

**Secular Body, Sacred Space:
Nude Dance at Judson Memorial Church**

By

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In 1961, 27-year-old dancer Yvonne Rainer attended a poetry reading at Judson Memorial Church, a Baptist institution and mecca of progressive social movement, free expression, and artistic exploration in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of downtown Manhattan. A year later, when her dance composition class searched for space to perform, Rainer recommended the Church. However, the group would first have to convince arts director Reverend Al Carmines to provide them with the space to show their work. Rainer recalls, “I remember having the feeling that Al wondered if we’d take all our clothes off or do something terrible.”¹ The dancers did not. Carmines and Church Leader Howard Moody gave the group space for their concert—the first of many. Judson Memorial Church became home to Judson Dance Theater (JDT). Four years later, Rainer took off all her clothes.

On Friday, March 25, 1965, a man and woman clasped each other in a face-to-face embrace. They stood on two tracks of wood placed horizontally across the stage—one foot on either plank. The man’s right hand rested on the small of the woman’s back. Her left hand sat on his shoulder. With the woman’s toes ever so slightly curled around the man’s, they took baby steps across the tracks. Directly behind the pair, a woman in an oversized suit held a rope that lengthened across the stage as she moved with the couple. The pair walked the entire track in this embrace. As he steps forward, she is moved backward. Upon reaching the end of the tracks, they are still. The lights cut to black.² For over 8 minutes, the couple held each other and inched across the stage to arias from Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra*.³ While the movement was not particularly compelling, an unanticipated aspect of the performance attracted critical attention: the pair was naked.

¹ Sally Banes, *Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1962-1964* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 35.

² *Four Pieces by Morris*, motion picture, 1993.

³ *Four Pieces by Morris*

This Judson Dance Theatre work, *Waterman Switch*, was part of a three-day concert run at Judson Memorial Church. Rainer and Robert Morris held each other nude while Lucinda Childs was dressed in a man's suit. The piece's nudity in the sanctity of the church elicited strong reactions from churchgoers and Ministers across the country. These reactions, ranging from awe to disgust, represent a microcosm of the tension between traditional values and the emerging cultural shifts sparked by the budding sexual revolution.

The 1960s marked the beginning of immense cultural upheaval in the United States as the burgeoning Sexual Revolution reexamined societal norms around gender, sexuality, and morality. This multi-faceted period of social change challenged long-standing taboos, reshaping attitudes toward premarital sex, contraception, abortion, and public discussions of intimacy. While these progressive ideologies flourished in some urban spaces, they stood in stark contrast to the 1950s Christian nationalist resurgence that had largely fortified convictions of 'traditional' sexual norms. The resulting tension between progressive and conservative ideologies created a cultural crucible in which art, like the nude performances at Judson Memorial Church, unwittingly became statements in broader countercultural debate.

Although JDT artists often resisted labeling their work as political and did not prescribe their use of nudity as a statement on the sexual paternalism of the Christian nation, the use of nude, moving bodies in the church—an inherently charged space—unwittingly transformed performances into cultural commentary. This thesis will explore how the use of the moving nude body in the Church, regardless of artistic intent, functioned as a critique of normative ideologies around sexuality and religious authority. I will demonstrate that it was not merely the presence of the naked body that incited outrage; rather, it was the sexual nude body—sexualized through a religious conception of the audience as a voyeur into the sanctity of the marital covenant.

Ultimately, I will argue that Judson Dance Theater's nude performances in the late 1960s, specifically Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainer's *Waterman Switch* (1965) and Rainer's *Trio A with Flags* (1970), challenged prevailing notions of sexual morality by juxtaposing the naked, moving body against the backdrop of a religious space, thereby confronting the deep-rooted Christian influence on American sexual norms, particularly traditional religious attitudes toward intimacy and the body, amidst the wider Sexual Revolution of the 1960s.

To substantiate this argument, I will first examine the historical relationship between Evangelical Christianity and American sexual identity in the 1950s and 60s, focusing on religious doctrines surrounding nudity and the sanctity of marriage. This context illuminates how JDT's performances occurred against intense religious influence on sexual morality. Building on Sally Banes's concept of the effervescent body and Ramsay Burt's theory of the unruly body in avant-garde performance, I begin my analysis with *Trio A with Flags*. As one of Yvonne Rainer's most studied works, documented through her writing and accessible video footage, *Trio A* (1966)—and its myriad versions, including 'with Flags'—is a cornerstone of avant-garde dance history and scholarly discourse. Then, I turn to *Waterman Switch*—a work that, despite its cultural impact, remains largely unexplored in dance scholarship. Through analysis of archival materials and critical responses, I excavate *Waterman Switch* from the margins of dance history to demonstrate its significance in challenging religious authority. While existing scholarship has extensively documented JDT's aesthetic innovations, this analysis reveals how their nude performances in a sacred space challenged Christian authority over sexual expression and heteronormative marital structures during the Sexual Revolution. By examining these works within their religious and historical contexts, this thesis addresses a significant gap in JDT scholarship: the implications of staging nude performances within a church setting.

