

Book Review

Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After
by Meredith Morse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016)

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Simone Forti's contributions to the major aesthetic shifts cranking out of mid 20th-century America have gone unacknowledged for too long, which makes Meredith Morse's monograph on Forti both timely and overdue. This delay evidences the gender and disciplinary inequities that have obfuscated the actual provenance of key experiments of the period and the true nature of their innovations. The recuperation of Forti's work, and its intervention into perceived genealogies of current intermedial, conceptual, minimalist, processual and performative tendencies in the post-disciplinary contemporary arts, finds a very worthy champion in Morse. The project is particularly timely as the dance-visual arts liaison of the past 10 years or so appears to be peaking, and Forti's importance as a 20th century precedent for this field of activity has become increasingly apparent. Beginning in the early 2000s, and picking up steam over the last 15 years, attention to Forti and her lineage via choreographer Anna Halprin and dance pedagogue Margaret D'Houbler, has catalyzed a reconsideration of the role of dance and choreography—both in its disciplinary and interdisciplinary conditions—in this milieu. This work asserts the art form amongst other key players such as the new music and visual arts traditions emerging from John Cage and Marcel Duchamp.

Following the work of Carrie Lambert-Beatty on Forti's peer, Yvonne Rainer, and very much in the same model as this earlier monograph which combined rigorous archival work with art theory, Morse provides a solid account of Forti's major works of the 1960s including their reception, with some attention also given to her later outputs. The role of scoring in her work is given particular attention as well as her use of the voice. The importance of her voice work is connected to her interest in the new music of artists such as La Monte Young and the materiality of sound in relation to the body, with this part of her oeuvre culminating in her role as composer/contributor to Trisha Brown and Robert Rauschenberg's choreographic works. Morse concludes the book with Forti's quote regarding the freedom of presenting sound works as dances, and refers to her work as 'a *synesthetic* experience' (198).

Regarding Forti's use of movement scores, the distinction is made between pre-existing scores or notations which must be followed to the letter in performance, and a dialogic approach where the performer could more loosely evoke the conditions of the original

written score or 'source materials'. As Morse states, in the latter the score takes on a 'qualitative rather than informational' role (45–48), and this is where her term 'extensibility' refers to how a score (an image or text) is generational beyond its facticity (138–39). The attachment of a score to its provenance is very different from Cage's projection of his scores into the 'now' of each performance with all of the relevant contingencies, associations and variables. Morse's reading of Forti's scoring practice points to their personal and biographical nature which works in union with the materiality of the body; so the media of the art form involves 'material of all kinds' (50), including feelings, memories and sensations, filtered through the subject. The play between art and life in Forti's scores is analysed in depth across several examples, and Morse concludes that 'the tone of these autobiographical works was one of intense, unanchored affect' (118–19).

Morse's project continues along the path set out by art theorists Lambert-Beatty, Julia Robinson and Anna Chave. These theorists collectively critique American Minimalism as a static 'movement,' and re-insert biographical information and a feminist insight to recalibrate Forti's role amongst Minimalism's key innovations. Chave and Meyer muddy the distinctions between the major 'movements' which Morse reiterates with her claims for Forti's position as a post-minimalist (42). Morse goes further in developing key terms for understanding Forti's aesthetic innovations; as mentioned, 'extensibility' (137–38) is a new concept she develops, but she also privileges feeling, imagination, participation, memory, presence and attention in her discussion of various works. Morse acknowledges that some commentators missed what was central to Forti's work—'the evanescence of modulated bodily registers of force and intensity' (102)—and does very well in keeping the dancing body central to her discussions.

Morse makes important contributions to a new understanding of the 'anatomical' or material revolution in dance that really marked the break that Forti and her peers made with the high-modernist dance of the first half of the 20th century (Graham, Humphrey et al). She sets out 'a history that takes H'Doubler and Halprin into account' in order to 'explain Forti's understanding of materials and the viewing relation' in ways that other historical accounts have not (4). This is the disciplinary heart of dance that focuses on the mind-body relation and spectatorship; dance 'fundamentals' which have not been adequately accounted for in dance studies to date, and the recuperation of H'Doubler by Morse and others will go some way towards rectifying this.

