How We Remember

Judson Dance Theater at MoMA

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THAT TIME, THIS TIME

In her autobiography *Feelings Are Facts*, choreographer Yvonne Rainer recalls an early brush with notoriety. She received a call from *Harper's Bazaar* hoping to include her in their list of "100 Women of Accomplishment." Asked the question "What do you value most?" she responded, "Being a part of one's time." The magazine missed her point and, instead, credited her with caring deeply about "Using one's time well."[1]

From 1963–65, Greenwich Village's most progressive ministry, Judson Memorial Church, hosted a group of young dancers—alongside poets, painters, community activists, and its parishioners—who did appear to be uniquely of their time. Much as across the United States people were bucking cultural mores and challenging systems of political and social organization, these dancers were upending the traditions they were handed, redefining what was understood as dance and the experience of the concert stage. As with artists before them, they linked their creative experimentation to larger cultural and political shifts. Different than other collective creative projects, they did not articulate their experimentation as a movement, they did not have a manifesto, and they did not set out to make revolution.[2] Though utopic and rebelling against its history, their dances were experiments anchored in their present, in the moments of creating and performing.

The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done* is centrally an invocation of the zeitgeist of that historical moment and the artists who helped shape it. Written into the show's title as well as the curation as a whole, the exhibition's implicit inquiry is: how do we look back from where we are; what does that time tell us about our times? And for those who accept the invitation: what might the creative action of that fertile and contentious era ask us of being and acting in our own?

PAJ 122 (2019), pp. 58–68.
doi:10.1162/PAJJ_a_00471

HOW WE REMEMBER

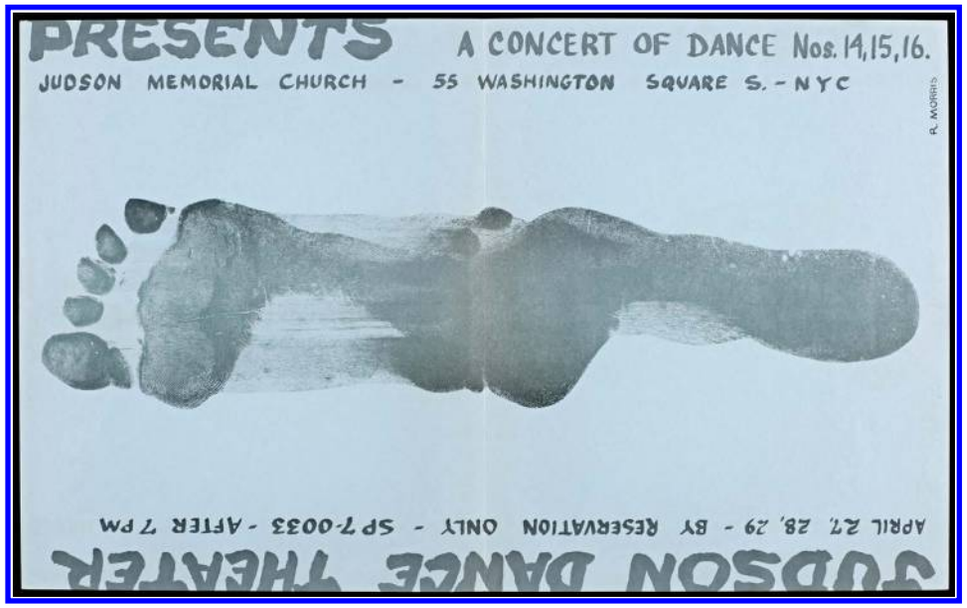
Judson Dance Theater's three years of existence are perhaps the most historicized moment in twentieth-century American dance, and the MoMA retrospective is far from the first look back at that history. (There has, in fact, been some amount of Judson fatigue among downtown dancemakers, especially since 2013, Judson dance's fiftieth anniversary year.) Until the MoMA show, these retrospective projects have been largely organized by dance institutions and artists. Each has its own focus and approach. However, they share an interest in the effects of Judson's legacy on the practices of contemporary artists. They were dominated by performances and conversations, especially between generations of artists; archival materials were sparse. As the MoMA exhibition becomes one of the most prominent sources of Judson history, how do its retrospective strategies and interests differ from past efforts to consider the importance of that history to today's artists and culture?

