



# EXPANDING SPACE

Ronald Bladen Al Held Yvonne Rainer George Sugarman





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from the top:  
Ronald Bladen in studio,  
circa 1950's

Al Held in  
Fifth Avenue Studio, 1965

Peter Moore  
[Yvonne Rainer improvising,  
Yam Festival at Segal's Farm,  
1963] (detail), 1963  
Gelatin silver print  
11 x 14 in. (27.9 x 35.6 cm)  
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Licensed by VAGA, New York,  
NY. Courtesy Paula Cooper  
Gallery, New York

George Sugarman  
in Paris, 1951



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## Expanding Space:

Ronald Bladen, Al Held, Yvonne Rainer, George Sugarman  
Robert S. Mattison

“The only valid criterion of the vitality of ideas is their power to inspire artists to creation.”<sup>1</sup>

In the years shortly after mid-century, sculptor Ronald Bladen, painter Al Held, choreographer/dancer Yvonne Rainer, and sculptor George Sugarman shared a complex personal, intellectual, and artistic history. At night, they smoked, drank, and argued until dawn in each other’s studios and in New York’s downtown cultural watering-holes like Max’s Kansas City and Fanelli’s saloon. Their passionate debates and give-and-take of ideas lent increased intensity, rigor, and lucidity to their creative endeavors.

In 1950, Held travelled to Paris on the G.I. Bill to study painting. There, he befriended Sugarman who had also come to Paris to study painting. After returning to New York in 1953, Held spent the year 1955 in San Francisco where he met the young Rainer, who was then studying acting at the Theater Arts Colony. Rainer and Held eventually married and lived together until 1959. In turn, Rainer introduced Held to Bladen, and Al and Ronnie became lifelong friends.

John Cohen  
*Tanager Gallery, 10th Street,*  
*Lois Dodd in window, 1959*  
Copyright John Cohen,  
Courtesy of L. Parker  
Stephenson Photographs, NYC



Bladen had been in San Francisco since 1939 studying painting and had developed a close relationship with avant-garde poets and musicians. He had met Rainer at the San Francisco jazz clubs. In 1956, Held decided to depart for New York City with Rainer, who was then twenty-one, in her words “to begin another life.”<sup>2</sup> Held also urged Bladen to come to New York recalling, “We talked a lot about everything, especially about the scene in New York.”<sup>3</sup> A few months later, following Held’s lead, Bladen moved to New York where he camped out for several months at Held and Rainer’s loft before finding his own place.

Sugarman had returned to New York in 1955 captivated by what he termed the “conglomerate” heterogeneity of New York City and established a studio on East 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. Shortly afterwards, Held and Rainer took a studio/loft nearby on 5 West 21<sup>st</sup> Street. The artists became deeply involved in the cutting-edge Tenth Street gallery scene. In 1957, Bladen, Held, and Sugarman were among the founding members of artist-run Brata Gallery. Bladen described Brata as “vital and invigorating, rougher than the other Tenth Street galleries.”<sup>4</sup>

The four went to avant-garde music venues, gallery openings, and modern dance performances; together, they would heatedly dissect the



Yvonne Rainer, Al Held, and Mara Held, 1958  
Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation

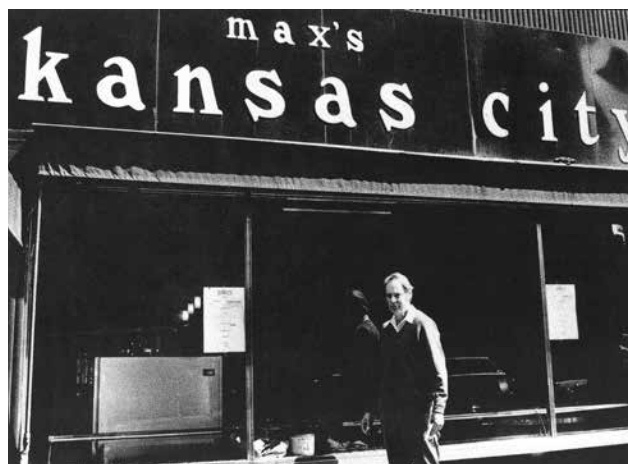
George Sugarman, Louie Finkelstein, Ronald Bladen, and Yvonne Rainer in Al and Yvonne’s loft, 1958  
Courtesy of the Al Held Foundation

cultural scene.<sup>5</sup> During these years, Bladen, Held, and Sugarman were so close that they were often referred to as the “three musketeers.” Held turned his 21<sup>st</sup> Street studio over to Bladen in 1960, and the enormous size of the new space encouraged Bladen to begin making sculptures.

