.

³ See Rainer, 1999; Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotic's: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

⁴ Elise Archias, 'The Body as an Everyday Material in the 1960s: Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton', *Wreck*, 3.1 (2010), 1–5 (p. 1).

⁵ Elise Archias, *The Concrete Body: Yvonne Rainer, Carolee Schneemann, Vito Acconci* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁶ Tanya Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), pp. 13–14.

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ This is something Schneemann herself argues in her notebooks from 1958–1963, reprinted in *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 52.

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performing, represented body, and their own bodies in particular, as materials to be used in the service of modernist critique.

They both employ intermediality not only to offer this critique of modernism but also to further their distinct explorations of language as a cultural system of power and gendered representations on screen. They both successfully extend the position of women's body in cinema beyond the traditional role as object to include embodied forms of authorship that consequently work to destabilize the fixity of language and media within the structuralist and modernist frames of the 1960s and 1970s. Their representations of complex and wholly agential woman on screen provide a historical foundation for the equally embodied, intermedial experiments found in feminist experimental film and media in the ensuing decades.

My comparative reading of the two artists focuses in on Schneemann's film *Plumb Line* and Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* in order to index how they each explore, in wholly distinct ways, what Rebecca Schneider calls 'the explicit body' of feminist art.⁹ This is seen first in how Schneemann and Rainer position their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films, and second in how both artists directly challenge to the valorization of cinematic specificity so common within the experimental art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. This I argue, they both do in distinct ways through foregrounding the body of the artist as both on screen image and author off screen. This move, or what I term below the double gesture of the artists, pushes against the conventional fixity of the diegetic film frame and addresses the audience in affective and visceral ways. In my analysis, these two related aesthetic innovations actively engage with the different embodiments of the artist/performer, the bodies onscreen, and the embodied spectator the films address. In order to understand how their specific aesthetic approaches developed, it is necessary to consider their histories within this space and time of the 1960s avant-garde art scene in New York City.

Shared Histories of 1960s New York

In the winter of 1967 Carolee Schneemann and Yvonne Rainer both participated in Angry Arts Week — a collective event of happenings, performances, and art inventions in New York City protesting the Vietnam War. Rainer performed *Convalescent Dance*, a variation on her well-known work *Trio A* at the Hunter Playhouse. *Convalescent Dance* sought to connect the vulnerability of her body, at the time recovering from major surgery, and those of soldiers' bodies in the Vietnam War. The performance was not overtly political but rather proposed an empathetic relationship between her 'frailty and the condition of soldiers wounded in action'.¹⁰ During the festival Schneemann presented her intermedia performance *Snows* at the Martinique Theatre. This architecturally

⁹ Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁰ Ramsey Burt, *Judson Dance Theatre: performative traces* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006), p. 17.

complex performance art event combined performers and film projections with lighting and audio sequences controlled by audience movements within in an immersive environment. Her film *Viet Flakes*, which includes graphic images of violence against Vietnamese civilians, was projected as part of the performance. Schneemann brought these various elements together within the performance space in order to make the viewer acutely aware of the bodily consequences of war from their own embodied position as viewers affectively addressed by the performance.¹¹ Rainer's and Schneemann's performances took place in an era when daily images of violence in the media prompted many women artists to 'make work in which bodies themselves took on the status of media'.¹² Both artists' focus on their bodies as an art medium in these performance spaces formally contested the political apathy and conservatism present within dominant American culture at this time.

Rainer arrived in New York in 1958 from San Francisco where she had previously trained as an actor.¹³ Once in New York, she quickly gravitated towards a group of dancers who were experimenting with John Cage's practice of chance operations and incorporating the quotidian into their performances. Rainer was deeply influenced by both Cage and Merce Cunningham and sought to employ their ideas within her work.¹⁴ During this period Rainer choreographed extensively, premiering key works such as *Three Satie Spoons* (1961), *We Shall Run* (1963), and *The Mind is a Muscle* (1966) which included her most famous dance *Trio A. Three Satie Spoons*,¹⁵ a solo dance in three sections, developed out of workshops held by Robert Dunn at Cunningham's studio in 1960, where Rainer and others explored ways to *adapt* Cage's scores into choreographed dance.¹⁶ The dance includes Rainer's signature interests in placing everyday actions contra the psychodrama celebrated in modern dance at this time. Rainer writes on the impact of watching Simone Forti do an improvised dance during a workshop session, she states 'what [Forti] did brought the god-like image of the *dancer* down to human scale... It was a beautiful alternative to the heroic posture' that was prevalent in Rainer's training

¹¹ For a detailed account of this performance see Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT press), pp. 60–73.

¹² Pamela M. Lee, 'Bare Lives', in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), p. 140.