One (Clothed) Nation under God

The idea of a “Christian America” has been a powerful ethos since the United States’ founding; however, after World War II, the religious conception that shaped American values and identity took on a renewed vigor. The 1950s saw a significant surge in membership and financial contributions to the Church that outpaced even the rapid population growth of the era. Between 1951 and 1961, the country’s population grew by 19 percent, and church attendance increased by 30 percent. Protestant churches alone gained over 12 million new members.⁴ This religious revival was closely aligned with the federal government, notably President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who described America’s identity as a “God-fearing nation,” a direct contrast to the secular communist Soviet Union. In the United States, attending Church was as patriotic as the Star Spangled Banner.⁵

Influential veterans’ groups, such as the American Legion, began “Back-to-God” programs to bolster the United States’ position as a global moral force, a central element of Cold War rhetoric. In February 1953, President Eisenhower addressed the American Legion, unequivocally tying the nation’s values and identity to religion: “Without God, there could be no American form of Government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first – the most basic – expression of Americanism. Thus, the Founding Fathers saw it, and thus, with God's help, it will continue to be.”⁶ One year later, “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance. In 1956, “In God We Trust” became the country’s official motto, and in 1957, it was added to paper currency.⁷

Christian influence permeated American society, serving as the bedrock of sexual and

⁴ John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

⁵ Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 66.

⁶ “Eisenhower: Back to God | WNYC | New York Public Radio, Podcasts, Live Streaming Radio, News,” WNYC, February 1, 1953, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/eisenhower-back-to-god/>.

⁷ Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 66.

moral norms. ‘God’ was everywhere—schools, homes, and the burgeoning mass media landscape. Hollywood films rigidly enforced Christian moral codes, particularly around sexuality. The Hays Code, the governing document regulating moral standards in the film industry, explicitly stated, “[t]he sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld... [Adultery] shall not be explicitly treated, nor shall they be justified or made to seem right or permissible.”⁸ For example, Sally Banes, in her text *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body*, highlights the restrictive nature of the Hays code through an anecdote from the film *That Touch of Mink*, in which the Doris Day character breaks into hives at the very suggestion of premarital sex.⁹

Unlike film, live theater and dance were not bound by the Hays Code; however, they were still influenced by the broader societal embrace of Christian moral norms. To avoid controversy, mainstream Broadway productions and dance performances, including classical ballet and modern dance, adhered to more conservative standards. Nudity was rare, and when it did occur, it was confined to underground performances where it could be framed as symbolic expression rather than indecency. Judson Dance Theater’s engagement with nudity reflected this reality. While JDT featured several choreographers and performers, very few explored nudity in their work. Of five identified performances incorporating the nude body—including Carole Schneeman’s *Meat Joy*, Robert Morris’ *Site*, and Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer’s *Word Words*—only *Waterman Switch* and *Trio A with Flags* featured full nudity in sustained motion.¹⁰

⁸“The Motion Picture Production Code” (Motion Picture Association of America, December 1956), Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, <http://catalog.oscars.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=13817>, 4.

⁹ Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Duke University Press, 1993), 232.

¹⁰ Most likely, there are more works I have not identified as including some form of nudity. Nude dance at Judson Memorial Church lacks widespread academic focus, and therefore, there is limited scholarship on the amount or frequency of works that explored movement and the unclothed body.; Ana Janevski, *Judson Dance Theater : The Work Is Never Done* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018).

For example, in *Word Words* (1963), Rainer and Paxton danced naked to emphasize uniformity between their bodies. However, wary of shocking audiences, they performed what Rainer described as a “chaste version of nudity,” exemplifying the cautious negotiation between artistic freedom and societal boundaries.¹¹ This type of self-regulation demonstrates how deeply entrenched and pervasive Christian moral standards had become in American society—a cultural influence further magnified by charismatic preachers who reached eager audiences through the growing popularity of radio and television.

Televangelists like Billy Graham framed what they identified as America’s most pressing problems through the lens of Christian morality. Televangelist’s teachings emphasized the sanctity of the nuclear family, defining marriage as a sacred covenant and sex as an “expression of the self-giving [between] the marriage partners” intended to remind the couple of their commitment to the Church, as their pairing was not an “accidental arrangement of the human species, but related to our creation in the image of God.”¹² This worldview dictated sexual behavior with unyielding clarity. ‘Saving oneself for marriage’ was a moral imperative. Premarital sex was considered not only an offense against God but also a threat to future marital happiness.¹³ As Graham described it,

The Bible indicates that immorality is a sin. But the Bible also indicates that sex is not a sin. It’s the wrong use of sex that’s sin. Many ancient and modern writers have held the idea that the body is evil.... But the body is not evil. The Bible teaches that your body is sacred. The Bible teaches that for the Christian that it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that includes your sex as well as every other part of your life.... God has put a fence around marriage and says, ‘Thou shall not commit immorality.’¹⁴

Within the sacred covenant of marriage, sex was moral; outside it, it was sinful. Public displays of nude intimacy outside the fence of marriage are against God’s will.