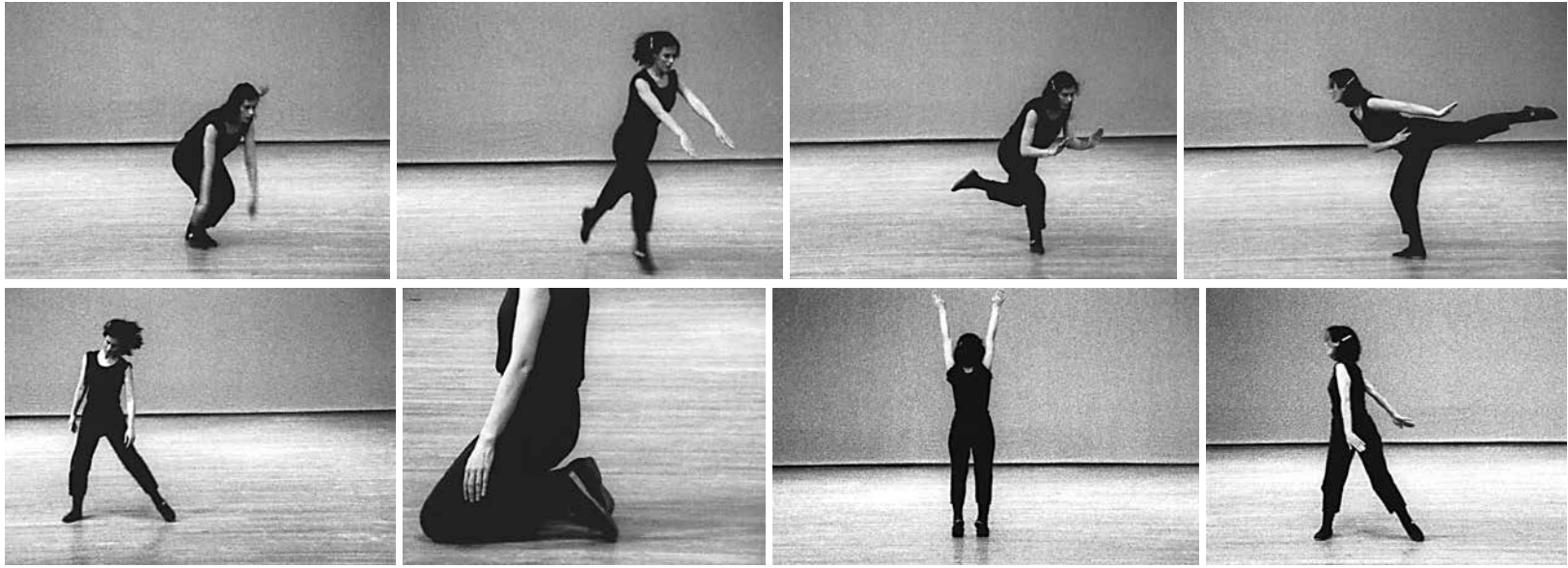
In 1965, art historian Irving Sandler organized the exhibition *Concrete Expressionism* at the Loeb Student Center of New York University that brought together Bladen, Held, and Sugarman in addition to Knox Martin and David Weinrib. Sandler wrote, “The five artists have been grouped together because they are closer in attitude to each other than to any other tendency.”<sup>6</sup> The reductive and powerful “attitude” about which Sandler wrote also extended to the arena of dance.

In 1965, Yvonne Rainer choreographed *Trio A*, which was presented at Judson Church in January 1966 as part of *The Mind is a Muscle*. Later, Rainer wrote about Sugarman’s importance to her as a role model, “For me George

came to represent an ideal of the artist who devotes his life to his passion and doesn’t let anything distract him from making art, neither poverty nor personal relations, nor emotional setbacks.”<sup>7</sup> In Rainer’s words, “George was a stalwart witness to my earliest performances between 1961 and 1965.”<sup>8</sup>