¹³ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, pp. 49–50. For a more detailed history of Rainer's move to New York see *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 151–97.

¹⁴ In an interview with Christine Iles, Rainer notes: 'The early 1960s was a very fertile time for intermingling of avant-garde activity in all the arts, primarily through the influence of John Cage; his writings about chance and Zen and silence affected painting, sculpture, dance and performance. Some of this activity took place in Yoko Ono's loft between 1960 and '61. Also, at the Ruben Gallery and the Judson Church Gallery artists like Robert Whitman, Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow presented their work'. See Iles, 'Life Class', *Frieze Magazine*, 100 (2006) <http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/life_class/> [accessed 12 October 2011].

¹⁵ Rainer's *Three Satie Spoons* is actually re-performed in the film *Film about a woman who...* (1974).

¹⁶ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, p. 55

at the Graham School.¹⁷ It was within these group studio sessions with Forti, her then-husband Robert Morris, and others that Rainer began incorporating pedestrian movements and the everyday into her choreography.

This interest was taken further in *We Shall Run*, where non-professionals and dancers dressed in everyday clothing run continuously in various patterned formations. The piece incorporated elements of the everyday (bodies, clothing, and movements) in an effort to counter the more elaborate staging and costuming of modern dance at the time. Again, the work was a direct response to the feted tendencies of modern dance — ‘the ecstatic, the heroic, the regal’¹⁸ — which Rainer recalls ‘seemed very tired to us, used up, effete’.¹⁹ In contrast, *We Shall Run* celebrated the ‘pedestrian, the quotidian, and the athletic’ body foregrounding it as an equally viable subject of choreography and performance.²⁰ Rainer describes a Robert Dunn course she attended where ‘all he did was present various examples of chance operations: mostly chance-derived scores created by John Cage, which could be adopted to dance’. From this course Rainer developed her ‘own movement tendencies’ which included ‘a lot of gesture’ as well as ‘sounds and sentences — not necessarily related to the movements that accompany them’.²¹ The favorable response to this work, and later on to *Trio A*, situated Rainer at the vanguard of 1960s minimalist dance. This alignment with minimalism was explicitly supported by Rainer’s publication of the ‘NO Manifesto’ in 1965 and ‘A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or an Analysis of *Trio A*’ in 1966.²² Both texts eschew the humanist and romantic tendencies of modern dance, adopting instead painterly minimalist principles into the realm of dance.²³

In the mid-1960s Rainer began using film, and later in the decade, narrative structures in her choreography. These particular explorations with film and narrative reveal Rainer’s growing tension with the minimalism she had readily ascribed to earlier in the decades.²⁴ These explorations and the tensions they produced greatly impacted the direction her film work would take in the following decades. Her earliest films made between 1967–1969 were projected

¹⁷ Rainer, *Work: 1961-1973* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design: 1974), p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Rainer, *Feelings*, p. 243.

²¹ This quote is taken from a lengthy letter Rainer wrote to her brother Ivan Rainer reprinted in *Feelings*, p. 204.

²² On the ‘NO Manifesto’ see Rainer, ‘Some Retrospective Notes on a Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called Parts of Some Sextets,’ in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. by Mariellen R. Sandford (London: Routledge, 1995); ‘A Quasi Survey of Some “Minimalist” Tendencies’ was first published in Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

²³ Rainer later notes that ‘the mantra of minimalist aesthetics’ required art to ‘eschew topicality, metaphor, reference, organizational structure’. These are tendencies that are clearly present in her dance works from the 1960s. Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, p. 28.

²⁴ Rainer offers a very candid account of the shortcomings of minimalism in relation to politics in *A Woman Who...*, pp. 130–34.

during dance performances and reflected her on-going interest in ‘the body in motion’,²⁵ as she sought to juxtapose the bodies moving on-stage with the more tightly framed bodies and objects in motion onscreen.

Schneemann also produced a significant body of work in the 1960s that established the major themes and what Brandon Joseph notes were the recurring formal concerns of her aesthetic practice in the ensuing six decades.²⁶ Schneemann settled permanently in New York City in 1962 after completing her MFA at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.²⁷ In the early part of the decade Schneemann developed her painterly interest in the human figure within and against the dominance of abstract expression at that time.²⁸ Schneemann cites the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, and Claes Oldenburg as formative influences on her experiments with what she called kinetic sculpture and kinetic theatre.²⁹ Her earliest work includes the action-environment *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions for Camera* (1963), the performances *Meat Joy* (1964) and *Snows* (1967), and her most well-known film *Fuses* (1964-67). Much of her work at this time explored ways to re-sensitize viewers to their bodily experiences and bring forward a politics of eroticism into what she perceived as a thoroughly repressive dominant American culture. Amongst her distinct interests at this time, it is in her focus on ‘liberatory politics’ that the influence of Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, and the later phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty are most clear.³⁰ The body in her films, photographic installations, and on-stage performances prompted a sensual awareness in the audience through tactile, material entanglements with other fleshy, visceral objects. Even at this early stage Schneemann displayed an interest in the energetic interchanges between performers on-stage/onscreen and viewers in the audience.

