





# Familiarity, irony, ambivalence

(and love, hate, envy, attraction, revulsion, hubris  
as byproducts of the “performative” act)

An email conversation between Sharon Hayes and Yvonne Rainer

In 2003, with her performance/talk at *Public Affairs*, Sharon Hayes launched an experimental research project to survey the current political moment in the U.S. While being fascinated by the collective constructions of democracy, Hayes wanted to disrupt the curious temporality intrinsic in the singular moment of an election. In her quasi-fictional, quasi-documentary video project *After Before* (2005), two central figures (Kemba Bloodworth and Ewa Einhorn) examine the production of “public opinion” by interviewing people on the streets of New York City throughout the month of September 2004, two months before the 2004 U.S. presidential elections. In its performative staging of “the interview,” *After Before* investigates the relation between individual opinion and the mythic construction of “the public.” In summer 2005, while editing that material, Sharon Hayes initiated the following email conversation with Yvonne Rainer.

Yvonne Rainer started out as a choreographer in 1960, switched to filmmaking in 1972, and returned to dance in 2000. In the spring of 2005, Dance Theater Workshop in New York invited her to participate in *Stravinsky Project*, a program consisting of choreographic and musical takes on Igor Stravinsky by five artists. She immediately thought of *Agon*, the collaboration between Balanchine and Stravinsky premiered in 1957 by the New York City Ballet. *Agon* is a plotless, abstract ballet for eight female and four male dancers, which Rainer saw a number of times in the following years. The conversation with



Sharon Hayes took place during the period in which she was rehearsing her reworking of the Balanchine dance (which, as she points out, is “certainly not a remaking or reconstruction, though perhaps an appropriation”), this time for four women, one of them *en pointe*.

**Yvonne Rainer:** What do you see as the difference between performance and “the performative”? Or does that matter? Is performance only about framing? Re-contextualizing? Re-speaking? Combinative? i.e., about jolting the audience into re-thinking their position of looking and listening?

**Sharon Hayes:** More and more I think my work has become something like an enactment of a series of performatives rather than performance. This perhaps reveals that although I was greatly relieved to abandon (by moving out of the performance and theatrical venue) the demand to be entertaining, I nevertheless have a bit of discomfort that most of the work I do in front of an audience now involves just standing in front of them and speaking.

I’ve been doing a series of works that engage a strategy of respeaking which is related, for me, to the speech act of the “performative.” Here by “performative” I mean Austin’s term, an utterance, which does rather than says. For the last several years, I’ve been interested in extending this to the notion of a “performative copy”: an utterance which does something in its repetition. By performative copy, I am thinking of any or all of Gertrude Stein’s writing. But I also mean a performative copy as it functions in certain literal acts of performance: Ron Vawter’s performance in *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* of Jack Smith’s *What’s Underground About Marshmallows* for instance. In the Vawter there is something akin to what I am most interested in about and around the performative copy: the collision and collapse of two temporal moments, two instances of speech. What I like about Vawter’s piece is that his repetition

of Smith's performance references the theatrical convention of repeatedly enacting a script, but exposes an important distinction between theater and performance: the difference between the "performer" and the "character." The character is a device specifically constructed to be "filled" by multiple actors across multiple geographic, ethnic, and temporal affiliations. One actor can be seen as better than another but there is, most often, no sense of an "original." The performer on the other hand, if you allow me this somewhat ungrounded distinction, is singularly attached to the performance that they enact. Such that Ron Vawter cannot "perform" Jack Smith without carrying Jack Smith along with him. I don't mean to assert that performance contains an authentic subject who is the performer/author but that it invokes the very problem of an authentic subject. That is what makes it interesting.

**Y. R.:** First off, who's Austin? Next, Ron Vawter's impersonation of Jack Smith was ever so powerful for me for my having seen the original. Of course, most people in that downtown audience would have seen or heard of the original. I always try to have my cake and eat it. Meaning, the ideal situation for me as both producer and spectator is to have the original, or reference to it, and the copy, however imperfect, running simultaneously. One of my schtikks when I was a member of the Grand Union in the early '70s was to go to a microphone and claim I was Martha Graham, then make all kinds of inappropriate statements that of course distanced me from the legendary icon. Very unlike Richard Move, who does a much more credible "copy" or imitation.

**S. H.:** Austin is J.L. Austin, the linguist who named the "performative utterance." But your questioning of him, of course, shows the term "performative" has circulated far from its origin.

