Sites of Subjectivity: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and Dance

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Reviewed work(s):

Published by: Congress on Research in Dance

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/30045072

Accessed: 21/01/2013 06:00
Robert Morris’s dance Site (Fig. 1) premiered in February 1964 at the Surplus Dance Theater in New York City. Choreographed and performed by Morris, Site also featured the visual artist Carolee Schneemann and several sheets of four-by-eight foot plywood. Although it may seem odd to include these wooden panels among the performers, they assumed an active role in the choreography. Ironically, it was Schneemann who provided the background scenery. Nude and covered in white paint, she sat motionless throughout the performance, recreating the pose and persona of Edouard Manet’s famous 1863 painting of Olympia while Morris manipulated the large wooden boards. In a graceful duet with inanimate partners, Morris spun the rectangular planes from a point on the ground, maneuvered them around his body, lifted them over his head, caressed their even form as he slowly moved his hand across one edge, and balanced the panels on his back as he moved across the stage. Not only did Morris never dance with Schneemann, he did not even seem to notice her.

In a career spanning over forty years, Robert Morris has produced theoretical articles, paintings, videos, installations, and environmental art in addition to his work in dance; nevertheless, the American artist remains best known for his Minimalist sculptures of the 1960s (Figs. 2 and 3). Like the works of his colleagues Donald Judd and Carl Andre, Morris’s spare, geometrical objects of that period were three-dimensional and called attention to issues of site and artistic context. They also resisted past artistic conventions based in subjective methods of composition, expressivity, and metaphor. Morris, however, distinguished himself among this group of visual artists by the emphasis he placed on the viewer’s bodily relationship with the art object, a distinction that derives directly from his unique involvement in avant-garde dance.¹

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Figure 2: Robert Morris, Columns, 1961. © 2004 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.


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Morris’s first wife, dancer and choreographer Simone Forti, introduced him to movement improvisation in San Francisco. After moving to New York in 1960, Morris and Forti became a vital part of that city’s active performance community. Although the couple divorced the following year, Morris continued his interest in dance, and soon became affiliated with the Judson Dance Theater, the loose collective of dancers, musicians, poets, and visual artists based at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. The period from 1963 to 1966 marks the time when Morris produced his own choreographic works, all of which were presented either with the Judson’s support or with its members in different contexts. Notably, these years of Morris’s close involvement with dance also correspond with his emergence as a leading artist associated with Minimalism.

It is my contention that Morris’s knowledge of dance directly informed his sculptural practice, and moreover, was fundamental to his theoretical understanding of the viewer’s role in art. I want here to expand our understanding of Morris’s Minimalist sculpture by considering how this influence of dance contributed to these objects’ performative function. By comparing Morris’s structures of the early 1960s to Yvonne Rainer’s 1965 dance Trio A, in which she emphasized the body as an object, I explore the relationship of Morris’s work to questions of gender, suggesting that male and female viewers might experience his sculptures in radically different ways based on subjective experience and gendered notions of identity. To support this position, I rely on methodological approaches that explore conditions of embodiment and gender performance as well as question the psychological processes involved in establishing individual identity.

Objectness as Subjectivity

Performativity theory posits that identity is established through a form of role playing in which we present ourselves according to our perceptions of the cultural expectations of what we should be (see Bennett 1998, 265–269). According to literary theorist Judith Butler, gender is performed in this way through repeated acts similar to those carried out in a theatrical context. Butler distinguishes this performance from the popular belief that gender results from particular characteristics and activities based on biological differences between the sexes. Rather, she argues that gender is not obvious prior to the “various acts, postures, and gestures by which it is dramatized and known” (1997, 411). In taking this stance, Butler exposes the role of performance to maintain cultural expectations and stereotypes about gender.

Dance provides an interesting model for examining the performative nature of gender because the dancer’s experience of subjective understanding comes through an awareness of physical presence and movement. This bodily recognition of the self, however, is altered by the performance context, which places the subject on stage before a viewing audience, thus transforming the dancer into an object of the spectator’s gaze. As scholars such as Leslie Satin, Ann Daly, and Ann Cooper Albright have shown, Yvonne Rainer established in her dances an alternative relationship that resists
this subject/object dualism in favor of an intersubjective model. Rainer’s choreography exposed the artifice of her performance by treating the dancing body as a material object. She downplayed the dancer’s personality, neutralizing the dramatic appeal of the performer and focusing instead on the body’s movement alone. Based on her own experience as a dancer with remarkable “stage presence,” Rainer wanted to develop a choreographic practice to disrupt the dynamic of power and desire traditionally existing between performer and audience. This interest in eliminating persona from dance offers cues to the self’s representation in performance. Her work allows us to explore how the dancer performs him/her self on stage and how the viewer regards that performative act.