For instance, *Eye-Body: 36 Transformative Actions* is a series of actions of Schneemann’s nude body situated within a collaged environment made of mirrors, glass, and motorized objects. In response to her encounters with ‘a few artists... introducing real and literal materials to an extended canvas (or picture plane),’

²⁵ Quoted in Peggy Phelan, ‘Yvonne Rainer: From Dance to Film’, in *A Woman Who...* ed. by Rainer, p. 8; original quote in Rainer, *Work*, p. 209.

²⁶ Brandon Joseph, ‘Carolee Schneemann’, *Artforum*, May 2019. <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201905/carolee-schneemann-79501>> [accessed February 20, 2020] (para. 1 of 3).

²⁷ For a history of Schneemann’s early career and move to New York see ‘Interview’, *ND* 14 (1991), reprinted in Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 113–26.

²⁸ Schneemann’s use of the term kinetic is in direct reference to her own personal brand of collage-based work and performance which operates on the principles of objects and bodies in motion. For further discussion of these ideas see Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 125, 229, 251, 256, 261.

²⁹ In a letter from November 1961, Schneemann observed a move in the New York art world away from abstract expressionism, which she observed was losing popularity: ‘The gang, swinging on top of its own scene, has finished with FEELING’ [capitalization in original], and towards the Happenings, events and experiments of Oldenburg, Kaprow and Rauschenberg. She counts herself as being similarly aligned in her experiments with the latter three artists. Schneemann, ‘Letter to Peter and Collie Hooven,’ in *Correspondence Course: an epistolary history of Carolee Schneemann and her circle*, ed. by Kristine Stiles (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), pp. 51–54.

³⁰ Joseph, (para. 2 of 3).

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she chose to incorporate herself in her 'work as an additional "material"'.³¹ In 1963 these movements were photographed by Icelandic artist Errol to become 'a variation of the environment itself',³² *Eye-Body* reflects Schneemann's abiding interest in multi-disciplinary aesthetic environments and in positioning her body as the central subject of her artwork.³³ It also reveals how she sought out formal experimentation as a means of countering the constraints she experienced as a woman in the art world at that time. Schneemann notes:

In 1963 when I first came to New York City and began an enormous construction, there was already a sense of specific exclusion of my work because I was told it resembled in its rhythms and its density... Cornell and Rauschenberg and that these visual territories were already occupied and yet I had indeed a related sense of materiality and energy and density in the work so I decided I would motorized the constructions that I was working on because the men had not already done that. I began to see motors as an extension of both... technology and the energy of my body.³⁴

This prompted Schneemann to explore how to combine her body with the material constructions and became the impetus behind a work like *Eye Body*: body as extension of painting/collage constructions.

The piece established Schneemann's desire to move beyond the confines of the painting canvas and into more multi-dimensional aesthetic spaces. After *Eye-Body*, Schneemann continued developing performances in complex spatial environments that challenged the boundaries of media frames. *Meat Joy*, first performed in 1964, included live performers interacting with everyday items, such as fish, chicken, paint, and paper, and responding to a collaged musical score. This early performance reveals Schneemann's interest in undoing media boundaries, an interest that finds its fullest expression in *Snows* which, as noted above, combines sculptural environments, cinema and live performances and audience participation with complex lighting and audio scores.³⁵ In *Snows*, audiences entered the back door of a performance space through 'two floor-to-ceiling foam rubber "mouths"' and then crawled along planks leading from the stage to the aisles.³⁶ Once seated, the performance mixed film projections and

³¹ Schneemann, *Cezanne She Was A Great Painter* (New Paltz, NY: Tresspass Press, 1975), np.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Schneemann, *Imaging*, pp. 55–56.

³⁴ Schneemann quoted in documentary *Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Art in America* (Michael Blackwood, 1995), 10'50"-11'20" min.

³⁵ Schneemann describes *Snows* as comprised of 'revolving light sculpture above 20x15x4 foot rear wall construction in an open grid filled with plastic sacks containing colored water. 20x30x6 foot floor-to-ceiling collage of torn white paper. 75 white branches hung in semicircle from stage curtain rod. Manila rope, 2 bales of pink plastic foam, 2 silver planks, floor lights. Floor covering: plastic sheeting over silver foil. 4 contact microphones under stage floor. 30 contact microphones placed randomly under theatre seats. 5 films, 3 16mm film projectors, 3 sound tapes, 5 speakers, SCR switching system', *Imaging*, p. 82.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 77.

live performers in a dynamic power struggle that highlighted and then subverted the dominance inherent in traditional gender hierarchies and in the encounters between soldiers and victims of war. This mix of projection and performance reflects a similar interest between Schneemann and Rainer to juxtapose the bodies on screen and in the performance space in order to foreground the intersubjective relations between art, performer, and audience.