¹¹ Banes, *Democracy’s Body*, 93.

¹² Erling Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice*, Contributions to the Study of Religion, no. 57 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1993), 91.

¹³ Billy Graham - Sex & the Bible, 1967, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etsxCFblzqA>.

¹⁴ Billy Graham - Sex & the Bible.

Consequently, Graham's ability to reach large swaths of society with this strain of divine messaging successfully translated into another medium: print publications. The rise of the academic evangelical, driven in part by the creation of magazines such as Graham's *Christianity Today (CT)*, fulfilled the belief that "theological study had much to contribute to the redress of the many crises of public morality facing Americans."¹⁵ *CT* included both theological acumen and a broad range of intellectual interests. It not only catered to fundamentalist doctrine but proselytized a Christian ideal of sexual morality amidst a society that was increasingly questioning these standards.¹⁶ When Yvonne Rainier and Robert Morris performed *Waterman Switch* in 1965, the religious controversy that followed first showed up in the pages of *Christianity Today*.

The Effervescent, Unruly Body

While mainstream America was steeped in Christian nationalist ideology, a radical artistic movement was emerging in downtown Manhattan. A hub for experimental performance, Judson Memorial Church was home to artists challenging prevailing dance traditions and social norms. Judson Dance Theater foregrounded exploration and critique, sparking innovation and eventual cultural controversy. Nothing was off the table. A foremost scholar on Judson Dance Theatre, Sally Banes extensively documented the group's departure from traditional aesthetics. Though her analysis stops short of noticing the religious implications of nude performances in a sacred space, she offers an interpretation of a distinctly avant-garde body politic: the effervescent body. Banes argues that 1960s avant-garde artists stressed the "primacy of the bodily experience," which produced "meanings that were interrelated in their indulgence in every aspect

¹⁵ Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America*, 24.

¹⁶ Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America*, 24.

of the human form and their imaginative oxymoronic reconceptions of the human form as a set of opposites.”¹⁷ Banes views avant-garde performances as producing a new way to understand the human body, one that embodies multiple, often opposing, concepts simultaneously. The effervescent body—characterized by its permeability of social constraint —“freely indulges in excessive eating, drinking, sexual activity, and every other imaginable sort of licentious behavior,” rejecting social restrictions and making private bodily functions public.¹⁸ Banes adds dimension to the effervescent body by noting that an egalitarian ethos drove avant-garde artists to provide both the banal and taboo equal representation in their work.¹⁹ Avant-garde performance, like those produced by JDT, was a space where the effervescent body could hold these contradictions without resolution. It is important to note, however, that Banes’s interpretation of avant-garde embodied politics has not gone unchallenged.

In his book *Judson Dance Theatre: Performative Traces*, Ramsay Burt finds issues with Banes’s construction of the effervescent body. Where Banes describes the effervescent body as having achieved a “harmoniously integrated” mind and body through the lived experience of avant-garde performance, Burt rejects these visions of utopic unity in favor of what he sees as the critical potential of the unruly body.²⁰ For Burt, through the “refusal to conform to normative aesthetic expectation,” performers “creat[e] a context in which embodied experience could become a site of resistance against normative ideologies rather than an affirmation of them.”²¹ Where Banes sees the body as a site of indulgence, Burt sees the body as a site of resistance.

In the context of JDT, Burt’s understanding of the dancers’ bodies as unruly is particularly interesting, especially given that JDT artists often describe their 1960s work as not

¹⁷ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 191.

¹⁸ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 192.

¹⁹ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 128.

²⁰ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 191.

²¹ Ramsay Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

political. For instance, in Yvonne Rainer's first complete performance of *The Mind is a Muscle*, which included the renowned *Trio A*, she published a lengthy statement in the program:

The condition for the making of my stuff lies in the continuation of my interest and energy. Just as ideological issues have no bearing on the nature of the work, neither does the tenor of current political and social conditions have any bearing on its execution.... [This statement] is a reflection of a state of mind that reacts with horror and disbelief upon seeing a Vietnamese shot dead on TV—not at the sight of death, however, but at the fact that the TV can be shut off afterward as after a bad Western. My body remains the enduring reality.²²

In 1966, Rainer did not want *Trio A* to be interpreted as political propaganda. However, by explicitly stating this expectation, she created a context in which her work resisted normative ideologies. The dancers' bodies became unruly vessels targeting existing aesthetics and context. Rainer attempts to isolate the dancing body from the public sphere, a place where its significance is "circumscribed by that body's social and ideological construction."²³ By positioning the body as an "enduring reality" that cannot be simply "shut off" like violence on TV, Rainer establishes the physical presence of the dancer's form as an uncompromising force. In contrast to the mediated, fleeting images on a screen that can be easily dismissed, the raw, unadorned bodies of JDT performers demand engagement and confrontation.