In a 1997 dissertation on gender and autobiography in the Judson Dance Theater, Leslie Satin discussed how many artists of the 1960s employed the trope of the body as object (60–61). Satin talks about the practice, in dance, of reading the unadorned body as an object, not as an individual sentient being, but in terms of its material qualities of mass and volume, as well as its spatial relationships to other objects/bodies. As she points out, such inquiry held implications for artists who were rethinking the concept of the body, as well as for those exploring the nature of objects. Furthermore, considering the body as an object suggested new questions about the relationship of the body to the self, and the body’s significance regarding the performing self. In other words, one must wonder how the self is represented when the body is treated as an object. This question is complicated further by considering dance in terms of the dancer’s embodied experience. Understood dually as an object of the spectator’s gaze and as an active subject aware of her or his own agency to enact the dance, she/he must reconcile a sense of personal identity within this shifting terrain of performance.

Paradoxically, Rainer’s treatment of the dancing body as an object also allowed her to highlight her subjectivity as a dancer. Ann Daly has addressed this contradiction in Rainer’s work saying, “[she] was able to seize objectness as her subjectivity where other performers (such as ballerinas) were trained to subordinate their subjectivity—their personality, their style, their thoughtful interpretation—to further their role as object, as display” (quoted in Satin 1997, 95). Daly here refers to the tradition in ballet to characterize the performer as an idealized fantastical being—the Swan Queen in Swan Lake, or The Nutcracker’s Sugar Plum Fairy or Nutcracker Prince—who then performs for the viewer’s visual pleasure (see Alderson 1987, 290–304; Novack 1993, 34–47). By contrast, Rainer’s practice of focusing on her body as an object resisted any such transformation, thus she was able to retain her own identity, and not perform in character.

In a 1990 article entitled “Mining the Dancefield: Spectacle, Moving Subjects and Feminist Theory,” Ann Cooper Albright demonstrates that strategies of contemporary dance, such as those used by Rainer, challenge the traditional relationship between performer and audience in order to assert the dancer’s subjectivity (33). To support her thesis, Albright draws on the ideas of Jessica Benjamin, a clinical psychoanalyst who proposed an alternative to previous models of establishing individuality and self (see Benjamin 1986, 78–101; 1998). Instead of a dualistic opposition between desiring subject and the object desired, Benjamin posits an intersubjective model of desire in which two
individuals might acknowledge each other’s subjectivity while maintaining their own (1986, 92). This model is radical in that it discards the belief that separation is necessary for establishing subjectivity. According to Benjamin, the subject does not have to control or dominate the other in order to affirm his or her independence. While the self exists *a priori*, it must have the other’s response and recognition to develop. As Benjamin explains however, the self is not realized in opposition to the other, instead it emerges within a context of connection and relatedness. She writes, “The intersubjective mode assumes the paradox that in being with the other, I may experience the most profound sense of self” (1986,92).

Applying Benjamin’s theory to the performance context, Albright finds intersubjective space to exist between the audience and dancer: “Once the performers have slipped outside of the frame of spectacle to move into the audience’s physical and emotional space . . . the audience becomes aware of the performer as an active participant who can engage, comment on, and direct the audience’s focus” (1990, 33). The performer thus engages in a dialogue with the viewer through which both are able to develop a sense of self in relation to the other’s actions and presence.

Benjamin’s model of intersubjective space offers a useful tool to study the connection between the viewer and Robert Morris’s sculpture in a gallery context. I consider the space where his Minimalist structures were exhibited comparable to a performance venue. As I will discuss, Morris intentionally displayed his work in ways meant to emphasize the viewer’s physical encounter with the individual objects as well as their surrounding environment. Like Rainer’s choreography in *Trio A*, Morris’s structures suggested a similar relationship between self and persona, body and object, each of which must be understood through connection to the other.

**Morris, Rainer, and Judson Dance Theater**

The group known as Judson Dance Theater grew out of workshops led by the composer Robert Dunn from the fall of 1960 until spring 1962 (see Banes 1983). After the second year of Dunn’s class, his students wanted to hold a public performance to show their work to a broader audience. Rainer suggested the Judson Memorial Church, located on the south side of Washington Square Park, as a possible site for the concert. The church was already home to the Judson Poet League and Judson Art Gallery, and had been a popular site for artists’ Happenings. Rainer and Steve Paxton visited Al Carmines, the church’s performing arts coordinator, to inquire about using its gymnasium for the event. Carmines auditioned the dancers and consented to hosting their first performance on July 6, 1961.