Schneemann and Rainer's paths crossed early through their mutual involvement and sometimes collaboration³⁷ within the Judson Dance Theatre, which played a central role in each artist's aesthetic development.³⁸ Both produced early forms of performance art through their work at Judson, including Rainer's *Ordinary Dance* (1962) and Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964). Both also began working with the film medium in the mid-1960s, most often as part of their performances and live events. Rainer moved towards film because: 'I wasn't so interested in narrative as a dancer, although at first I told stories while I danced but one of the reasons I began to think about making films was that narrative via Hollywood had been under-utilized in avant-garde film...'.³⁹ Schneemann notes that she was drawn to film because '[p]ainting was too slow... I needed the implicit energy of abstract expressionism to become more materialized, more dimensional... Film became another way to paint in time...'.⁴⁰ It was in this way that her film *Fuses* thus 'developed after my first performance works. My sense of time is now pushing the frames of painting through the exigencies and energies of my body into a lived circumstance...'.⁴¹ In both instances, Rainer and Schneemann were pushing against the media they identified with in their early training and incorporated film as a means of doing so. It is not to say that dance or painting ever stopped being central to their work but that film became a space for greater explorations of the limits of different media in conjunction with one another. Importantly, it is at this point of Schneemann exploring the potential of film that Amelia Jones locates her greatest interventions into modernist formalism. As Jones notes, Schneemann's work here is 'dramatically intersubjective' utterly tied to a relationship with the audience.⁴² For Jones, it is the emphasis on bodies that poses the key challenge to masculinist imperatives of modernist formalism which from criticism to structuralism is tied to notions of disembodied/disinterestedness of spectator and artist. Instead Schneemann successfully underscores 'the intersubjectivity of all artistic production and reception'.⁴³ Likewise, one of the

³⁷ Erika Levin, 'Dissent and the Aesthetics of Control: On Carolee Schneemann's *Snows*', *World Picture Journal*, 8 (2013), <http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_8/Levin.html> [accessed 20 February 2020], (para. 4 of 26).

³⁸ For an extensive overview of Rainer and Schneemann's histories at this time see Archias, *The Concrete Body*.

³⁹ Iles.

⁴⁰ Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 69.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 70.

⁴² Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 5.

intellectual interventions Carrie Lambert-Beatty makes in *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* is assert spectatorship as ‘a basic medium of Rainer’s work’.⁴⁴ I would argue that what Lambert-Beatty define at Rainer’s ‘phenomenological investigation of subject-object relations in minimalism’ offer an echo of what Jones outlines as Schneemann’s exploration of intersubjectivity above, albeit in entirely distinct ways.⁴⁵ These intersubjective modes of address directed to the audience are central to their film works, and places them at the early part of what I have outlined elsewhere as a significant contribution by women filmmakers who occupy an artistic place between film and performance, to experimental and avant-garde cinema.⁴⁶

Schneemann is overtly critical of society and in particular conservative social constraints that work against women’s freedoms. Rainer is too also critical of society and social conventions but is equally critical of herself and notions of stable forms of subjectivity more broadly. Whereas Schneemann’s enemy is 3000 years of patriarchal, colonial, militaristic and national forms of violence and suppression,⁴⁷ Rainer pushes back in her work against the belief in a coherent self and the coherency of narrative and artistic expression tied to it.⁴⁸ Thus, they offer meta-critiques of the 1960s milieu they worked within in different ways. With Schneemann the focus often centered on the patriarchal hatred of women’s bodies and how that was tied into the dehumanization of other marginalized bodies via war. Rainer’s work offered a focus on critiques of representational structures, as well as later on explicit power dynamics of race, class, sexuality of which her earlier concerns with meta-narratives and dominant forms of cultural discourse provided the groundwork for. For Schneemann the consideration of gendered language and cultural taboos against women centered on re-valuing Eros as a means of pushing back against violence and war. And within this, she embedded a critique of aesthetic structures of framing as correlates to such cultural forms of containment for both the viewers and representational bodies as static or en-framed images. Rainer’s concern with language explored questions of affect and emotion, more specifically cultural taboos against emotion.⁴⁹ This emerges within her critique of narrative structures and more specifically the genre of melodrama as it unfolds in both modern dance and then later in her investigation of classical Hollywood, she

⁴⁴ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, *Being Watched: Yvonne Rainer and the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Shana MacDonald, ‘Modes of Intersubjective Address in the *Central Character* (1977) and *Our Marilyn* (1987)’, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 25.1 (2016), 111–34.