Rainer's extensive involvement in JDT and comprehensive documentation of her artistic process provide a rich entry point for examining the interplay between the secular body and sacred space. Understanding 1966's *Trio A* neutral presentation of the body, her 1970 embrace of the explicitly political through the wearing of the American flag in *Trio A with Flags* allows us to interrogate how the movement—which stayed the same in both the 1966 and 1970 performances—is prescribed meaning by social and bodily contexts.²⁴ In 1966, Rainer intensely

²² Yvonne Rainer, *Work 1961-73* (Halifax, N.S. : New York: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design ; New York University Press, 1974), 71.

²³ Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 87.

²⁴ Both JDT scholars who I draw from for this paper have dedicated research to the political and social effects of minimalist, avant-garde ethos.

resisted the body's objectification as a political statement. In 1970, her "burgeoning feminist consciousness" reshaped her creative framework.²⁵ This evolution, which Rainer credits as pivotal in her transition from dance to film, reflects broader shifts in understanding how bodies inevitably carry political meaning, especially in attempts to evade any meaning at all.

The tension between the corporeal form's "enduring reality"—Banes's effervescent body—and its inevitable social contextualization reveals that avant-garde performers, like Rainer, engaged in acts of disruption despite aspirations toward purely physical, non-political presentation. Regardless of Rainer's intent, the body is not an isolated reality, and placing unadorned bodies in a church means that the body will challenge social norms. On the one hand, the effervescent body's unadorned form evokes the purity of Adam and Eve's natural state before the Fall, aligning with ideals of innocence and divine creation. On the other, the presentation of nudity in a religious space challenges the doctrine that equates nakedness with temptation and sin, thus converging with Burt's theorization of the unruly body. While Rainer could attempt to divorce the body from its social context, the avant-garde's egalitarian ethos empowered performers to hold both conformity and nonconformity within their corporeal form.

This interplay between effervescence and unruly resistance provides a framework for understanding the range of ways the nude body was presented, experienced, and received within the context of Judson Memorial Church. JDT artists who explored usages of the nude body simultaneously affirmed and criticized existing societal circumscriptions by presenting unclothed moving bodies within a religious institution. As Banes observed, dominant ideologies of the era demanded that bodies be "controlled and covered up."²⁶ The staging of two nude bodies in an intimate embrace, as Rainer and Morris did in *Waterman Switch*, created an unruly physicality

²⁵ Yvonne Rainer, *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carole Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass. : MIT Press, 2006), <http://archive.org/details/womenartistsatmi0000unse>.

²⁶ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 232.

that evoked premarital sexuality, disrupting both the sanctity and purist aesthetic traditionally associated with religious space. Paradoxically, the religious outcry against these performances served to validate the church's cultural authority over societal attitudes toward sexuality.

The effervescent body's occupation of a liminal space suggests that the validation of authority and dominant structures is also within the boundaries of its form. There is a duality to nudity: tension between innocence and transgression. Nudity in its natural state evokes the purity of a newborn child, uncorrupted by shame or sin. However, when framed through the lens of sexuality, the nude body becomes the subject of judgment, with condemnation arising not from the body itself but from the societal circumscription of aesthetic and moral boundaries.

As a choreographer of *Waterman Switch and Trio A with Flags*, Rainer's complex relationship with sexualization and politicization creates space for diverse interpretations of nudity. These performances reflect Rainer's choreographic intent—resistance to spectacle, non-political movement, or an attack on censorship—while inevitably engaging with the broader socio-political landscape. This analysis acknowledges the multiple and, at times, contradictory interpretations of nudity: those rooted in Rainer's choreographic intent and intellectual defiance of spectacle, those emerging from larger political realities, and those complicit with Christian ideals of natural form—recalling the purity of the unadorned human body in creation narratives. Recognizing that performance resists singular interpretation, this thesis explores nudity as transgressive due to its spatial context, understanding that the unclothed, moving body critiques, confronts, and affirms different ideals depending on its environment.

Thus, the avant-garde body transcends both Banes and Burt's singular frameworks. When staged in the church, the effervescent body is unruly. Where normative ideology attempts to segregate bodily expression into categorizations of right and wrong, the effervescent body

refuses such categorization. By embodying both the pure (unadorned human form) and impure (a public, moving, naked embrace), the nude body is indulgent while resisting the rigid structure of the church.