When Dunn decided to discontinue his workshop, his students continued meeting, first at Rainer’s studio and later at the Judson Church. The Judson workshops, as these sessions became known, replaced Dunn’s class as a forum where participants could exchange ideas, perform their own choreography, and receive feedback from others. Founded on the model of a collective, the Judson Dance Theater adhered to a policy of inclusion, allowing anyone who wanted to participate in its activities to do so and mak-
ing decisions based on consensus. Over the next two years, this group of performers—although they did not use the name Judson Dance Theater until April 1963—held over twenty public concerts at the church and other venues.

Throughout the history of the Judson Dance Theater, non-dancers were welcome participants. Visual artists—such as Morris—as well as poets and composers, had participated in earlier performance events at the Reuben Gallery, the Living Theater, and Yoko Ono’s Chambers Street Loft, and often visited their friends in Dunn’s workshop (see Banes 1993).³ After the larger group began meeting at the Judson Church, participants who were not trained as dancers proliferated. These ostensible non-dancers contributed to the music, stage, and lighting design of the concerts, as well as producing their own choreography and performing in works by others (see Banes 1983).⁴ By January 1964, program notes for the group’s Concert at New Paltz State University College explained:

In the curious way in which the arts world changes, painters have made inroads into theatrical performances. Artists find that there are no unacceptable sources for material. The repertoire of Judson Dance Theater reflects the latest of this recent tendency to allow freer play. Dancers, mixed with painters on stage, point out how there is another quality to bodies than just the arrived-at differences dancers have discovered in themselves—there is the whole look of the body, which knows a lot on its own, and whether “trained” or not, relays much of its history with action. (n.p.)

This mutual exchange between dancers and visual artists indicates that the group recognized the body’s function both as an object of spectacle, and as a physical instrument able to execute movement.

Throughout the Judson Dance Theater’s inception and development, Robert Morris remained an important part of its artistic and social community (see Banes 1993). Dance historian Sally Banes quotes Morris’s written comments on a lecture series held in fall 1962 that had been organized by choreographer James Waring and poet Diane diPrima. According to Banes, Morris praised the program, which featured Rainer and others involved with Judson, as an attempt to move beyond the problem of communicating about an art form so impermanent and often undocumented. He encouraged dancers to attend subsequent lectures because, as important as what was said, he argued, was the fact that a situation existed where such ideas could be expressed. To conclude his remarks, Morris raised the possibility that, “Perhaps dance is moving toward dance, toward its own free identity and does not have any historical obligation to submit to a metamorphosis into theater” (quoted in Banes 1983, 79).

Morris’s allusion to theater refers to dance’s traditional role to serve a metaphorical or narrative function, a practice that members of the Judson Dance Theater adamantly resisted. Their use of found movements, reliance on chance, and impersonal methods of production is comparable to the vernacular assemblage aesthetic adopted by such “Proto-Pop” artists as Robert Rauschenberg, Ray Johnson, and Wallace Berman, who have been associated with the Beat literary movement of late 1950s (see Phillips 1995).
This connection is further supported by the relationship of Diane DiPrima and other Beat poets to these dancers through their activity at the Judson Poets League. However, unlike these Beat artists and writers who culled imagery from marginalized sources for poetic effect, the Judson dancers’ opposition to the emotional expressivity of dance parallels the move away from subjectivity and illusionism in visual art by Morris and his Minimalist colleagues.

After his divorce from Forti, Morris and Rainer became romantically involved and the couple lived together from around 1964 until 1968 (Morris 2001; Rainer 1974, 9). It was during this time that Rainer began to explore ideas associated with Minimalism in art in her choreographic work. For Rainer, Minimalism implied neutrality, a removal of the drama and theatricality that had characterized previous modern dance. Instead of representing the dancer as a persona, she saw that the dancer’s body could be “handled like an object, picked up and carried—and that objects and bodies could be interchangeable” (quoted in Bear and Sharp 1972, 50). Unlike other dancers interested in the body-as-object, Rainer’s attitude toward this concept did not focus on concerns of spatial interaction and phenomenological perception; rather, for her, interpreting the body as an object allowed the dancer to reject the projection of a persona and act simply as “neutral purveyor of information” (quoted in Bear and Sharp 1972, 50).