⁴⁷ M.M. Serra and Kathryn Ramey, ‘Eye/Body: The Cinematic Paintings of Carolee Schneemann’, in *Women’s Experimental Cinema*, ed. by Robin Blaetz (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), p. 116.

⁴⁸ B. Ruby Rich, ‘Yvonne Rainer. An Introduction’, in *The Films of Yvonne Rainer*, ed. by Yvonne Rainer and others (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 4; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2002), p. 118; Archias, ‘The Body as an Everyday Material’, p. 4.

⁴⁹ For more a brief discussion of emotion see Rainer, *Works*, p. 108.

counters these constraints with a turn to, and emphasis on autobiography and the everyday as a means of formally refusing the totalizing myths of subjectivity.⁵⁰

In works such as those outlined above, Schneemann and Rainer equally challenged medium purist notions of dance, painting, sculpture, performance, and film, and worked tirelessly against the often masculinist-informed principles of critics, curators, teachers during that time. They individually confronted the limitations they faced as women artists through formal experimentation; this effectively transformed their critiques of their working environments into comprehensive counter-aesthetic practices. Their early work reveals different reactions to a set of aesthetic, epistemological, and cultural problems faced by women artists in the 1960s. Schneemann and Rainer's aesthetic responses to this period of art offer insights into the history of feminist experimental film and media and point to how they continue to manifest in the present. This differently realized set of aesthetic principles in both artists work perhaps finds its clearest expression in their film works from the later 1960s and early 1970s.

Intermedial Aesthetics in Plumb Line and Lives of Performers

In what follows, I offer a close analysis of Schneemann's *Plumb Line* and Rainer's *Lives of Performers* in order to extend the arguments made above around their intermedial feminist aesthetic, specifically within the realm of cinematic texts. *Plumb Line*, made between 1967 and 1971, is the second film in Schneemann's *Autobiographical Trilogy*. In the fifteen-minute film, Schneemann relentlessly manipulates and distorts images of herself and a former lover in order to examine more closely the relationship's demise. Completed in 1972, *Lives of Performers* is Rainer's first feature-length film. The film is composed of different sections including rich black and white images from a dance rehearsal; photographic stills documenting a performance; scenarios enacted on a theatrical stage without synchronized audio. These segments are intercut with a soundtrack of different voice-overs that, at times, describe the images while, at other times, narrate the intimate experiences of the performers. The narrative is based on a script that was part of Rainer's live work *Performance* (1972).

In considering both Rainer and Schneemann's films together I draw attention to how they both express an interest in the everyday, in the breaking of painterly and cinematic frames, and an emphasis on the embodiment of both the artist and the audience in order to advance their very distinct formal politics. This is most clearly seen in how Schneemann and Rainer present two very different notions of bodies and the everyday. Rainer's represented bodies are unadorned, stripped down, in motion, and located within the banality of the quotidian. Her interest in minimalism places an emphasis on the viewing environment

⁵⁰ Rainer, *A Woman Who...*, pp. 59–60.

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and a corporeal sense of immanence rather than the transcendence sought by high modernism. This can be clearly traced back to her move away from modern dance in her early encounters with Dunn and Cage as noted above. In an entirely different way Schneemann's work viscerally explores the tactility, sensuality, and pleasure of physical experience through a maximalist bricolage aesthetic. Schneemann's abiding emphasis on the human figure as an expressive material directly confronts the loss of figuration in abstract expressionism. This engagement with abstract painting 'actions' is something Elise Archias notes is taken up by Rainer and Schneemann alike.⁵¹ Both films considered here expand the intermedial possibilities of dance, performance, sculpture, photography, and film. Equally the two films encourage sustained interactions between the bodies of the performer, the spectator and the different art media evoked within the *mise en scène*. Through this they both challenge existing cultural and aesthetic codes and develop very different but lasting images of the artists body as a site of resistance on screen.

Plumb Line is a deeply personal account of Schneemann negotiating the end of a romantic relationship. It is comprised of photographic stills and film sequences of Schneemann and her lover (both alone and together), as well as shots of buildings, European plazas, beaches, and roadways. These images are edited into densely collaged sequences that are often split into framed quadrants onscreen. The images are reprinted on high-contrast film stock using deeply saturated color filters, giving the images a vibrant, textured quality. The images are counter-posed by an equally dense soundtrack of sirens, psychedelic rock, a cat meowing, unidentified moaning, and a recording of Schneemann speaking while under emotional duress. Schneemann is a key player within the *mise en scène* as the central character of the film. However, as the filmmaker and editor of the images she equally exists as an external observer retrospectively engaging with a past image of herself. This meta-authorial aspect of the film reveals Schneemann's important critique of how cinematic images collapse history, memories, and personal relations into the flatness of the representational frame.