With this framework through which to analyze *Trio A with Flags* and *Waterman Switch*, the remainder of this paper will examine how the avant-garde artist's effervescent, unruly body challenged sexual expression beyond heteronormative marital structures within Judson Memorial Church performances. This complex interplay of purity and transgression is most evident in Rainer's *Trio A with Flags*, a performance that joins minimalism, nudity, and national symbolism to confront the policing of bodies and challenge the sanctity of religious and patriotic ideals.

Trio A with Flags (1970)

In November 1970, Judson Memorial Church hosted a week-long exhibition called *The People's Flag Show*. The purpose of the gathering was to discuss "repressive laws governing so-called flag desecration."²⁷ At the Flag Show's opening, Stephen Radich, a New York artist convicted in 1967 of desecrating the flag, shared his delight in the many artists who "continue to have the courage to express themselves by using the flag and other patriotic symbols."²⁸ One of these artists was Yvonne Rainer.

Rainer had reimagined her seminal work *Trio A* into an overt political message. Recalling her statement that "ideological issues have no bearing on the nature of the work, neither does the tenor of current political and social conditions have any bearing on its execution," *Trio A with Flags* emerged as a distinctly political intervention.²⁹ Through a juxtaposition of aesthetic

²⁷ Grace Glueck, "A Strange Assortment of Flags Is Displayed at 'People's Show,'" *The New York Times*, November 10, 1970, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/11/10/archives/a-strange-assortment-of-flags-is-displayed-at-peoples-show.html>.

²⁸ Glueck, "A Strange Assortment."

²⁹ Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, 71.

structure, nakedness, and national symbolism, Rainer's performance manifested what Ramsay Burt describes as enabling "dancers to recognize that the dancing body was not, in fact, value-free or an enduring reality but a site of contestation and resistance against dominant ideologies."³⁰ By subverting her previous claims of political neutrality, Rainer transformed *Trio A* into a critique of how bodies are policed, regulated, and inscribed with meaning—revealing the effervescent, unruly body's inherent political potential as a site of aesthetic practice.

The dancers performed *Trio A* in the sanctuary of Judson Memorial Church with three-by-five-foot flags tied around their necks like bibs, unclothed underneath.³¹ In *Trio A*, Rainer's choreography is continuous, mostly pedestrian vocabulary, with all movement inhabiting time as dictated by the actual weight and energy the body takes to execute. There is no emphasis. About three minutes into the piece, the dancer swings their arms back and forth, as if walking, while their knees are hip-width and their torso gradually leans forward. They then transition into swatting their head as if saying no. Their eyes are always closed when facing the audience, and their expression remains blank. They unceremoniously stand up to face the audience, chin hanging on their chest, rolling down as if engaged in a slow hamstring stretch. There is no discernable difference in intention between each movement.³² There is no discernable phrasing that suggests temporality to the work.

Rainer calls *Trio A* a survey of "minimalist" tendencies. She choreographs against the grain of what she characterized as the prevailing norms of Western dance choreography: the "attack" and the "climax."³³ It is a continuous phrase of movement—like dance—but without the spectacle that defined prominent modern dance choreography of the time. Modern dance before

³⁰ Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 137.

³¹ Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, 172.

³² *Trio A*, 2023, <https://www.numeridanse.tv/en/dance-videotheque/trio>.

³³ Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, 65.

Judson Dance Theatre held a theatrical structure, with music, dynamics, and codified technique set on a stage, removed from the spectator.³⁴ When watching *Trio A* performed, it does not feel like Rainer's choreography is in the traditional dance vernacular. She choreographs a slump forward—not a contraction. She jumps from two legs and lands on one—not a *sissonne*. Contractions and *sissonnes* are virtuosic movements. They are codified terminology for dance forms defined by tradition. *Trio A* challenges the modern dance establishment in the same way, the American conceptions of sexual morality are at odds with the use of moving nude bodies in the sanctuary of a church.

Trio A with Flag's coupling of choreography that rejects the modern dance 'establishment' with nude bodies adorned only by American flags performed within the sanctum of a church communicates an irreverence for following convention. The flag, a marker of a collective American identity (similar to how attending church on Sundays is a form of collective American identity), becomes a minimal garment that paradoxically draws attention to the exposed bodies, creating provocation between the idealized, symbolic body of the nation and the raw individual bodies of the performers.

Ramsay Burt describes this provocation as “conceptually violent” toward established behavior dictating a reverent treatment of the flag.³⁵ As it pertains to Christian ideals of sexual morality, this violence is also conducted through a viewing of the moving nude body outside the confines of marriage. The physical and ideological conflation of the American flag, nude bodies, and the church embodies an intimate entanglement between church and state, artistically conceptualizing how governing institutions aim to control sexual expression through the rigid prescription of the marital covenant—a framework that dictates acceptable bodily behavior and

³⁴ Banes, *Democracy's Body*.