Rainer’s search for what she described as a “different way to move” began in September 1964, while in Düsseldorf with Morris who was there preparing for an exhibition. Morris’s presence at this time does not imply causality or direct influence, but demonstrates how the circumstances of Morris’s relationship with Rainer allowed for opportunities where ideas could be exchanged either specifically or in more general terms. In her own work, Rainer hoped to abandon the eccentric types of found actions she had previously been using, and she looked to her body for inspiration. She recalls:

[I] wiggled my elbows, shifted from one foot to the other, looked at the ceiling, shifted eye focus within a tiny radius, watched a flattened, raised hand moving and stopping, moving and stopping. Slowly the things I made began to go together, along with sudden sharp, hard changes in dynamics. But basically, I wanted it to remain undynamic movement, no rhythm, no emphasis, no tension, no relaxation. You just do it. (1974, 50)

Rainer initially applied these ideas in Parts of Some Sextets of 1965, performed in March, first at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut and then at the Judson Memorial Church. Structured according to a chart that ordered movements and temporal duration, this dance included varied types of movements, activities with mattresses, static actions such as sitting or laying down, and continuous, as well as simultaneous motions that changed abruptly at set intervals.

Another influence had been Robert Morris’s dance Check, which premiered at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in August 1964. Originally performed in a vast space measuring 100 by 300 feet, Check involved over forty performers and seven hundred spectators (Morris 1965, 185). The performers mingled within the audience until a signal indicated that they should split into two groups to perform a series of simple simul-
taneous actions. At one end of the hall, a man ran back and forth on a platform while, at the other, Rainer moved slowly before an image of vertical lines projected on the wall. When these activities were completed, the performers again dispersed into the crowd where, according to Morris, they “resume[d] wandering, talking, observing as a kind of proto-audience” (1965, 185).

What impressed Rainer about Check was that, although the action was completely visible to the audience, the piece remained inaccessible. “Simple, undistinctive [sic] activities,” she explained, “made momentous through their inaccessibility . . . another device designed to counter the venerable convention of serving it all up on a platter” (1974, 45). In addition to the spectacle of performance itself, the “it” that Rainer references may remark on the convention of dance to communicate a story or emotion for the audience to share or appreciate. In light of Rainer’s interests, however, she seems to suggest further that the dancer also “serves herself up” to the spectator for display and deliberate consumption.

Trying to replicate the effect of Check, Rainer decided to avoid any sense of continuity or progression between movement combinations in Parts of Some Sextets. She relied instead on interruption and repetition, devices she had used before, to break the flow of the piece. As Rainer explained, “both factors were to produce a ‘chunky’ continuity, repetition making the eye jump back and forth in time and possibly establishing more strongly the differences in the movement material. . . . Interruption would also function to disrupt the continuity and prevent prolonged involvement with any one image” (1974, 47). Viewers were thus denied the power of the extended gaze and forced to focus attention on other components of the dance, such as the interaction between body and object, or the body’s movement itself.

Rainer described the development of Parts of Some Sextets in the Tulane Drama Review in 1965. Writing a postscript to the article, she explicated her goals in a statement that critics have called her “no manifesto” (Phelan 1999, 3). Rainer wrote:

All I am inclined to indicate here are various feelings about Parts of Some Sextets and its effort in a certain direction—an area of concern as yet not fully clarified for me in relation to dance, but existing as a very large NO to many facts in theater today. (This is not to say that I personally do not enjoy many forms of theater. It is only to define more stringently the rules and boundaries of my own artistic game of the moment.)

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved. (1974, 51)

Rainer’s statement reveals the extent of the correspondence emerging between her choreography and Minimalism in art. Her rejection of “magic,” “make-believe,” and “transcendency” denounces the illusionism of traditional dance in a way that recalls Frank Stella’s famous quip about his Minimalist paintings: “What you see is what you
see” (quoted in Lippard 1966, 59). Like theoretical treatises by visual artists such as Morris and Donald Judd, Rainer’s text contributed to the public’s knowledge of work that was often found baffling or discounted as too banal. Rainer’s remarks furthermore allude to a transformative process witnessed in performance. On stage, the dancer appears differently to her audience. She (or he) assumes a distinctive persona, which, as Rainer notes, involves the “seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer” (1974, 51).

**Intersubjectivity in Trio A and Morris’s Minimalism**

Rainer’s aspiration to break the erotic bond between dancer and spectator led in 1965 to her creation of Trio A, a four-and-a-half-minute sequence of movements for three people. She choreographed the dance according to specific rules she established. Significantly, she decided never to allow herself to look at the audience. Believing her face to be the source of her charisma, Rainer thought she could eliminate its seductive power by denying it to the viewer (quoted in Blumenthal 1999, 6263). Instead she closed her eyes or blocked her face whenever she turned toward the audience. At other times, she relied on movements with her head—twisting away, looking upward or offstage—to prevent herself from meeting the spectators’ gaze (Blumenthal 1999, 63). She also chose movements that did not mimic everyday activities, but which came from the body’s natural range of motions, such as shifting weight from one leg to another, bending at the waist or tilting the head. Although all three dancers performed the same movements simultaneously, their timing fell in and out of synchronicity based on how long each took to perform a particular step. Most radically, there were no transitions between gestures or changes in tempo of the performance, thus suggesting that no one movement was more important than any other.