The Bennington College Judson Project is a prominent early retrospective project. Organized by three Bennington faculty members—Wendy Perron, Tony Carruthers, and Daniel J. Cameron—in the early 1980s, it included filmed interviews and led to an exhibition at New York University's Grey Art Gallery, with accompanying print publication and performances at St. Mark's Church, Judson's neighbor and the home of Danspace Project. The program included artists from the original Judson cohort restaging works from the sixties.[3] The Bennington archive was often cited in the MoMA show, including video of assistant minister Al Carmines giving one of the most deeply felt testimonies to the importance of dance in community and spiritual life.[4] Bennington College has no information this project on their website. Videos from the performance evenings are held by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, though there is no place to access an overview of the project as a whole.

Since 2010, on either side of Judson Dance Theater's fiftieth anniversary, there has been a spate of programs revisiting Judson's history and its effects on contemporary dance and art. In 2012, Danspace Project, headed by Judy Hussie-Taylor, presented a multi-week program entitled *Judson Now*. To look back, the program presented the current work of the artists who had participated in Judson, further contextualizing their work with "artists who influenced Judson pre-1962 and contemporary artists who claim Judson as a direct point of reference."[5] The catalogue that accompanies the show is dominated by conversations, also by contemporary artists, scholars, and curators speaking with Judson-affiliated artists. The implicit perspective of this curatorial approach is that this is living history and that what is essential is not what happened so much as what it has and may become. Like the Bennington project, it is nearly impossible to find information about the *Judson Now* programming online, another consequence of the limited resources

Peter Moore's photograph of (from left) Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Schlichter (hidden), Sally Gross, Tony Holder, Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer, Alex Hay, Robert Morris (behind), and Lucinda Childs performing Rainer's *We Shall Run*, 1963. Performed at Two Evenings of Dances by Yvonne Rainer, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, March 7, 1965. © Barbara Moore/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Yvonne Rainer, *We Shall Run*, 1963. Performed in *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019. Performers: Brittany Bailey, Patrick Gallagher, Iréne Hultman, Abigail Levine, Omagbitse Omagbemi, Louisa Pancoast, Emmanuèle Phuon, Damani Pompey, Suzzanne Ponomarenko, Heather Robles, Mary Kate Sheehan, Timothy Ward. Digital image © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court.



Poster for Judson Memorial Church presents *Concerts of Dance #14, #15, and #16*. April 27, 28, and 29, 1964. Offset print. 10 3/16 × 16 9/16" (25.8 × 42 cm). Yvonne Rainer Papers Archive, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles (2006.M.24).

Lucinda Childs, *Particular Reel*, 1973. Performed in Lucinda Childs: Early Works, 1963–78, as part of *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019. Performer: Lucinda Childs. Digital image © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court.

of dance institutions and their traditional lack of prioritization of the material archive. Danspace's practice of publishing catalogues alongside their *Platforms* performance series is a major addition to archival material of contemporary U.S. dance, a clear adoption from visual art convention.

For four months at the end of 2012, the New Museum hosted "Movement Research: Rethinking the Imprint of Judson Dance Theater Fifty Years Later," a program of residencies, discussions, and informal performances.[6] The program was conceived by Travis Chamberlain, the New Museum's Public Programs Coordinator (much dance and theater in museums has been organized, and financed, through education and community outreach departments) with Barbara Bryan and Levi Gonzalez, Executive Director and Programming Advisor of Movement Research. The New Museum programming functioned as a live experiment. Those who showed up for a discussion of Judson's legacy determined questions that would guide a selection of artists who then created new works from these prompts with open rehearsals and workshop performances taking place in the museum only weeks later. The discussions were wonderfully gossipy and the performances invigorating and messy. It felt like an especially fun secret, taking place as it did in the basement of the museum. The structure of the programming was thoughtful and well-researched. Yet, in its aim to prioritize the experimentation of Judson's legacy, which critics noted failed as often as it succeeded, the resulting public events had an appealing, and likely reminiscent, anarchic quality to them.

In 2010, Joanna Steinberg partnered with New York University's Fales Library, a repository of New York City's radical history, on the exhibition *Judson Memorial Church and the Avant-Garde 1955–1977*. The exhibition was accompanied by "Two Performances in Honor of Judson, A Sanctuary for the Arts." The program focused more on the radical church as the context for the dancers' experimentation, how the politics of the congregation was integral to understanding the art produced within its halls.[7] The program included Rainer performing *Trio A*, *Geriatric with Talking*—her own sharp and self-effacing response to the question of keeping old material relevant—as well as composer Malcolm Goldstein, and works by Remy Charlip, Elaine Summers, Aileen Passloff, and Carolee Schneemann. Looking back at the Judson artists as one manifestation of the church's outreach and commitments—the ethos and aesthetic of that community—adds something essential to the understanding of Judson Dance that has been somewhat lost in those retrospectives focused more narrowly on the artists and their performance works. Fales Library surely has a comprehensive archive of the materials from this exhibition, but once again, there is little to lead you there online if you do not know to go looking.