Plumb Line begins and ends with a plumb line⁵² swinging pendulum-like in front of an image of Schneemann's former male lover.⁵³ The image becomes consumed by flames and burns on-screen. Schneemann's hand then enters the frame and inscribes the title of the film and then her name on the space where the burned image of the man formerly was. This first image of a photographic still frozen on screen is not just an entry point into the film, but is also an indexical

⁵¹ See Archias, *The Concrete Body*; Emily Liebert, 'Elise Archias's *The Concrete Body*', *Artforum*, February 2018, <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201802/elise-archias-s-the-concrete-body-73658>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁵² A tool that suspends a weighted object from a line in order to measure depth or verticality.

⁵³ The lover was a carpenter and thus the choice of a plumb line as a signifying object in the film corresponds with it being traditionally a tool of his trade.

framing of the film frame itself. The photographic still documents the mechanics of the cinema — still images running twenty-four frames per second through a projector and onto a screen. When this image is then completely destroyed, disappearing as it is being burned it offers a comment by Schneemann on the instability of the (projected) image. The viewers process of ‘consuming’ the photographic image is refused as it is consumed by flames instead. There is a violence to this act that forces the viewer to contemplate the meaning of the man’s image burning on the screen within the film. Schneemann’s inclusion of her own hand painting the title and signing her name offers an equally important visual intervention as it leads viewers to think about authorship and intention. Schneemann’s gesture of signing her name and title, filmed in real time, exhibits a claiming of the film and the space it occupies both on screen and in the site of exhibition. This sequence establishes a main theme of the film; woman’s inscription of herself (and her subjectivity) over the trace of the male image. This is strengthened by her inclusion of her body, a woman’s body, as the agent claiming this space. The gesture is both unremarkable as artists have been signing their work for centuries, and powerful as it documents a woman’s body functioning as the maker and not just the bearer of an image.⁵⁴ Throughout *Plumb Line* Schneemann reflexively counters the on-screen image of herself through the tactile formal process she enacts on the filmstrip. This builds on earlier experiments Schneemann undertook in *Fuses* (1967), the first film of her *Autobiographical Trilogy*. Of *Fuses*, Schneemann notes ‘as a painter I was free to examine the celluloid itself: burning, baking, cutting, painting, dipping my footage in acid, building dense layers of collage [...]’.⁵⁵ What is important to point out here is that for Schneemann the fact that she is painter and not filmmaker is what frees her to experiment cinematically. This echoes the intermedial approach she takes in *Eye/Body*, which equally builds a densely layered collage within the sculptural-photographic environment.

Her hand-manipulated gestures produce an aggressive, formally excessive intervention into her role as a represented object. Indexing the tensions between lived experience and social ideals, the film reveals an uncomfortable dynamic between cultural fantasy and lived bodies. As Rebecca Schneider notes, Schneemann’s aesthetic reveals how ‘woman has existence relative only to her representation,’ and explores the ways ‘woman stands beside herself [...] as a successful or failed, compliant or belligerent copy’.⁵⁶ A key example of this is found in Schneemann’s critical analysis of her image within the film’s *mise en scène*. A central image in the film is of Schneemann walking in a bright, colour-saturated Italian *piazza*. She repeats this shot as a way of launching a sharp critique of representation and viewing pleasure. In this sequence, Schneemann

⁵⁴ For a more extensive discussion of women as the bearer rather than the maker of the image see Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen*, 16.3 (1975), 6–18.

⁵⁵ Schneemann, *Cezanne*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Schneider, p. 51.

walks towards the camera, directly engaging the viewer's gaze. The framing, lighting, and angle of the shot make the action quite striking to behold — there is undeniable visual pleasure in watching Schneemann walking. This gesture is both an act of self-presentation and recognition of the everyday gendered performance of walking in public space. Foregrounding this within the film reveals her awareness that she is always already on visual display. In this scene, Schneemann mimetically re-enacts the traditional framing of woman as spectacle in classical Hollywood cinema.⁵⁷ In the reverse shot she frames a group of well-dressed men turning to stare as she passes by. The male gaze is indexed through Schneemann's editing of the footage. Catching the men in the act of looking, Schneemann reveals two long-standing forms of voyeurism that operate in cinematic framing and in men looking at women in public space. This sequence successfully interrogates the syntax of the female body through the specificity of the film medium.⁵⁸ Schneemann's camera appropriates and performs dominant forms of looking in order to reveal their visual excess. She blurs the distinction between the male gaze and the female spectacle by citing and enacting both in the film frame. By placing herself wittingly as the spectacle on-view, she is pushing an otherwise repetitive visual stereotype to a place of critique.