In my work, I return to specific political texts to very specifically reinsert

them into a present discourse, making a separation between myself as a biographical speaking subject and the words that I speak. In some instances, my gesture is one of affiliation and in others one of radical distinction such as when I read all 36 of Ronald Reagan's Address to the Nation speeches.

The performance was research but it was research for which I needed precisely the form of a live address. I don't think I could've understood how the speeches operated if I had read them to myself over the course of several weeks. In this Reagan reading it became clear to me that performance offers a very particular site for working through a set of political questions. While I find this terrain exciting, my only hesitation with this employment of performance, which was quite different from my other work, is that the one who "benefited the most" from this exercise was me. I'm not sure it had the same layered depth for an audience.

So perhaps I am not answering the question about performance and the performative. I don't think they are the same, but for me, performance, as a form, allows for certain very precise examinations of the performative operations of subject formation.

I am wondering if you see this as related to your use of quotation. I remember that you once said something like (I'm paraphrasing and probably also misremembering) one of the reasons you moved from dance to film is that you can't quote in dance. Much of your film work does seem to employ performance as a quotation. Like the multiple instances of "a performance within a film" in *Lives of Performers*, *MURDER and murder*, *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, etc. Part of what this quotation of performance seems to do, in addition to grounding and elaborating the characters, is engage the audience in the contemplation of multiple forms of address. I guess what I mean is that in these moments of quotation, the audience recognizes that they are sitting watching a film but that they could also be another audience in that case one watching a performance—moving

them, as you offer in your question, into re-thinking their position. Do you see these things as distinct: citation, quotation? Does this use of quotation affect how you think about live performance now in your return to making dance work?

**Y. R.:** I'm working on a dance that spins off of Balanchine's *Agon*. At first I thought I'd just have my four dancers perform *traces* of the original, but more and more I'm thinking of having a monitor onstage *showing* a 1982 performance of *Agon* while my dance proceeds. In fact I would like to be there to fast forward the parts I'm not using. Which immediately brings up a copyright infringement can of worms. But it reminds me of your record-scratch performance. Hearing Eleanor Roosevelt's voice in the middle of your intense "reworking," re-contextualizing all that original material was what made it work for me.<sup>1</sup>

We're both involved in some kind of re-positioning or dislocation. In *MURDER and murder*, I put Mildred and Doris's domestic travails on a stage, or put my tuxedoed rant in a monitor frame that is observed by one of my characters. Why not just face the camera full-frame? So I can have two things going at once, culminating in the punch line "Is that PBS?!" And about "you can't quote in dance," you *can* quote in dance, but only to the cognoscenti. Not that I want to get into populism. Rather, I'm interested in "bad" acting and "bad" dancing, and these can more readily be understood in relation, if not to an "original," then to something more familiar, like Lawrence Olivier or Maria Tallchief or Ronald Reagan, people who embody standards, taste, and/or celebrity.<sup>2</sup> Or they can be understood in terms of "staginess," self-consciousness, incongruity, perversity, "abnormality." Irony is the key to re-speaking, re-staging. Dances are always reconstructed in all seriousness. There are many many versions of *Agon*, danced by different ballet companies. Of what interest is it to engage three middle-aged dancers, one of whom has never taken a ballet class

in her life, and one young ballet-trained dancer who actually danced with the New York City Ballet, to perform parts of *Agon*? How to prevent the audience—and the dancers themselves—from recoiling with “They/I can’t do the steps, they’re/I’m terrible?” I’m going to find out as soon as I get back to New York and start rehearsals.

Maybe the name of the game is the destruction/re-making of revered icons. Following my presentation with Taisha for the squalors, one sharp squalor described it as an “autopsy.”<sup>3</sup> Certainly my aged presence lent an aura of mortality, but beyond that I would hope that some kind of analysis took place, a liberation of *Agon* from its sanctified status, a re-investment in the original’s complexity via my re-enactment. I didn’t want to kill it, just make it lighter, more intelligible. A bit of hubris, perhaps, considering how many luminaries have danced it and written about it.

**S. H.:** I appreciate your reference to the term “familiar” because it reminds me that many of these strategies of remaking or re-speaking do turn on the notion of the familiar. They invoke a viewer’s attachment to the familiar BUT then continue by *not* fulfilling that familiarity. Instead, to varying degrees, they produce something frustrating, strange, bad, perverse, or just not quite the same. And this new thing has to be contended with, it has to be considered in a way that the familiar object/event does not. *This* is why it’s not the repetition of theater or, in your *Agon* case, the repetition of a repertory ballet company.