Regarding spectatorship, Morse finds in Forti's work 'a laboratory for kinesthetic response' that operates 'through and upon the body' (78). Morse traces this to H'Doubler's commitment to anatomy and interest in the connection between 'felt sensation' and an, 'externally visible bodily attitude' (16-17). This shuttling between action and perception, interiority and exteriority, gets to the basis of a materialist account of dance. In this sense, I'm not sure that Forti 'pursued a much more material exploration' of dance than H'Doubler or Halprin (25), but that the conception of the materiality of the body was reconfigured through Forti's intermedial context which put physiology into dialogue with sculpture (among other things). In any case, Morse's conclusion is spot on:

'H'Doubler's formulation cultivated a form of desubjectivization for dance, though one much less recognized than that of Cage for visual art' (25). The corollary of this pedagogical orientation in H'Doubler's work towards 'the leveling authority of anatomy,' is read by Morse in relation to important gender and race politics in the 20th century.

The 'material' turn in dance is also connected by Morse to Cage and minimalism. The important role of Forti in developing the intermedial capacities of dance—epitomised in the democratic and inclusive culture of Judson Dance Theater—is clearly argued for by Morse. *Cloths* (1967) is a case in point and exemplifies the trans-medial compositional play that Forti was involved in at this time. Three performers were concealed behind three makeshift screens of cloth that were added to in layers by the hidden performer as the piece proceeded. Live and pre-recorded songs provided the soundtrack. Morse reads this as a critique of the 'minimalist object' we can see (the frames and cloths) through 'the hidden presence that animates them', demonstrating the tussle between the formal and the personal surrounding minimalism with a capital 'M' as theorised by Chave, Meyer and Lambert-Beatty (60). She also sees *Cloths* as problematising 'visibility' as such, and painting in particular (61), pointing to the continuities with Rauschenberg's experiments in painting. In this thick reading of *Cloths*, Morse demonstrates the subversive capacities of the performing body to bridge media and destabilise what were becoming new aesthetic paradigms. She writes; 'if Forti's dance constructions, and her text works, suggest minimalism, it is as a ... "protominimalism" – and one that turns Cage's attention to things in themselves toward the materiality of the performing body' (69).

One of the strengths of the book is the manner in which the author moves authoritatively across the disciplines of dance, visual arts and music, and regularly shifts the balance of the 'leading' media. Chapter 2 focuses quite heavily on the visual arts lens for the discussion of Forti's early work, and Chapter 4 commits to an analogy between listening to music and attending to a dance drawing heavily on music theory (e.g. 98–99). In Chapter 7 the influence of process-based visual art as theorised by Morris is read in the work of Forti, Trisha Brown and others, and it takes some time for an account of the influence of dance on the same aesthetic shift to emerge (163). It could be argued that dance is the most processual of the arts, exposing as it does the processes, transformations and properties of the media in its realisation. Richard Serra's direct account of the influence of dance on his work, and the acknowledged influence of Brown on Gordon Matta-Clark,ⁱ allow Morse to highlight the choreographic elements of this post-minimal art such as corporeality, materiality, temporality, spatiality, but also an attention to perception, sensibility and presence (165–69). The debt visual arts owed to concurrent dance practices regarding these specific new interests in this downtown New York milieu could have been underlined even further in this chapter. However, projects such as Morse's perhaps question the necessity of any such assertions.