In *Lives of Performers*, like Schneemann's position in *Plumb Line*, Rainer's presence as both performer and director engages the audience from a position both inside and outside the diegesis. Rainer situates herself early in this film as a choreographer directing the actions of the performers of the title. Like Schneemann, Rainer establishes herself as the author of the film through both the image and the audio.⁵⁹ The first image of the film shows Rainer directing a group of dancers in a rehearsal. Rainer is heard throughout this sequence on a separate, non-synchronized audio track, giving the dancers directions. Her voice is very clear, engaged, and passionate while explaining certain moves and phrases to the dancers. It is a commanding voice that matches the strength of the choreography and the concentration of the group in the rehearsal space. Similar to Schneemann's signature at the beginning of *Plumb Line*, Rainer's directorial presence in this early scene places her in a position of authority over the images we encounter; it is her choreography and her direction that we are watching. The film was made ten years into Rainer's career as a pivotal figure in the dance world. As such, there is a certain degree of gravity to her presence in the film as well as a voyeuristic thrill in seeing Rainer-the-choreographer at work. This thrill is extended in a shot of Rainer and the group of dancers laughing together during a break. In this sequence

⁵⁷ Similar to the presentation of Rita Hayworth's performance of *Put the Blame on Mame* in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) or Marlena Dietrich's initial entrance on stage in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), Schneemann is filmed as the central figure walking towards a purposefully positioned camera.

⁵⁸ Mary Ann Doane, 'Woman's Stake: Filming the Female Body', *October*, 17 (1981), 23–36.

⁵⁹ Here the audio and image are placed in juxtaposition to one another, and are rarely, if ever in sync.

the viewer is a privileged witness to Rainer's process as an artist and the particular way she engages with others in the rehearsal space. This opening scene establishes Rainer's strong directorial presence, but also allows us to see her at work within her creative process. Together, this mix of authority and intimacy in the same instance brokers a familiarity between Rainer and the audience. As performer (Rainer the choreographer on screen) and author (Rainer in the voice-over), she does not stand beside her image within the frame but instead positions herself beside the viewer through the voice-over audio and takes them into her confidence as they view the image on screen with her. This move places the audience in a discursive exchange with Rainer as she speaks to/about herself as an image. Here the double gesture of Rainer both inside the film and outside the film, viewing it alongside the audience, garners the trust of the viewer by allowing them to see the quotidian experiences of the dance rehearsal. I would add that even if this 'behind-the-scenes' view of the dance experience is itself a choreographed performance, it encourages the viewer to identify with the voice over character of the 'real' Rainer. It establishes Rainer as both performer and observer standing alongside the viewer, commenting to us on her own artistic process. This experimental mode of address can be seen in various forms throughout the film.

In a later section of the film Rainer participates in a read-through of a script for her work *Performers*, revealing the intimate and idiosyncratic way that she positions herself as a vulnerable rather than impervious author. During the read-through Rainer reads a long quote by Carl Jung that was used in the documented performance she is describing. In response, Shirley, one of the performers in the piece, critiques Rainer and the quote as being overly righteous. Rainer defends the quote as being quite the opposite, however Shirley critiques both Rainer's delivery and her taking the quote out of context. Rainer responds, 'Well you know Shirley that I have always had a weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men'. At this point we hear an audience responding with laughter over top of Rainer's final statement: 'That's why I'm going at this concert so differently'. Rainer here refers to her attempt at a different form of storytelling. This final dialogue sequence is a clear example of Rainer's attempt to establish a dialogue both inside the film (as performer) and outside the film (as commentator standing alongside the viewer). She includes other voices on the audio to interact and contradict her position as author. Additionally, she allows those other voices to critique her position, thus allowing herself to be a flawed character both within the film and the author. Acknowledging 'her weakness for the sweeping revelations of great men' suggests a perceived weakness on her part and reveals her as a conflicted author engaged in an auto-critique. Again, this invites the viewer to see up close the self-conscious reflexivity that informs her process. Finally, her inclusion of the audience laughing over her work is an important example of Rainer's reflexive use of audio to reconfirm the viewer's position as part of the dialogue. In this instance our position as extra-diegetic viewers is mirrored (and brought into closer proximity) by the diegetic sound of the audience in the film. Through this audio Rainer creates a space for the viewer, acknowledging the extra-diegetic audio as an integral and interactive part of the film.