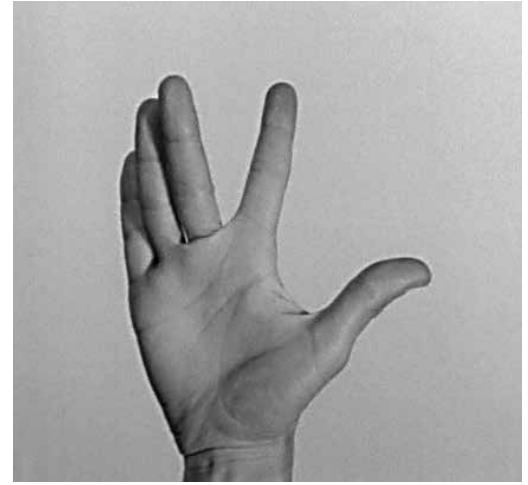
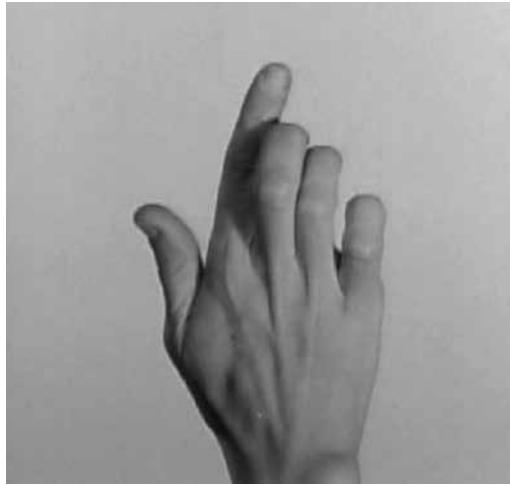
Ronald Bladen,  
Max's Kansas City,  
213 Park Avenue  
South, 1972



So, what were some of the ideas exchanged by Bladen, Held, Rainer, and Sugarman? The four were disenchanted with the imprecise character they found in Abstract Expressionism and in the emotional dances of Martha Graham. Their careers paralleled the rise of Minimalism with which each has been associated at various times. The four, however, were set apart from mainstream Minimalism because they viewed its approach to form and space as mechanistic and formulaic. Sugarman wrote of his sculpture, "Indeed, it challenges the minimal at almost every point in its aesthetic. Space, relationships and activity are dirty words to the minimalists. Certainly my sculpture is active; certainly it is involved with, and involves the spectator

Yvonne Rainer  
*Trio A*, 1966  
 Film, Approx. 10 minutes long  
 Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of  
 Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org),  
 School of the Art Institute of Chicago.





Yvonne Rainer  
"Hand Movie" A clip from the "Five Easy Pieces", 1966, film, 8mm, 5 minutes,  
Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank,  
[www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org), School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

A MANIFESTO  
Yvonne Rainer

1965

NO to spectacle

No to virtuosity

No to transformations and magic and make-believe

No to the glamour and transcendence 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

RECONSIDERED

2008

Avoid if at all possible

Acceptable in limited quantity.

Magic is out: the other two are sometimes tolerable.

Acceptable only as quotation.

Dancers are ipso facto heroic.

Don't agree with that one.

Don't understand that one

Spectators: stay in your seat.

Style is unavoidable.

A little goes a long way.

Unavoidable.

If you mean "unpredictable," that's the name of the game.

Unavoidable.

in a changing internal volume and a spatial experience... And certainly it is dramatic, which no minimalist (Heaven forbid!) would allow.”<sup>9</sup> Bladen said, “But the ‘minimal’ artists don’t mean ‘drama.’ They mean ‘less sufficient.’ Whereas what I am after is to create drama out of a minimal experience.”<sup>10</sup>

Bladen, Held, Rainer, and Sugarman shared a drive toward clarity of composition. For them, such lucidity focused and intensified the visual power of their art. An essential component of that directness was the avoidance of the relational structures—the balance of one part against another—that had dominated much modern art since Cubism. They also rejected predetermined modular components that were a basis of Minimalism. For the four artists, each form whether it be a sculptural element, a painterly shape, or a dance movement must occupy its own space. Rainer termed this “equality of parts.”<sup>11</sup> All believed that the careful placement of a form or gesture within its particular space gave it physicality, specificity, and visual authority.

They asserted that their art activated space and that the spatial experience was participatory. Physical involvement was essential to their pieces. They aimed to provide dynamic spatial events that would profoundly engage the viewer on both intellectual and emotional levels.

In addition, all four believed in handmade objects or in the case of Rainer dances with “task or task-like activity.”<sup>12</sup> While they rejected the



Al Held  
*Hung Low*, 1966  
Acrylic on canvas over board  
24 ½ x 18 ½ inches

Al Held  
*Thalocropolis*, 1966  
Acrylic on canvas  
84 x 72 inches



cult of personality that surrounded Abstract Expressionism, they cast off the anonymity proposed in Minimalist theory. Instead, they intended their works to have visual impact, or in a term used by all of them “presence,” a condition that was due to workmanship as well as personal and sometimes surprising choices made by the artist.