If you count projects that are not official Judson retrospectives, the number of related programs is even greater. And that just refers to New York City. A second

project by dancer-writer Wendy Perron with dance scholar Ninotchka D. Bennahum and art historian Bruce Robertson, *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955–1972*, was a 2017 exhibition at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts with a "series of associated events [lectures and performances] around the city."[8] The look of the *Radical Bodies* gallery was not unlike that of the MoMA show on a more intimate scale, lots of black-and-white documentation with contextualizing text. However, the priorities of a dancer, a female dancer's, curatorial eye was evident, reflected in the framing statement: "Placing the body and performance at the center of debate, each developed corporeal languages and methodologies that continue to influence choreographers and visual artists around the world to the present day, enabling a critical practice that reinserts social and political issues into postmodern dance and art."[9] The argument of this exhibition is really that the radical invention and its cultural impacts can be traced to the corporeal work—choreographic and somatic—of these women. This work is evident but not explicit in the MoMA show, especially the attention to somatic practice. The curation of the MoMA exhibition is deeply caring and well-researched, informed by consultation with the Judson dance artists and others in the field. The fact that none of the exhibition's curators has a background in dance remains palpable throughout the show.

In the MoMA atrium itself choreographer Ralph Lemon's curated *some sweet day*, a series of performances, which included Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay, both identified for their Judson affiliation. In *Dancers, Buildings, and People in the Street*, again at Danspace Project, dance critic and poet Claudia LaRocco made blind dates between choreographers connected to Judson and Merce Cunningham's legacies with dancers from New York City Ballet. Like *Judson Now* and the New Museum program, both of these projects emphasized the living, transformed history in the work of artists today. Through their selection of artists and curatorial questions, they also both responded to what was likely the largest blind spot in Judson's collective politics, the sparse inclusion of artists of color and lack of acknowledgment of the contributions of these artists' work to the development of experimental practices in dance, music, and art.[10] The MoMA show provides important documentation of the contemporaneous experimentation among Black artists in the creative territories for which Judson is recognized, as well as showing many instances of cross-pollination and collaboration. It was heartening to see creative music improvisers Cecil Taylor and Bill Dixon's work considered alongside Judson dance improvisers—many Judsonites were regulars at The Five Spot, and the musicians appeared on the Judson Dance concerts—as well as to see Amiri Baraka (née Leroi Jones) and Diane diPrima's publication *The Floating Bear* recognized as another critical source for Judson history alongside Jill Johnston's definitive chronicling. These inclusions helped—yet more could be done—to deepen and nuance the narrative of the sixties downtown scene.

David Gordon. *THE MATTER @ MOMA/2018*. 2018. Performance. Performed in *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019. Performers: Valda Setterfield, Wally Cardona. Digital image © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court.

Simone Forti. *Accompaniment for La Monte's "2 sounds" and La Monte's "2 sounds."* 1961. Performance with natural fiber rope and sound. Committee on Media and Performance Art Funds. Performed in *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019. Performer: Christiana Cefalu. Digital image © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Paula Court.

Because of its reputation and resources, the MoMA exhibition and archive will likely become the definitive source of Judson history and legacy. The research, loving and exhaustive, that undergirds the show is unprecedented. The catalogue is a trove of archival material and sources, and thoughtful critical readings of the artists and the questions their work raises. And the performance series, the chance to see these storied works revived and reconsidered, has been a singular pleasure, one largely out of reach of the much smaller-budgeted dance institutions. MoMA does a great service to this history. We are yet better served if we consider the museum's retrospective alongside these other projects and approaches. If we lose the multiplicity and the perspective of the way dance practitioners stage their relationships to this history, it risks becoming flattened and disembodied. This will require commitment because, as noted, the programs I've reviewed here have far fewer resources to keep them in the public eye.