Rainer’s achievement in Trio A parallels Robert Morris’s goal for sculpture. Like Morris, who wanted the viewer to focus on the object’s essential properties of scale, mass and weight, Rainer reduced dance to its fundamental elements—the physical movement of the body through space over time. Rainer even adopted the critical language of Minimalism to explain her ideas in the essay, “A Quasi Survey of Some ‘Minimalist’ Tendencies in the Quantitatively Minimal Dance Activity Midst the Plethora, or An Analysis of Trio A” (1974, 63–69). Introduced with a well-known chart in which Rainer identified similarities between contemporary sculpture and choreographic practice, the text not surprisingly corresponds to Morris’s series of articles “Notes on Sculpture, I–IV” published in *Artforum* (1993, 170).

In these important essays, Morris argued that an object’s physical qualities are paramount for sculpture. He attacked the use of sculptural relief format because it obscured sculpture’s “autonomous and literal nature,” adding that “[o]ne of the conditions of knowing an object is supplied by the sensing of the gravitational force acting upon it in actual space” (1993, 4). To summarize his theoretical position, Morris proposed sculptures that would effect a Gestalt sensation, encouraging the viewer to perceive them as conceptually whole. Such “unitary forms,” he noted, “do not negate the numerous relative sensations of color to texture, scale to mass, etc., they do not present clearly separate
parts for these kinds of relations to be established in terms of shapes. . . . Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum resistance to perceptual separation” (1993, 6). Morris believed that, only when seen as a whole Gestalt, could an object’s physical characteristics in relationship to space, light, and time be appreciated.

In a February 26, 2001 email, Rainer suggested that her ideas about dance’s relationship to sculpture probably developed in conversation with Morris as they “discussed all kinds of things aesthetic, dance, sculpture, the art world, etc.” Indeed she cites Morris, as well as art critic Barbara Rose, as important influences on her writing, saying that they provided more analytical models than contemporary dance critics such as Jill Johnston (February 26, 2001). As Morris did with sculpture, Rainer explains in her text that, in order to establish its artistic autonomy, dance must acknowledge its unique qualities through their literal presentation. To this end, *Trio A* reveals aspects of dance traditionally hidden from the spectator. For example, Rainer points to the convention of “phrasing” in dance as a way to conceal the effort necessary to execute a particular movement. She writes, “[this] particular distribution of energy: maximal output or ‘attack’ at the beginning of a phrase, recovery at the end, with energy often arrested somewhere in the middle . . . means that one part of the phrase—usually the part that is most still—becomes the focus of attention, registering like a photograph or suspended moment of climax” (1974, 59). Rainer points out that, ironically, traditional dance operates in such a way as to call attention not to the moving body, but to the static pose: the suspended leap, the balanced posture, the extended arabesque. Phrasing thus effectively pauses the continuous motion of dance just long enough to frame the dancer’s body for the spectator’s pleasure and enjoyment.

By contrast *Trio A*’s presentation of distinct actions in an unbroken, even manner cancels out this effect, calling attention instead to the actual time and energy, given his or her individual weight and mass, that the dancer needs to expend in order to complete the motion. Every step presented as equally important forces the viewer to watch each gesture with the same amount of attention. Furthermore, Rainer’s emphasis on the literal presentation of movement challenged the appearance of dance as effortless or transcendent, and her refusal to look at the audience disrupted the usual dynamics of desire and seduction in dance performance. By revealing these elements previously hidden from the viewer, Rainer called attention to the artificiality of performance itself. In *Trio A*, she effectively defied the process of transformation that typically characterizes a dancer on stage by refusing to “perform” for her audience. Rainer danced according to the rules of the composition and the material conditions of weight, gravity, time, and space. Most importantly, she did not try to seduce the audience members into believing they were looking at something other than a body moving through space and time.

Morris likewise emphasized the viewer’s perception of his work. In “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” Morris expanded his theory of sculpture in phenomenological terms:

The object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is
more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and space. (1993, 15)

Morris thus posited that the viewer understands real space physically, constructing internal knowledge based on the phenomenological apprehension of other objects sharing the same space, architectural surroundings, and conditions.