³⁵ Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 136.

intimate relations within narrowly defined, religiously sanctioned boundaries. As illustrated by the Stars and Stripes laying upon the observable, dancing genitals of the nude body, *Trio A with Flags* “gave voice to an antagonism that questioned its own conditions of representability.”³⁶ Aligning with the effervescent, unruly body’s defiance of binary categorization and its ability to both embody and resist dominant ideologies, the American flag on the nude moving body provides imagery of government and religious censorship of sexuality while also resisting normative constraints on bodily expression and national symbolism. In the words of Yvonne Rainer, “To combine the flag and nudity seemed a double-barreled attack on repression and censorship.”³⁷

In contrast to how Rainer describes *Trio A with Flags* as an attack, the relationship between the flesh and flag does not have to be read solely through an antagonistic lens. The nude body, representing an uninscribed canvas, could also be seeking communion with foundational American principles of liberty and equality. The work could be interpreted as an affirmation of these ideals, suggesting that the body’s nakedness underscores the dignity and autonomy promised by the American ethos. Conversely, the flag might function as a ceremonial object, evoking a ritualism that bridges personal expression and collective identity.

However, this alternative reading does not negate the work’s critical edge. By staging the nude body in motion, loosely covered by the flag within the sanctum of a church, Rainer confronts authority, freedom, and morality in American culture. The coexistence of affirmation and critique in *Trio A with Flags* exemplifies the duality of the effervescent, unruly body, demonstrating how nudity can simultaneously challenge and uphold dominant ideologies. This duality invites us to question whether freedom in America is truly free or always mediated

³⁶ Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 136.

³⁷ Rainer, *Work 1961-73*, 172.

through ideological structures like religion and nationalism.

Trio A with Flags challenged the church, a bastion of moral authority and community standards. Rainer's work blurs the line between sacred and profane and between national symbols and individual expressions. It embodies a tension between social movements that emphasize individual freedom and the moral boundaries of what it means to be 'American' as imposed by religious doctrine. *Trio A with Flags* is a study on the limits of freedom, the role of tradition, and the changing nature of American identity.

Waterman Switch (1965)

Even before *Trio A with Flags*, *Waterman Switch* challenged Christian sexual morality not through overt provocation but through its staging of intimate nudity within sacred space.³⁸ Two moving bodies in a standing embrace—Rainer's bare breasts pressed up against Morris' bare chest, their small steps across wooden planks created a measured procession that seemed to both mirror and subvert religious ceremony.³⁹ Through deliberately restrained movement and a lack of expression, *Waterman Switch*'s presentation of intimate nudity outside the sanctified bounds of marriage, within church walls, created a decisive confrontation with prevailing Christian sexual norms.

Lucinda Childs, dressed in a man's suit, walked beside the couple. She remained largely hidden from view, positioned upstage of the pair.⁴⁰ She was only visible as she exited and

³⁸ While my research for *Trio A with Flags* drew from existing Judson academic scholarship, *Waterman Switch* is seldom mentioned in existing work. For this section, my research draws from New York University's Judson Memorial Church digital archives that include correspondence regarding *Waterman Switch* and the controversy surrounding the Church that followed. I also visited the New York Public Library Performing Arts Division where there is publicly available footage of *Waterman Switch* as performed in Robert Morris' *Four Pieces*—albeit this version was performed almost 30 years following the work's JDT inception.

³⁹ *Four Pieces by Morris*

⁴⁰ Lucinda Childs is a postmodern dancer and a founding member of Judson Dance Theatre.

returned. On her return, she walked behind the pair again, extending a rope across the stage.⁴¹ Her costume and positioning created a striking visual metaphor for religious authority. A suited figure stretching a rope taut across a religious space elicits a physical representation of an attempt to constrain—evoking the Church’s attempt to bind the moving, nude body within a ‘traditional’ understanding of expression where sexual interaction is bound to a sacred marital covenant.⁴² The rope’s dual role as both a binding and measuring device, along with its artificial nature, resists inflexible religious doctrines that govern intimate physical experience. The rope and its use by Childs question the infallibility of religious authority.

The element of nudity in *Waterman Switch* is a tableau that mirrors the intimacy of sexual intercourse—the entanglement of the nude in motion. Most significantly, this image was not confined to the private sphere of a marital bed but displayed publicly. The unsuggestive nudity of *Waterman Switch* inside the ultimate religious space breaks the Church’s spatial and temporal control of the body. This resistance is best described through the lens of Banes and Burt’s effervescent, unruly body. The nude dancers present the “primacy of bodily experience” in its most basic form.⁴³ The pair is pure in their simplicity. There is no sensationalization or pornographic gyration, yet they are transgressive in their context within the Church, creating “a site of resistance against normative ideologies.”⁴⁴ The bodies were simultaneously indulgent in their nakedness yet restrained in their movement, effervescent in their presence yet unruly in their defiance of traditional religious space.