And returning to the galleries, dance in museums is here, at least for now, in some abundance. In the fall of 2018, between the seven performance programs and workshops of the Judson show, plus the Bruce Naumann exhibition, I would hazard a guess that the Museum of Modern Art (inclusive of PS1) has been one of the largest employers of dancers in New York City. Dance scholars and artists have written over the last number of years about the practicalities, ethics, and curatorial considerations of bringing performance—and performers—into museum galleries. Danielle Goldman, a dancer and performance studies scholar, has been a consistent voice inserting the concerns, practical and aesthetic, of dance and dancers into a visual art context.[11] Forthcoming is choreographer-turned-art historian Megan Metcalf's monograph on the details and complexities of MoMA's acquisition of Simone Forti's *Dance Constructions*.[12] And happily contemporaneous with the exhibition is an essay by Catherine Damman, an art historian who also began life as a dancer. Writing the lead article on the MoMA exhibition for *Artforum*, Damman sensitively reframes—but without mincing words—the relationship of dance to the museum:

> So the real question is not what we want, but what do we owe? The work that is truly never done is that circadian, grisly shuttling from desire to ethical obligation and back again. Modest demands might look something like this: Pay attention to dancers, to dancing itself, and to the specificities of dance history and forms. Better yet, just follow Paxton's lead and pay dancers.[13]

DO IT AND MOVE ON

Since 2014, I have learned four of Yvonne Rainer's dances, including two solos that share the choreographer's distinctive movement palette, though Rainer has

rarely been identified for this aspect of her work. Like *Trio A*, her most frequently performed work, *Talking Solo* (which I and five others performed at MoMA) is composed of a string of discrete, full-bodied movements, connected by neither physical nor thematic logic. They are each an independent assignment for the dancer set in sequence. Rainer is specific about how the choreography is performed—not too "dancey" (relying on flourishes or emphasizing the movement's virtuosity); rhythms and facial focus tend not to be emphatic, though clear; the performer refrains from "interpreting" the movement, from using expression to direct the viewer's understanding of a given gesture or pose.[14] However, her most frequent directive is about the timing of the movement. The dancer should neither hold the movement, as if giving time for a photograph, nor meld a sequence of them (her word is "slur") into a single, continuous phrase. Simply do each movement, singular and complete, and then move on to the next. This seems like one more link between Rainer's approach to dance and the visual artists in her milieu. The discreetness of each movement makes the dances more object-like than musical. But centrally, this is an approach to time, which has a set of values connected to it. Do not linger; do not hold onto what is passing nor anticipate what is about to come; one moment followed by one more and one more. This makes me think of the spirit of Judson Dance Theater; "do it and move on" reflects much of what the artists and chroniclers say of that time—they did not know what they were creating, but they went at it with gusto; forces economic, art historical, and political converged to create a particular moment of experimentation and change; it was all over quickly.[15]

How could an exhibition pay tribute to this? What would it look like to craft a retrospective that doesn't try to hold on? Really it's a catch-22, the central paradox of dance and legacy—to look back and preserve, at the same time to let go and move on, to resist letting the dances turn into historical objects. This is a question museums are going to have to contend with as they bring dance further into their institutional structures. If we add to this the provocation suggested by the exhibition's curation, to consider what Judson's creative action asks of us today, where does that leave us? Perhaps: To proceed with the curious and bold spirit of uncompromising experimentation—and always in community; to work with reverence and irreverence in relation to received traditions; to insist on the symbiotic relationship of aesthetic-cultural and social-political bravery and change; and to acknowledge, study, and support the profound work that can only be done through the body, through dance.

NOTES

1. Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 280.

2. The Judson dance artists "never wrote a definitive statement declaring their collective intentions," notes MoMA curator Thomas J. Lax in his essay for the exhibition catalogue. The spirit of the group was "To collaborate, to inquire rather than take a position." The manifesto Judson Dance Theater is most associated with, Rainer's "No Manifesto," was created in relation to a specific work *Parts of Some Sextets* and, further, has been granted too much interpretive weight, according to Rainer, in regard to the aesthetic and politics of Judson dance as a whole. See: Rainer, "Parts of Some Sextets," *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Winter 1965. Thanks to Pat Catterson for providing the citation. Thomas J. Lax, "Allow me to begin again," *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 15.

3. Jack Anderson, "Judson Revisited with Liberties Taken," *The New York Times*. Accessed January 15, 2019. http://www.nytimes.com/1982/04/22/arts/dance-judson-revisited-with-liberties-taken.html

4. "Modern dance had more to do with the change in the worship of this church than any other art form. Because we began to see how abstract movement, and silence, and sounds of music and people relating and then not relating had to do with a lot of form in worship. We had always kind of stressed the word in worship. You know, you always had to speak. And seeing an art form that did not rely on the spoken word and that did not rely on a story opened up our whole hearts to the idea of religious truth in a very new way." Al Carmines, Video documentation. Bennington College Judson Project. *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 16, 2018–February 3, 2019.