There is a tendency in the book to highlight the influence of male artists on Forti and on their ability to speak to her work, though the traffic of ideas the other way—the influence of female artists on their male counterparts—is much more tentatively approached by Morse. Forti's second husband Robert Whitman (Chapter 2), musician La Monte Young

(Chapter 3 and 4), and her first husband Robert Morris (Chapter 5 and 7) are given much weight and word-space in the author's account of their innovations and the ways in which Forti took these up in her own work. The attention to Morris' work and writing (the latter is given much weight by Morse [113]) supports her arguments regarding the highly gendered 'problem of the personal' through Morris' formulation of the same. However, Morse is very tentative in her claims regarding Morris' repetition of, and benefit from, Forti's aesthetic concepts (121). The influence of Whitman on Forti is read through his combination of singular images or elements in juxtaposed or 'aggregated' compositions. From Young, Morse argues that Forti took the model of a single event repeated or serialised, improvisation, and the impersonal combined with interiority (56, 64, 84).

That Forti was working side-by-side with these men is clear, and so there could be some logic—and political significance—in considering the influence back the other way. Also, many elements found in Forti's work and traced to these men also appear in Halprin's work (juxtaposition, improvisation, the impersonal and personal), and Halprin directly influenced Young. Again, credit is returned back the other way to Halprin (or Forti) much more tentatively, for example when Morse details Young's interest in a corporeal relationship with the non-human world (67). Yes, Whitman was an intermedial artist (56), however the same applies to Halprin (who was interested in architecture etc) who really set Forti on this path. In line with this criticism of what is an excellent book, Morse's referral to other commentators does on occasion 'disappear' her authorial position, such as her account of Meyer and others on Cage's compositional interest in time (98), various accounts of Minimalism and dance, particularly Lambert-Beatty's (133), and Banes and Louppe on 'analytical' postmodern dance and links to processual art (151–54). Key sources such as Cage and Michael Fried remain distant, but there is a strong commitment to the writing and words of Forti herself.

The book does some interesting epistemological questions from a dance studies perspective. The first is the formulation of the natural-neutral body in dance and the mind-body activity, particularly in improvised dance. The 'natural body' and 'natural movement' are understood as distinct in dance studies—the first being a model of the mind-body relation, the second an aesthetic modality (18-19). Conflating the terms 'natural' and 'neutral' in relation to the dancing body runs up against the very contested ground of such terms in dance studies following the mobilisation of Foucault's theories of corporeal subjection and the impossibility of complete emancipation for the body (25). There is also some equation by Morse of 'non-conscious' movement with 'automatic' movement, which does not leave room for the non-conscious or 'unthought' movements of the mind in the body as something more than imperative or intuitive (24, 28). While this space of body-led movement is introduced much later (169), Morse may have benefitted from drawing on some of the very effective recent writings on somatic-based movement practices. There is also some confusion of 'emotion,' 'feeling' and 'kinaesthetic empathy' in relation to improvised dance (176). Responding to the movement of another physiologically and responding to embodied emotions are of course distinct. The former was never really rejected from postmodern dance, which depended upon a 'democratic' kinaesthetic empathy related to pedestrian movement.

Lastly, the work on perception and embodiment can no longer be described as ‘a minority position’ for dance (169). This disciplinary perspective has a strong voice in the ‘mix,’ and in Morse’s book, in fact, we have an impressive project that sets us on this path and will no doubt introduce sophisticated dance theory to a broader arts readership.

Overall, Morse’s project is a significant achievement. The diversity amongst Forti’s outputs and difficulty in categorising the artist is admirably exposed and handled by the author, revealing Forti’s renegade status by putting her work into relation with her peers. Morse has finally provided a focused publication on the intermedial artist who she describes as producing, ‘an emergent art, situated at the time across dance and visual art, that sought to explore the very qualitative nature of the moving body, its spaces, and its temporalities’ (8).

Notes

i. See Lydia Lee, ‘When the Sky Was the Limit,’ in *Laurie Anderson, Trisha Brown, Gordon Matta-Clark: Pioneers of the Downtown Scene New York 1970s* (London: Barbican Centre, 2011), 13–25.

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