This embodied contradiction is further exemplified through the contrasting critical reception from the audience and the wider Christian community. In a *New York Times* review

⁴¹ *Four Pieces by Morris*

⁴² Billy Graham - *Sex & the Bible*.

⁴³ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 191.

⁴⁴ Burt, *Judson Dance Theater*, 21.

published the evening after Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainier's performance of *Waterman Switch*, arts writer Grace Glueck wryly reported, “[n]udity may be banned from the Broadway stage, but it found sanctuary last night in a dance program at Judson Memorial Church.”⁴⁵ Rather than scandal, the performance elicited “groans of disappointment” from audience members who had hoped “for an adagio or a pirouette that would have taken more advantage of the situation.”⁴⁶ Glueck's observation that Morris and Rainer “seemed almost intent on showing that nudity on stage can be nearly as prim and proper as a church social” was echoed by DANCE Magazine's Jacqueline Maskey, who described the inclusion of nudity as “unsensational and unsuggestive, its attempt to shock seemed, oddly enough, only touching.”⁴⁷

The reaction beyond New York City proved far more contentious. Billy Graham's *Christianity Today* readership took issue with the performance. In their April edition of “NEWS: Church and State,” *CT* published the following:

Modern man's preoccupation with sex seems now to be taking on ecclesiastical aspects.

At Judson Memorial Church (American Baptist) in New York's Greenwich Village, a dance program last month included a number in which a man and woman, both nude, moved across the stage in a face-to-face embrace.⁴⁸

Judson Memorial Church received numerous letters from religious leaders and *CT* consumers nationwide. The letters expressed shock and dismay that a “condition of sexual immorality” had befallen an American Baptist Church.⁴⁹ One particularly distressed church-goer shared his disdain, stating, “as long as there are people who look at the Church and its members as the

⁴⁵ Grace Glueck, “Dance Program Offers 2 Nudes,” March 26, 1965, Judson Dance Theater - Yvonne Rainer/Robert Morris 3/23/1965: 1965, NYU Special Collections.

⁴⁶ Grace Glueck, “Dance Program Offers 2 Nudes.”

⁴⁷ Grace Glueck, “Dance Program Offers 2 Nudes.”; Jacqueline Maskey, “Reviews: Yvonne Rainer and Robert Morris,” May 1965, Judson Dance Theater-Yvonne Rainer/Robert Morris 3/23/1965: 1965, NYU Special Collections.

⁴⁸ “Sexual Dialogue,” *Christianity Today*, April 23, 1965, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/magazine/1965/april-23/>, CT Archives.

⁴⁹ Pieter Smit, “Dear Pastor Moody,” May 3, 1965, Judson Dance Theater - Correspondence concerning “Nude Dance in Church” issue 3/25/1965: 1965, NYU Special Collections, https://sites.dlib.nyu.edu/viewer/photos/mss094_ref270/107.

bearers of certain ethical and moral standards and the conscience of the community – then I, as a member of Baptist Church, has no moral right to do anything which will cast a shadow on the witness of my Church.”⁵⁰ The prevailing belief was that the performance of *Waterman Switch* had damaged the community of faith. This troubled commentary underscores a deep-seated belief in the church’s role as a moral compass for society and the perceived threat of its destabilization.

The measured responses from dance critics and arts patrons starkly contrast the moral outrage expressed by religious voices from afar. Christian critics imagined sexual impropriety and moral degradation; those who watched live characterized *Waterman Switch* as something remarkably unremarkable. Descriptions such as “unsensational,” “unsuggestive,” and even “prim and proper” stood in contrast to the comments made by those reacting solely to the *idea* of nudity in the church. Glueck’s mention of audience disappointment further exemplifies this disparity, sharing how some viewers anticipated “more.” This disappointment suggests a cultural expectation of nudity as a provocateur. Where my interpretation frames *Waterman Switch* as a critique of religious authority, the performance’s “unsensational” presentation of nudity aligns surprisingly with ideals of Christian modesty. From this perspective, nudity can be seen as reverential, affirming Christian values within the context of marital intimacy. While this alignment with traditional ideals echoes Rainer’s *Word Words*’ “chaste nudity,” dual reactions to *Waterman Switch*—boredom and shock—emphasize the cultural expectations imposed on the work.

If the performance was unsensational to the point of disappointment for some viewers, did it really challenge religious norms' sanctity, or did it merely offer an alternative framing of

⁵⁰ Guy Podratz, “Dear Dr. Moody,” May 15, 1965, Judson Dance Theater - Correspondence concerning “Nude Dance in Church” issue 3/25/1965: 1965, NYU Special Collections.

bodily expression within the Church's moral framework? Perhaps it did both—by occupying the space between critique and affirmation, *Waterman Switch* blurred the line between subverting and affirming religious norms, inviting questions of what constitutes transgression in a sacred space.