The interplay between Morris's Minimalist objects and bodily experience was first demonstrated by Column (1961) (Fig. 3). Two-feet square, eight-feet high and painted gray, this sculpture debuted, not in an art gallery, but at the Living Theater in New York in 1962.10 Placed vertically on an empty stage, Column remained on end for three-and-a-half minutes before being pulled over by a string held off stage. It then lay horizontally for another three and a half minutes before the lights went out and the performance ended. Wanting the object to appear to move of its own volition, Morris had intended to stand inside the hollow structure and fall over, causing it to topple. During a rehearsal, however, he suffered a head injury from the fall and he chose to substitute a pull-string in the actual performance. In Column, built to human scale, Morris devised an object which served as a surrogate for himself, or some other live performer, by seeming to execute fundamental postures of standing tall and lying prostrate. Like a dancing body, it “performed” a sequence of choreographed movements over a set period of time, reacting to conditions of material weight, gravity, and space.

In subsequent dances, Morris used objects to generate movement because they did not dominate other aspects of the performance. He explained that, in dances such as Arizona (1963) and Site (1964) (Fig. 1), the items themselves were not important, but provided the “means for dealing with specific problems” such as time and space (1965, 180). In a November 9, 2000 fax, Morris linked his use of objects to determine dance sequences to his methodology in making sculpture:

Finding ways to get the body moving—and having this movement be generated by the manipulation of objects so that the resultant movement became the dance was the challenge . . . pace the comparable a priori methods involved in construction to generate my sculptural objects of the early 1960s. This new structural armature opened up the making for me on both fronts—i.e., a kind of automation that foreclosed the ‘expression’ involved in pointing the toe (dance), or adding a little more on the left (sculpture) offered a new freedom.

Thus, for Morris, objects used as props helped him solve the problem of intentional- ity in artistic-decision making. Accordingly, he believed the process of art-making no longer to be a conscious individual undertaking; the interaction between artist and materials could yield a final product without any visible trace of the artist’s presence.

Looking closer at Morris’s work of the sixties, however, suggests that the constructed object held a more ambiguous place in relation to subjectivity than simply as a result of artistic labor. While the artist’s indexical trace is seemingly absent, the objects Morris produced still imply a clear relationship to the human body in both their scale and struc-
ture. In addition to *Column*, Morris’s early works such as *Passageway* (1961), and *Box for Standing* (1961, Fig. 4) similarly hinted toward human involvement. Indeed, Morris appears with some of these objects in photographs from the period, making explicit their connection to the body and moreover, reestablishing his own physical presence as integral to the sculpture’s display.

In his dances, Morris reiterated the equivocal status of the body seen in his sculptural production. In *Site*, described at the beginning of this article, Morris, like Rainer in *Trio A*, challenged the authority of the spectator’s gaze by problematizing the relation between bodies and objects on stage. In her performance as Manet’s *Olympia*, Schneemann was subsumed by her status as an object—both as a passive female body displayed for the viewer’s gaze and as a re-creation of a famous painting, an object of art. On the other hand, Morris’s panels acted anthropomorphically as performers. Ironically, they implied a human presence that the character of Schneemann as Olympia lacked completely. Morris pushed this ambiguity further by concealing his facial expressions with a mask that replicated his own features. *Site* thus forced its viewers to reconcile the anthropomorphism of the plywood panels with the neutral presence of the living performers.

Morris’s Minimalist objects of the mid-1960s likewise engaged the viewer in the gallery. For example, his installation at New York’s Green Gallery in 1964 (Fig. 3) involved the display of each sculpture in a way that called attention to the physical environment and surrounding space. Known as the “The Plywood Show” for Morris’s choice of material, this was the artist’s second solo show in the city and the first devoted entirely to the spare geometric constructions he had begun building in 1961. As visitors entered, they passed beneath *Untitled (Corner Beam)* which, like all of the objects in the

*Figure 4: Robert Morris, Box for Standing, 1961. © 2004 Robert Morris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*
show, was made of plywood and nails, hand-painted Merkin Pilgrim gray, and lacked any notable surface texture or detail. The shape and placement of Morris's sculptures created a heightened sense of spatial awareness among visitors. But, more than simply articulating their contingency to the architectural setting, these objects asserted their presence through the phenomenological encounter with the viewer that Morris had described in “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2.” Morris posited the object’s meaning to be dependant on this interactive exchange between it and its viewer. The visitor in the gallery thus engaged in a reflexive process of self-awareness based on the physical presence of the object that, like another person, shared his or her environment.

