

Shannon Cochrane on What If? by Maja Delak



What if I quit?
What if I didn't?
What do you do with old junk?

What If?, Maja Delak's meditation on the aging body - the aging female body to be specific - and all the ways it fails us, is arresting. I am not a dancer, and haven't spent the better part of the last twenty years watching dance the way I have watched performance art, but the vocabulary of What If? feels familiar. I am also a 40-something year old woman, an artist, working in/for culture, and wondering – where does this end? Or better, how does this end? Perched between not being young and not being old, defined by and sometimes limited by the body, by gender, by age, the questions What If? asks about the artistic and the personal self have a relatable urgency.

Lately I've been a bit obsessed with a dance work entitled Trio A by Yvonne Rainer. Trio A was a seminal dance work from the late 60s that has taken a place in the living archive of dance in a unique way. Not as repertoire, but as a pedagogical tool. There are only a few people in the world who are authorized by Rainer to teach Trio A, and it is not a work that is regularly performed, or by just anyone. Trio A is not a thing that is taught, rather it is transmitted.

When you look at [Yvonne dancing Trio A for Babette Mangolte's film camera in 1978](#), you see a young(ish) dancer moving the way her body moved, moving the way dancers moved at the time. One year ago I saw one of [Rainer's team perform Trio A](#), and I see the same movements transposed onto a

dancer trained in a different era. Her extension is different. The way she collapses to the ground looks different. Even her feet look different. This difference has become a characteristic of an aging work. Instead of insisting the work remain static, youthful, stuck in time, perfect, Trio A has been allowed to age, with grace and intelligence. Full circle in the life cycle of the work, Yvonne still occasionally performs Trio A, what she calls the geriatric version. In this version performed by an older body, the dance has given way to the voice, and Rainer moves through the sequence by calling out the names of the various movements. Where the body fails, language takes over.

I love it when dancers don't dance. I love it when they spend more time on stage talking (at one point Maja says, "I realized I spend more time typing than dancing), or singing, or lying on the ground, or bleating into the microphone, because when they do move - when they resort to dancing - it feels charged and critical. When Maja dances, the way she moves underlines her vulnerability and at the same time her way of moving insists: I am capable. I am strong. I can do this. I have done this. When Maja confesses that her first choreography was not a solo presented some years ago in this same festival, but a dance to a Donna Summer's song she choreographed on a group of friends on the last day of school when she was a teenager, her demonstration of the dance is suitably dated, and in spite of the fact that it is delivered through her 44-year old, practiced and accomplished body, it soars, and it's a bit heart breaking. It starts off as the feel-good moment of the piece, but ends manically, her back to the audience, screaming at her invisible troupe of dancers. Encouragement has turned into aggressive cheerleading, an outer display of her inner monologue, and we are propelled back into the world of grown-up frustrations. As dancers know all too well, the body remembers everything. At the end of What If? I feel this is both a blessing and a curse.