But is this an ironic gesture? I think irony is facile. Irony folds effortlessly into reverence for the replicated icons. It seems to me it’s a safe cover for something else (perhaps something quite a bit more earnest) that is going on. The kind of re-speaking or copying that I’m interested in is not exclusive of reverence but it includes more complicated relations as well: love, hate, envy, attraction, revulsion, yes, hubris for sure.



I think the copy, the re-speaking, the re-make can't help but bring a certain death to the original. (Your reference to copyright infringement makes that clear in hard, cold economic facts.) In a sense I think you kill it and can't kill it all at the same time and this death of the original *combined* with the desire not to kill it (or the impossibility of killing it) is what creates such an interesting tension. And I think this tension is present to an audience whether they've seen the original or not. It's the constant concern you have as an audience to a production that has some clearly defined referent. The way you always have to qualify what you say by admitting to either having seen or not having seen the original from which the remake was done, having read or not having read the book on which the film was based, etc. For that reason, I like that you'll show *Agon* on a monitor on the side of the stage...like bringing the elephant into the room.

It seems to me that re-making is a bit like translation. When it is good—smooth and seamless, etc.—we can forget that it is lined with all of this complication. But when it is bad, and a translator can't find the word or has to struggle through various options, then we remember how precarious the whole enterprise is in the first place.

**Y. R.:** What's in it for me, the spectator? YOU understood Reagan's machinations better by reading him aloud, but would I have?

**S. H.:** When I first started making performance work, I fell into the very available trap of wanting to please the audience which I dealt with in the only way I knew how, which was to make it part of the content of the work. I've moved a long way from that point and I'm no longer afraid of boring large groups of people. Your initial question about jolting an audience into rethinking their position is interesting to consider here. Does "jolting" suggest an antagonistic

or instrumental position toward the spectator? While I am deeply committed to provoking an idea of audience as an actively constructed position, I'm still uncomfortable with the idea that my work would invade their experience in such a way as to jolt, shock, or actively alarm them. Perhaps this is a problem. Too easy on the eyes and ears. On the other hand, I've found something quite interesting in the space of less spectacular maneuvers, which is to work with various notions of a phantom audience. This manifests itself in different ways, in different works. In *The Lesbian* (the last work I made in/for a theatrical venue), the "Audience" was one among seven characters: The Audience, The Lesbian, The Researcher, The Girlfriend, The Interviewer, The Choreographer, and The Tour Guide. So the character of The Audience existed not exactly in an imaginary space, but in an imagined one. It marked the audience as a participant but didn't ask for audience participation. Any audience participation was already scripted into the performance as the character of the audience was invoked every now and again as having laughed or as having been confused. The actual viewing audience knew that they weren't the character "The Audience" but they also knew they could be, that the actions and reactions were plausible, at times iterating or portending a reaction that the "real" audience actually expressed or at the very least thought about expressing. Thus the audience was enveloped in the frame of the performance even while they were quite assured that they were also sitting there, in their actual seats, outside of that frame.

My sense of your work is that you have actively resisted certain traps of placating the conventions of viewership. (I think here of the "NO! manifesto" but also your commitment to long takes, to fragmented narratives, to having more than one thing happening at once, etc.) Did you notice any differences in your relation to or considerations of audience when you re-entered the field of live performance?

**Y. R.:** The answer is a definite “No.” Between my “performative” inclinations and the spectator there lies a predictable area (“chasm” some might call it) of ambiguity. Keep them on the edge of their seats with a series of questions or “moves”: Where is this going? Is it funny or serious? Unexpected whammo between the eyes. Formal dance vs. “hanging out”/doing “nothing.” Replicate the act of looking and being looked at.

There is a climactic moment in *Agon* where, following a pirouette, the ballerina wraps her leg around her partner’s neck. An utterly reckless and amazing moment. I have my three postmodern choreographers (Pat Catterson, Patricia Hoffbauer, Sally Silvers) rush in at the same moment to establish a tableau replicating that moment (with ballerina Emily Coates) but also adding two “bathing beauty” cheese-cake poses on either side. Without my bidding they all plastered grins on their faces. My immediate impulse was to wipe them off. The configuration is hilarious without their “gilding the lily.” On being confronted by their understandably anxious questions as to what it looked like, I came up with “hilarious, serious, poignant” in that order.