5. Platform 2012: Judson Now. Danspace Project. Program text. Accessed January 5, 2019. http://www.danspaceproject.org/2012/09/04/platform-2012-judson-now/

6. Movement Research in Residence: Rethinking the Imprint of Judson Dance Theater Fifty Years Later September–December 2012. New Museum. Exhibition text. Accessed January 5, 2019. https://www.newmuseum.org/pages/view/movement-research

7. The exhibition text lays out, "*A Sanctuary for the Arts* explore the synergies between the artists who performed at Judson Memorial Church in the 1960s and 70s and the church ministry and congregation in Greenwich Village during this tumultuous period of political and social ferment. It offers social context for understanding this unique collaboration, against the background of the various social movements of the 1960s involving Free Speech, Women's Liberation, Gay Rights, Liberation Theology, and the movement against the war in Vietnam." *A Sanctuary for the Arts: Judson Memorial Church and the Avant-Garde, 1954–1977*, an exhibition at New York University's Fales Library, October 28, 2010–January 7, 2011. https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2010/october/multi-media-exhibition-at-nyus-fales-library-a-sanctuary-for-the-arts-opens-october-28-2010.html

8. *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955–1972*. Exhibition text. Accessed January 15, 2019, an exhibition at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, May 24, 2017–September 16, 2017. https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/radical-bodies-anna-halprin-simone-forti-and-yvonne-rainer-california-and-new

9. Ibid.

10. MoMA curator Thomas Lax reported on a conversation about these issues with Rainer on Instagram in a post entitled "Being black at MoMA: January 10." He writes, "Today, @a_janevski and I invited Yvonne Rainer and two of her "Raindeer" Pat Catterson and Patricia Hoffbauer to watch video documentation of their performances from our Judson exhibition. Yvonne talked about seeing herself now, what has changed in the costuming and casting from the 1960s until today: shoes where there were bare feet, people of color and older folks where the performers were once all white and young." This reflection echoes many others happening around the dance world in recent years, including prominently at Danspace Project's series "Conversations Without Walls." For discussion on Ralph Lemon's curatorial consideration of race in his MoMA program some sweet day and choreographer Deborah Hay's dubious interpretation of it, see Kourlas, Gia. "New Spaces for the Revolution" *The New York Times.* December 21, 2012. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/arts/dance/beyond-judson-dance-shows-at-moma-and-danspace.html

11. Speaking to the conditions inhospitable to dance and dancers in the MoMA atrium during a 2013 performance of Boris Charmatz's *20 Dancers for the XX Century*, Danielle Goldman writes, "Valda Setterfield, 79 years old, who wore a sweater around her torso, explaining that because of the cold temperature in the atrium she would need to engage in some Qi Gong practices in order to "wake up" her body; and Ashley Chen, after dancing a solo from Cunningham's *Biped* on the atrium's slate floor, quietly acknowledging that he had "thrown his neck out a bit." Goldman, Danielle. "More Than Incidental Choreographies." *Critical Correspondence.* Accessed January 15, 2019. https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/dance-and-the-museum-more-than-incidental-choreographies-by-danielle-goldman

12. See Metcalf, M.G. (2018). *In the New Body: Simone Forti's Dance Constructions (1960–61) and their Acquisition by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). UCLA*. Accessed January 20, 2019. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39b102wg

13. Damman, Catherine. "Presence at the Creation." *Artforum International.* Vol. 57. No 1. Winter 2018.

14. Pat Catterson coaches Rainer's work definitively, often retaining by memory the details of the choreography and informatively interpreting Rainer's notes (words and diagrams) that have facilitated their reconstruction over many years.

15. In her essay for the catalogue, curator Ana Janevski quotes critic Jill Johnston, "In retrospect it was a beautiful mess." In the *Artforum* portfolio about the exhibition, Deborah Hay writes, "I didn't know aesthetics from a hole in the head." Which a touch of hyperbole, these and other similar accounts make a point about the tenor of the work and experimentation. Hay, Deborah. In "Sanctuary: Judson's Movements." *Artforum International.* Vol. 57. No 1. Winter 2018. Janevski, Ana. "Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done—Sanctuary Always Needed." *Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done.* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 27.

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