The Aesthetic Lives of Performers: Rethinking Intermediality in the Films of Yvonne Rainer

In *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* Schneemann and Rainer employ a double gesture enacted by each artists' inclusion of themselves in the dual role of onscreen image and off-screen narrator. Rebecca Schneider defines the double gesture as that which embraces both the essence and social construction of women's bodies, situating it as a useful formal device for revealing what is often masked or hidden by dominant representation.⁶⁰ By acknowledging women's bodies as both a construct and as materially specific, the double gesture unravels the gendered illusion required or maintained by dominant culture, and I would argue dominant representational codes in film and media. Schneemann and Rainer present themselves as participants within the films and as authors who externally determine the film's form. As such, they gesture towards themselves as representations while also as material bodies beyond their status as images. This gesture to their roles as authors outside the film frame is a common trope in modernist art cinema, often used to establish the filmmaker as an omnipotent commentator of the film. Notably, Schneemann and Rainer use this reflexive trope not to establish a position of dominance or omnipotence, but to comment on their status as images and to reveal intimate insights into their personal faults and vulnerabilities. This undermines the traditional assertion of the director's authority established by such a gesture in both modernist and classical cinema.

Double Gestures of the Artists as On and Offscreen

My comparative reading of *Plumb Line* and *Lives of Performers* indexes Schneemann and Rainer's formal explorations of what Schneider calls the 'explicit body'⁶¹ in three distinct ways. The first is Schneemann and Rainer's positioning of their own bodies in the dual roles of performer and author within their films. The second is their exploration of gendered representation. In Schneemann's film we see this in women's everyday experiences of objectification and in Rainer's through the vulnerability of self-representation and self-critique. Both films offer highly self-reflexive performative sequences that undermine or call into question the certainty of the male gaze and the heroism associated with the male auteur. Finally, Rainer and Schneemann in different ways manage to pose a challenge to cinema specificity through foregrounding the material practices of the body that pushes against the film frame. In my analysis, these three areas employ different types of bodies including that of the artist/performer, the represented bodies onscreen and the embodied spectator the films address. One reason I would suggest the everyday is taken up by both is perhaps as Schneider points out women are the 'public private', being both 'emblematic of the private sphere' of domesticity while being 'simultaneously the prime terrain of the given to be seen, the obsessional hub of *public display*'.⁶² Examining the lived everyday, from a personal perspective in both these films thus suggests both artists seek to interrogate this particular paradox.

⁶⁰ Schneider, chapter 1.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 71.

⁶² Ivi, p. 72 (emphasis in original).

Both Schneemann and Rainer's inclusion of themselves in this dual position of image and author reveals a central illusion masked by the cinematic apparatus — that of the separation between author and viewer. Schneemann and Rainer simultaneously embrace themselves as both performing image and embodied author, reflecting a shared interest in reconciling their presence as a body on screen and also as a voice off screen. The result is that the artists somehow stand beside the projected image and beside the viewer watching. This in turn requires the viewer to recognize, through the intimacy of their encounter with the author's address, their position as spectators. This shared formal approach reflects a broader concern in the 1960s avant-garde to promote a direct engagement between spectator, art object and artist. Unlike the more dominant reflexive authorial position in 1960s films, like those of Jean-Luc Godard, that speak *at* rather than *with* an audience (often from a place of physical and moral remove), Rainer and Schneemann seek an intimate dialogue that is based on mutual vulnerability of artist and audience. The viewer can no longer maintain a position of distance and voyeuristic superiority when being addressed by a speaker who acknowledges her own internal conflicts and challenges. This double position within the films provides a complex and affective expression of authorial reflexivity. Rainer and Schneemann's dual presence as image and voice, performer and external director, guide the viewers' engagement with the images on screen. Schneemann and Rainer address the audience, standing beside them, requiring the audience to participate in a dialogue with them. This dialectic form of address seeks to break the divide between audience and screen, viewer, filmmaker and text as well as the on and off-screen space that structures the viewing environment. It is in this way that both artists successfully assert the body, in differing forms, as a key element in formally refiguring the spatial relations between image on screen and spectator in the viewing space.

Schneemann and Rainer's separate artistic responses to their shared milieu has had a profound impact on the direction of feminist avant-garde film, media, dance and performance art over the ensuing five decades. In singling out Rainer and Schneemann in this article, I seek to reconfirm their importance as early figures in the history of feminist experimental film and media. As many of the crucial early feminist connections between both artists have been rendered invisible within the history of feminist art, film, and performance criticism it is necessary to point out these overlaps whether intentional on the part of the artists or not. What I hope future scholarship on feminist experimental media directs its attention to is how feminist artists have further expanded these explorations into quotidian, intermedial, and embodied modes of representation across media as forms of feminist interventions into dominant and reigning aesthetic demands placed upon women and other marginalized artists.