The effervescent, unruly body rebels against exclusive understandings of 'pure' vs. 'impure.'⁵¹ Morris and Rainer's nude embrace defied binary categorization. For some, *Waterman Switch* became a site of moral panic. For others, the unsensational presentation of the body offered an alternative to the voyeuristic or eroticized portrayals often associated with nudity in performance. These conflicting responses expose the arbitrary nature of norms. The nonsexual, bland viewing of the body by direct observers contrasted with religious outcry suggests that the sexualization of the body is not necessarily inherent but a product of cultural conditioning. With 1965's prevailing societal expectations being primarily dictated by the 1950s conflation of religion with the broader American tradition, *Waterman Switch* reveals that the perception of the body as a site of extramarital temptation and sin is not universal or innate but instead, a construct heavily influenced by Evangelical teachings. That the performance proceeded without police interference or community scandal—marked only by its surprising ordinariness—was perhaps the most potent critique of existing sexual norms.

Anything but Ordinary

What is considered ordinary? For readers of *Christianity Today*, the moving, nude body in the church was anything but ordinary. As many scholars have, labeling the works of Judson Dance Theater as 'revolutionary' overlooks that these performances primarily operated within the confines of traditional gender roles. *Waterman Switch*, for instance, featured a heterosexual

⁵¹ Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 191.

couple in an intimate embrace, potentially evoking alignment with conservative Christian family values.⁵² However, these binary interpretations—ordinary or revolutionary—miss a crucial layer of complexity. The effervescent, unruly body reveals that transgression and affirmation are not mutually exclusive but are in a precarious and tense dance with one another.

Waterman Switch may appear to uphold traditional values in its portrayal of heterosexual intimacy. Yet, it simultaneously disrupts those same values by presenting nude, moving bodies in a sacred space, thereby challenging the prevailing Christian-influenced normative ideologies that sought to control bodily expression. *Trio A with Flags* contends with the tension between affirmation and transgression in a far more explicit manner. By combining nudity with the powerful symbol of the American flag, Rainer visually adds political and national commentary to the body. The work explores the body's resistance to social norms by interrogating how religious and state institutions regulate the body. Where *Waterman Switch* remains within the boundaries of conventional heterosexual intimacy, *Trio A with Flags* explicitly politicizes the nude body by staging it in a performative context. These works show the body as not simply an object of sexual or religious control but a site of resistance and radical expression.

Whether it was the American flag draped over the nude, moving body, or a tableau of sexual intimacy in motion across the sanctuary, the artistic and cultural impact of *Waterman Switch* and *Trio A with Flags* encapsulated the Sexual Revolution's struggle for personal freedom in a world that sought to govern the most intimate moments of human experience. In the context of these works, the effervescent, unruly body, as a site of affirmation and transgression, functions to destabilize prevailing notions of sexual morality by juxtaposing the naked, moving body

⁵² Yvonne Rainer is a lesbian, although she did not 'come out' until 1990. When analyzing *Waterman Switch* through a retrospective lens, it becomes clear that the work should not be understood solely as a depiction of heterosexual intimacy, but rather as another mode of transgression. Rainer's identity is particularly significant when considering her numerous performances in a church—a space defined by heteronormative sexual orientation. While this paper primarily focuses on the works themselves, it is important to acknowledge how the identities of JDT artists—Rainer included—contributed either transgressive or affirmative purposes while performing in a sacred space.

against the confines of a sacred space. While it is important to note that these works are not isolated to this paper's conceptualization of the nude, moving body in a sacred space, I offer this interpretation as a means of drawing attention to how Judson Dance Theater's nude works and the critical reactions that followed, functioned as a microcosm of budding tensions that would soon be pervasive in everyday life as the Sexual Revolution rose to national prominence.

Waterman Switch and *Trio A with Flags* illustrate the complex ways the nude, moving body navigates social and institutional control. Through these works, we see how JDT's use of the naked body in a sacred space not only challenged existing norms but also revealed entrenched cultural anxieties surrounding intimate sexuality, morality, and conceptions of freedom. The body becomes a site of both affirmation and transgression, of submission and subversion, demonstrating how challenging entrenched traditions do not always lead to a complete rejection of prevailing ideals but rather a reconceptualization of their meaning and function.

The nude body serves as more than simply a symbol of sexual or religious control; it is an instrument of radical self-expression, rejecting the constraints of state and religious institutions alike. By employing minimalist aesthetics, these works emphasize the body's potential as both a performer and subject capable of challenging the very systems that seek to govern it. Together, *Waterman Switch* and *Trio A with Flags* reflect how Judson Dance Theater's performances cannot be easily categorized as revolutionary or conservative. Instead, they operate within the space where normative ideology, political power, and the body intersect—highlighting the body's power to conform and resist the structures that define it.

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