Bladen, Held, and Sugarman were interested in the scientific and engineering discoveries of their time. During their lifetimes, the physical relationship between objects and space was influenced by the space race, discoveries in quantum physics and astrophysics, electronic technology, new engineering, and architectural discoveries. This is not to suggest that they were physicists or engineers, but they were sensitive to complex ideas about mass, structure, movement, and space that dominated their age.

The four also shared socialist political views. In the midst of the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s, they would argue fervently for long hours about the relationship between society and culture. The fact that they gravitated toward the creation of public murals in the case of Held, public sculptural commissions in the cases of Bladen and Sugarman, and non-proscenium venues in the case of Rainer evinced their common belief that art could make a difference to society. Rainer wrote, “When I first began teaching *Trio A* to

Ronald Bladen  
*The Sentinels* (Model), 1972  
Painted wood  
16 x 17 x 15 inches  
unique to its size, fabricated  
by studio



opposite page  
Ronald Bladen  
*V* (Mid Scale), 1973  
Painted aluminum  
60 ½ x 106 x 8 inches  
Edition 1 of 3



anyone who wanted to learn it—skilled , unskilled, professional, fat, old, sick, amateur—and gave tacit permission to anyone who wanted to teach it to teach it. I envisioned myself as a post-modern dance evangelist bringing movement to the masses,..."<sup>13</sup>



Ronald Bladen's *V (Mid Scale)* aligns to one of the artist's first monumental public commissions. In 1969, Bladen was included in the important exhibition *14 Sculptors: The Industrial Edge* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. At the end of the exhibition, the Walker's legendary director Martin Friedman formed a committee that selected Bladen as the sculptor to execute a monumental work for the Minneapolis government center, a pair of 24 story glass towers. Bladen conceived *V* which consists of two arms raised off the ground at 45 degree angles and supported by rectangular base notched along its upper side. Bladen intended his sculpture to be 60 feet tall and 106 feet long, an ambitious proposal for the artist's second public commission. The plan for *V* was approved by the county commission only to be overturned at the last minute by the city council.

As seen in the mid-scale edition, *V* reaches toward the sky and embraces the surrounding environment. Its arms form an open-ended gesture that suggests extension into infinite space. "V" is a primal sign for exaltation, one that has existed since human beings first raised their arms

George Sugarman  
*Yellow and Blue Spiral*, 1967  
Acrylic on wood  
33 x 19 x 19 inches



opposite page  
George Sugarman  
*Orange, Blue and Black*, 1968-1970  
Acrylic on wood  
50 x 65 x 19 ½ inches



in a gesture of triumph. A recent sociological study has indicated that the gesture is common among primates, and even athletes who are sight impaired and thus have never seen the signal will use it in a moment of triumph.<sup>14</sup> The “V” gesture with two fingers, made famous by Prime Minister Winston Churchill, was one of the enduring symbol of hope and confidence during World War II. In the 1960s and 1970s, “V” became a new generation’s international sign for peace.

Al Held’s *Thalocropolis* is a powerful visual statement. The composition is almost sculptural in its spatial clarity and structural character. *Thalocropolis*’s scale asserts that it is a public statement, and its precision of design, as well as its title, are architectonic.<sup>15</sup> Neither the white nor black areas of the painting can be read as figure or ground; they coexist as strong equal elements. The black area both partially borders and bisects the composition. On one hand, the work is entirely unified and self-sufficient. On the other, the notch with yellow area at the bottom right edge of the painting is a surprising divergence—a decision that asserts the artist’s personal choice. That un-bordered area—a device that Held borrowed from Piet Mondrian—proposes that the space of the painting may be expanded beyond its physical edges.

*Thalocropolis* is one of Held’s *Alphabet Paintings*, a group of monumental works that precede the deliberate spatial ambiguities of works from 1967 onwards, and it marks a point where Held’s bold sensibility is particularly close to that of Bladen and Rainer.

Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* was first performed in four and one-half minutes as three simultaneous solos by Rainer, David Gordon, and Steve Paxton. In *Trio A*, the individually articulated gestures featured in Rainer’s words “a great variety of movement shapes” that are “of equal weight and are equally emphasized.”<sup>16</sup>



There are no pauses between phrases nor are there repetitions. Rainer described the dance, “The phrases themselves consist of separate parts, such as limb articulations –‘right leg, left leg, arms, jump,’ etc.”<sup>17</sup> Each phrase extends into space as an individual three-dimensional element. *Trio A* concerns specificity and lucidity, and it breaks with traditional modern dance phrasing by rejecting the notion of “spectacle,” and idea of “narrative climaxes,” just exactly as Bladen, Held, and Sugarman broke with tradition in favor of visual lucidity.<sup>18</sup>

Rainer has written of her effort to arrive at precise movements. While she chose dance positions that do not require traditional ballet training, *Trio A*'s seemingly impromptu choreography is actually carefully thought-out and highly deliberate.