**Gender, Experience and Meaning in Minimalist Art**

The viewer’s encounter with Morris’s object approaches Albright’s conditions for intersubjective space within performance. His sculpture is no longer objectified by the viewer’s disinterested gaze; rather, the viewer is forced to recognize the artwork’s ability to direct his or her experience, and even to challenge his understanding of the environment. Morris’s viewer is comparable to a member of Rainer’s audience watching *Trio A*. He or she must acknowledge the dancer as an independent subject, distinct from him or herself. In this analysis, I am trying not to project human subjectivity on objects that remain inanimate. Rather, I take the position that the viewer of Morris’s Minimalist objects defines a sense of self within the intersubjective context of performance that occurs in the gallery. This intersubjectivity is founded in the viewer’s perception of the object as another physical presence, comparable to his/her body. The sculptural encounter thus forces the viewer to recognize the object’s shared material characteristics of scale, mass, and weight, and to acknowledge their mutual existence in real space and time.

Writing for *Arts Magazine* in April 1967, Rainer called attention to the interactive nature of the viewer’s experience with Morris’s sculpture by asking: “Does it exist without my presence?” Rainer described the effect Morris’s work had on her, challenging her own sense of space and temporal reality: “It includes me in its space but defies all attempts to know any more about it than what a single glance can gather. It can be encompassed instantly, but seduces me into drawn-out contemplations and reflections about its nature” (47) Rainer’s language suggests an almost mystical link between the viewer and the object itself:

> We take up space together . . . The exquisite containment of my body. I can’t say it’s euphoria or ecstasy . . . But yet still I have this strange sense of limits—physical limits—and it seems such an exquisite knowledge. Perfect containment. Something to do with a finely-tuned awareness of just how, what, something to do with my own particular mass and volume. It (or my body) occupies exactly as much space as it needs . . . (1967, 46)

Morris’s sculptural seduction of Rainer recalls her own charismatic appeal to the spectator of her dances. But, like her strategy to eliminate desire between performer and audience, Morris’s objects, she observes, also resist the viewer. While Morris’s
work demands her participation, it refuses to reciprocate. Rainer furthermore assigned Morris’s objects anthropomorphic qualities such as “silence,” describing them as “non-committal,” and “non-communicative” to explain their resistance. She concludes, “In front of a Morris, I have a reverie; I wait for the object to ‘look back’ at me, then hold it responsible when it doesn’t” (1967, 47). Rainer’s remarks may be interpreted in light of her intimate involvement with the artist. Describing a sculpture by her lover of three years as “non-committal” and “non-communicative” could imply more than a critical attempt at poetic metaphor. Rainer’s comments may reflect her feelings toward Morris directly and refer to concerns she had about their personal relationship. Nevertheless, the exchange Rainer describes demonstrates the altered dynamics she perceived in the viewer’s sculptural encounter. Furthermore, her remarks are key to understanding the relationship of Morris’s sculpture to the performance of gender.

Within Jessica Benjamin’s model of intersubjectivity, gender remains fluid. The concept of identity formation Benjamin proposes challenges a heterosexual structure based on the difference between a child’s mother and father; rather, Benjamin demonstrates that ideally the individual integrates male and female aspects of selfhood. This variability is particularly important to understanding gender performance in dance because both male and female dancers perform on stage. Indeed, although Rainer created Trio A based on her own body’s movements, she performed it with two men: Steve Paxton and David Gordon. Trio A thus problematizes the assumption of the spectator’s gaze to signify male heterosexual privilege, and calls for a more flexible model to theorize gender performance and subjective experience in dance (see Copeland, 133–150). Likewise, visitors to Morris’s exhibitions include men and women, raising the question: How does gender performance intersect with the process of establishing identity in all viewing encounters with his objects?

The experience of dance again offers a possible explanation. Like the performer on stage who is aware of his or her body as being objectified by the spectatoral gaze, the spectator in the gallery becomes increasingly conscious of his or her body’s objectness in relation to the sculpture. For the dancer, as Rainer explained, performance is characterized by a kind of narcissistic exhibitionism, a display of the body for the scopophilic pleasure that is culturally associated with the performance of femininity. In the gallery, the self-reflexive process of the encounter with Morris’s sculpture is therefore shaped according to the viewer’s gender identification and performance based on cultural expectations. In other words, male and female viewers will interact physically and psychologically with the object based on their particular understanding of what constitutes appropriate behaviors for their own gender identification. For Rainer—identifying as female—she expected the object to “look back at her” in her sculptural encounter. By contrast, male artists at the time observed that the physical presence of Morris’s objects called attention to their architectural setting. For example, Donald Judd commented, “Morris’s works are minimal visually, but they’re powerful spatially. . . . The occupancy of space, the access to or denial of it, is very specific” (1965, 54). Morris’s sculptures forced Judd—a male viewer—also to consider his relationship to the objects in the
gallery. But, instead of objectifying him for display, they challenged his autonomy as an active subject to move through the space itself.