As I continue working (we’re in the second week of rehearsals), I am finding that my ham-fisted replications are indeed creating something new and fascinating, if for no other reason than that the mechanics of hauling a body around—no matter that the body in question is a superbly ballet-trained machine—creates its own logic and dynamics when the “haulers” come from an entirely different sphere of operations. This new sphere is affected not only by differences in training, but by the inescapable difference of gender. My postmodern female choreographers simply lack the muscle mass and finesse of their idealized male original. And in adjusting and accommodating their specific limits—and wit, I must add—to the act of replication, we arrive at an unexpected end point. It’s very gratifying, because I had no idea when I started out—even though I knew the *process* would be interesting—what the results would be.

**S. H.:** Your description of hauling a superbly ballet-trained body around makes me linger over the way in which you employ “task” as a way to disrupt or maybe just to refuse or alter certain conventions of performance. Similarly, I see my various re-speakings as the execution of a task rather than as the acting out (in the interpretive sense) of a text or a role. As you are pointing out in the anecdote from your rehearsals, the particular body/speaker who executes this task is relevant because of the questions that are raised by/in their doing of the task: for you in the *Agon* reenactments these might be questions around gender, or for me it is questions of authenticity. But the emphasis here is not on these bodies as a specific personality, as it is when marking a particular performance personality, as when Sandy Duncan is celebrated (or trashed) for her portrayal of Peter Pan, for instance. This seems quite significant.

The other thing I find compelling about the way in which you use task is that it seems to me that you use it to foreground, rather than hide, the effort of the repetition of performance. Try as any performer might, a task can never be performed precisely the same way night after night. Traditional theater and dance companies allow for and even enjoy slight nightly variation but the structure of the discipline is geared toward preventing too much fluctuation. So the dancers and actors are trained to be “up to the task” of doing the same set of actions and saying the same script of words night after night with energy, enthusiasm, and conviction. Even in “downtown” or “alternative” theater, performance and dance venues, this is often adopted as a goal (unless they are specifically using improvisation or some kind of variable structure that changes from night to night).

The way that you employ task in your work disrupts this aim. Do you think I’m off here? What you’re describing about your “ham-fisted replications” of *Agon* seems to set up a situation in which the task is more difficult to repeat from night to night.



I've been trying to be quite specific in my attention to this relationship between task and repetition in another way. In certain pieces I won't perform the task twice—because the task of the speaking was only to generate a video recording, for instance. This isn't a rigid rule but something that I am trying to be intentional about from piece to piece. This has been a significant aspect of my shift from “doing” to “using” performance.

**Y. R.:** Regarding task and (professional) repetition: Oddly enough, I find myself “drilling” my motley group of dancers (no pejorative intended here; perhaps “unlikely” would be more accurate) as though their lives depended on it. I must push each to the limit of her particular skill. It is the differences in these skills that will hopefully foreground task and effort. Facility is at once gained, accomplished, broken down, analyzed, deconstructed, at some moments destroyed altogether. The question occurs to me: How is this different from the amateur dance company of Edith Stephen in which I danced as a rank beginner in 1958? The members of Edith's group might be said to have shared a comparable “spread” of skills as my current group. The comparison is off the mark—for one thing, there being no “rank beginner” among my *Agon* dancers—except for the factor of the “original.” The original looms behind my dancers at every step, the balletic standard is the ground they traverse, the template of training and idealized bodies is the all-encompassing surround. There is something comforting about all this. These values are so ubiquitous, so endemic in Western culture that they provide me just as enduringly with a wall against which to beat my head. (I think you know John Cage's story about his deciding to spend his life beating his head against Schoenberg's valorizing of harmony, for which Cage admitted to having no “feeling.”) Resistance needs, if not a hard, then a stable and well-worn surface.

Notes:

1. Yvonne Rainer refers to Sharon Hayes's DJ performance at the LTTR Explosion in July 2004 at Art in General, New York, in which Hayes spun a wide variety of spoken-word records.
2. The ballerina Maria Tallchief was the foremost exponent of Balanchine's choreography. They were married from 1946 to 1951 and together formed what eventually became the New York City Ballet.
3. Taisha Paggett is a dancer, who assisted Yvonne Rainer when she was a resident "squalor" (scholar) at the Getty Research Institute in spring 2005.



pp. 45, 47, and 48: *AG Indexical, with a little help from H.M.*, choreographed by Yvonne Rainer (after George Balanchine's *Agon*). Performed by Pat Catterson, Emily Coates, Patricia Hoffbauer, and Sally Silvers.