Just as Bladen, Held, and Sugarman sought public venues for their art, Rainer's *Trio A* was designed so that it could be performed under varied circumstances, and in her words it has “undergone many incarnations.”<sup>19</sup> These include a 1970 performance by the Grand Union dance group in which the dancers were naked except for large American flags, worn as protest against people who had been arrested for “desecrating” the American flag.

In George Sugarman's sculpture, each component occupies a distinct space—the contrasts between the shapes and colors emphasize the unique character of each. In his journals, Sugarman wrote, “A meeting place attracts diversity; diversity often means activity as one form or one color tries to be dominant, but a rigorous formal relationship throughout keeps each element in its place while allowing it its maximum assertiveness.”<sup>20</sup>

In his sculptures, Sugarman dispensed with the pedestal by placing his works directly on the floor, and he eliminated the “concept of the closed vertical





core” around which sculpture had been traditionally organized. Sugarman’s *Orange, Blue, and Black* (1968-70) features two hollow wedges, one blue and one orange, balanced on-point and supporting an open black arch. In turn, two forms geometrically defined as “curvilinear triangles” are placed on their sides and cantilevered off the arch. The viewer is first struck by the seemingly precarious balance of this open sculpture, looking “like a house of cards.”

Further visual analysis, however, makes clear the complex relationships established by the artist. The rigorous geometry of this bi-symmetrical work functions almost like a heraldic shield. Further, the linear wedges are precisely complemented by the more organic volumes of the curvilinear triangles and arch. The blue, orange, and black edges and surfaces mirror one another and encourage us visually to relate the parts. As with Held’s *Thalocropolis* and Rainer’s *Trio A*, rigorous logic and playful surprise exist in equal parts. Sugarman once commented, “In each sculpture, the volume finds a different expression as forms and colors surround it, pierce it, echo it to create a formal ‘logic,’ ...”<sup>21</sup>

Shared personal, intellectual, political, and artistic histories like those between Bladen, Held, Rainer, and Sugarman are difficult to define precisely. The most intense exchanges of ideas and critical studio visits often took place during late nights when no notes were taken. Nevertheless, such interactions were essential and frequent in the close and competitive New York art world around mid-century. For example, one thinks of the friendship between Stuart Davis, Willem de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, and John Graham. Viewing such artists in the context of each other can be revealing. Their common concerns disclose ideas that permeated the age, and their differences throw the accomplishments of each into higher relief.■

(Endnotes)

1. Lionel Abel as quoted in Irving Sandler, *Concrete Expressionism*, exhibition catalogue (Loeb Student Center, New York University, April 6–29, 1965), np.
2. Yvonne Rainer, *Feelings Art Facts: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 2006), 113.
3. Held in Douglas Dreishpoon, *Ronald Bladen, 1918–1988: Drawings and Sculptural Models*, exhibition catalogue (Greensboro, N.C.: Weatherspoon Art Gallery, 1966), 44.
4. Bladen interview in *Beyond the Plane: American Constructions 1930–1965*, exhibition catalogue (Trenton, N.J.: New Jersey State Museum, 1938), 29.
5. Dreishpoon, *Ronald Bladen*, 32.
6. Sandler, *Concrete Expressionism*, np.
7. Rainer, *Feelings Are Facts*, 171.
8. Rainer, email to Loretta Howard, September 28, 2017.
9. Sugarman quoted in Holiday T. Day, *The Shape of Space: The Sculpture of George Sugarman*, exhibition catalogue (Omaha, Neb.: Joslyn Art Museum, December 6, 1981–January 31, 1982), 42.
10. Bladen quoted in Bill Berkson, “Ronald Bladen Sculpture and Where We Stand,” *Art and Literature* 12 (Spring 1967), 140–141.
11. Rainer, “The Mind Is A Muscle (1966),” in *Yvonne Rainer: Work 1961–1973* (Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974), 63.
12. Rainer, “The Mind Is A Muscle (1966),” 63.
13. *Ibid.*, 77.
14. Amy Cuddy, *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2015) 42–64.
15. The title is a word invented by Held. It seems to combine the Greek word “thalo” which means “flourishing” and “acropolis,” a settlement on high ground.
16. Rainer, “The Mind I A Muscle (1966),” 67.
17. *Op. cit.*, 66.
18. *Op. cit.*, 65.
19. Rainer statement for Video Data Bank (<http://vdb.org/titles/trio>).
20. Day, *The Shape of Space*, 53.
21. *Ibid.*, 54.

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