These opposing examples suggest that, at least in the case of Morris’s sculpture, the female viewer, more accustomed to being the object of the male gaze, might accept a comparable role in the gallery; while, for a man, these same structures might challenge his independent agency. Michael Fried’s famous observation about Minimalist sculpture, however, reveals such a dualistic stance to be overly simplified. Fried, like Rainer, perceived a distinct threat in the Minimalist object’s “presence” that implies a weakened, or less authoritative position, than typically afforded the (male) critic.

In his well-known article entitled “Art and Objecthood,” Fried applied Morris’s ideas about the viewer’s phenomenological encounter broadly to denounce all Minimalist art for its failure to meet the aesthetic purity that modernism demanded (1967, 12–23). Because of the object’s “presence,” Fried concluded that minimalist sculpture departed from the realm of visual art and entered into the theatrical. Fried wrote:

Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it seriously—and when the fulfillment of that demand consists simply in being aware of it and, so to speak, in acting accordingly . . . the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation as subject to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another person. (1967, 127–128. Italics original.)

Fried’s comments expose the psychological relationship with the object, through which the viewer perceives him or herself in the presence of another person. The critic’s own response demonstrates clearly how his personal encounter challenged the stability of his own masculine prerogative as objective, detached, and independent.

In the intersubjective space of the gallery, visitors who encounter Morris’s Minimalist sculptures establish selfhood by reconciling subjective agency with their own body’s “objectness.” This experience is necessarily different for men and women, based on variables including individual identifications and perceived social expectations. The close connections between Morris’s sculpture and his extensive participation in avant-garde dance suggest that the dynamics of performance are essential to understanding the significance of his oeuvre. Moreover, Rainer’s innovations in choreography—which Morris certainly knew quite well—provide an appropriate model for examining how gender performance is relevant to the viewer’s encounter with the objects that he produced. The Minimalist object’s effect on the viewer reveals gender to be a changeable category, determined according to particular circumstance and cultural understanding of individual gender performance. The performative strategies seen in both Morris’s choreographic and sculptural production show gender to be integrally involved in his artistic project, and demonstrate that by moving critical focus away from the art object alone to consider also the unique lived experience of the male or female viewer, Minimalist art may be understood to convey gendered meaning.
Notes


2. The Judson Gallery began exhibiting performance and installation pieces by artists such as Jim Dine, Tom Wesselmann, Daniel Spoerri, Red Grooms and Claes Oldenburg around 1959. For activities by visual artists at the Judson Memorial Church, see Haskell 1984 and Marter, ed. 1999.

3. These were popular venues for many of the activities of New York’s avant-garde community of this period. Performances and exhibitions included work by dancers, musicians, poets, actors and visual artists.

4. Among the more famous non-dancers associated with the Judson were Robert Rauschenberg, Carolee Schneemann, James Tenney, Philip Corner, Alex Hay, and William Linich, who later became known as Billy Name at Andy Warhol’s Factory.

5. Morris did not feel that Check was as successful in its second performance, which took place in the smaller space of the Judson Church on March 24, 1965.

6. As noted in Lippard, Stella originally made this comment during the radio interview, conducted by Bruce Glaser on February 15, 1964 and broadcast on March 24, 1964 on WBAI-FM in New York as part of a series entitled “New Nihilism or New Art.”

7. Trio A, which became the first part of Rainer’s larger work, The Mind is a Muscle (1968), was originally performed by Rainer, Steve Paxton, and David Gordon at the Judson Memorial Church on January 10, 1965.

8. To eliminate the charismatic effect of her features, Rainer first tried blacking her face out in an earlier work called Partially Improvised New Untitled Solo with Pink T-Shirt, Blue Bloomers, Red Ball, and Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D Minor (Blumenthal 1999, 62–63). Rainer’s use of blackface holds obvious significance for the question of how race intersects with issues of spectatorial desire and the performer’s subjectivity. Although Rainer insists that neither did she intend any racial reference, nor did the audience interpret her action in such terms, the assumption that a white woman could be made less powerful over her audience by painting her features black deserves to be discussed in more detail than appropriate here.

9. Rainer wrote her text in 1966, but it was not published until 1968 when it appeared in Battcock 1968.

10. Column’s origins in the Living Theater performance have been well documented although contradictory dates have been posited for both the original construction and performance. See, for example, Paice 1994, 90; Chave fn. 47, 162; and Strickland 1993, 263–264.

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