THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE MAILINGLIST

The Brooklyn Rail: Dance
SIMONE FORTI with Claudia La Rocco
By Claudia La Rocco
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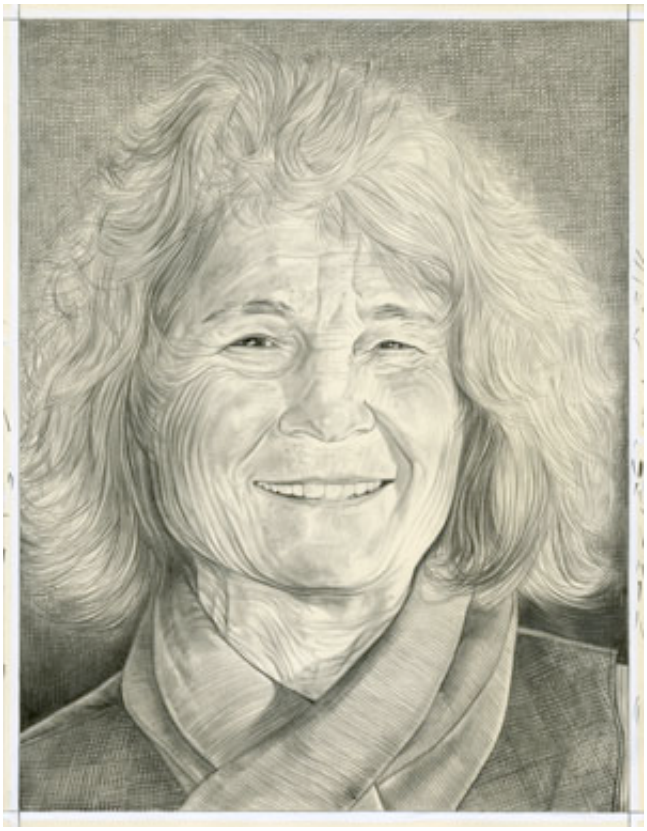
While back in New York to teach a workshop and perform at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, Simone Forti invited Editor-at-Large Claudia La Rocco to her former SoHo loft to talk about her life as a choreographer, dancer and writer. A new edition of her book, *Oh, Tongue,* (Beyond Baroque Books, 2003) will be introduced at the Box Gallery in Los Angeles, where she lives, on April 15th & 16th.



INCONVERSATION

Claudia La Rocco (Rail): There are so many things I want to ask you—could you start by talking about your relationship to language and movement?

Simone Forti: Well, there's the connection between language and movement and then, for

me, a more recent development of taking it into writing as something that can stand on its own but comes from working with language and movement. I started taking the news as the ground from which I was improvising, from which questions and speculations, bits of information, were floating up and connecting together in different ways. Even as I said, "were floating up," as we were talking, I kind of spread my fingers and my hands came up and I hadn't planned to do that. It's something we do—some of us more than others—use our hands and our whole bodies as part of our expression. And I find that it's not only part of the expression, but it's part of understanding, it's part of the original thought or image or feeling about something, finding the words for it; the kind of energy you feel in your body, or if you shift off center, that almost shifts you to another part of the idea, that physicality and the language relationship to thought are pretty basic to us.

When I started working with the news, I was at the end of a period of work. I had been working with my husband, who was a musician, Peter Van Riper, and then we broke up. And so, whoops, there went that work, what next? I'd decided to run a workshop for people who were at a transition in their work but didn't quite know what the next step was going to be, because I needed that workshop. It was a small group, maybe there were six or seven of us. We met once a week for four hours to try things out, and one woman had us working with newspapers. It happened that my father had recently died and he always read the newspapers. Maybe I felt it was a way to be close to him, maybe also I always felt protected by the fact that he knew what was going on. It just clicked for me and it started me on this path.

Rail: What year was that?

Forti: Around 1984. I would do things, like spread newspaper on the floor and make them into maps and talk about what I was reading. Playing it through my body helped me understand where there were tensions, where something maybe was about to change, how it might change something somewhere else. I was talking, also, and there were certain phrases in the newspapers like, "the dollar in freefall," or, "Lebanon a slippery slope."

Rail: The pieces in which you're talking about the news and, particularly when you were responding to developments in the government that you find dismaying are obviously explicitly political. Have you always considered yourself a political artist?

Forti: No, I haven't. That really started with the news. It started late.

Rail: I think of a lot of your work from much earlier, in the 60s in New York for example, as being feminist work. Would you agree?

Forti: I don't think so. If you find a certain sensuality and you feel that that's feminine, maybe it was feminine work. But, I must say, in terms of feminism, I'm now realizing that I really have had a lot of privilege, both my mother and my father encouraged me to do whatever I want. My father even told me that, as a man, he had been responsible to ensure the physical well-being of the family. But, as a woman, I was free to choose to be an artist if I wanted and I should go for it. And then, when I did those pieces, and I was married to Bob Morris, I remember, a lot of the pieces involved building something and I expressed to him that I didn't know how I was going to build these things and he said, "I can do it for you." And he had taught me how to stretch a canvas. I don't mean to say that the men are the ones who supported me to do things, but I kind of have always thought of us as spirits.

Rail: Could you talk a bit about how you and Bob Morris influenced each other?

Forti: One of the strong influences he had on me was that he is very disciplined and he did let me know that I had to really do my work and do my best.

Rail: What was the thing you said earlier, that one day he told you, "You can't just stand around eating peanut butter"?

Forti: Yeah, and staring out the window. He really was strict with me; he expected himself to do his best and he thought I should too.

I grew up in a house full of books of reproductions of Renaissance Art. When I first dropped out of college with Bob, I was painting for about six months. I think painting can knock me out like few other mediums, but maybe because of that, because I've seen painting and continue to see painting that I just find so transcendent, I didn't feel I could do that. I didn't feel I could really, let's say compete, with the heavy painters. But I felt that in dance I had something to offer. My sense of movement.

Intellectually, well, in San Francisco I was very much with Anna Halprin and Bob came to some of the classes. He must have been influenced by seeing what Anna was doing. As I mention in *Handbook In Motion* I remember one time he'd been observing a rock and then when we all came in from doing the observations we'd done in the woods, he lay on the floor of the outdoor studio and very slowly gathered himself up as tightly as possible until he was a ball balanced on just a rather small part of his side or maybe his back. He was very dense and it had taken him time to arrive there and then he stayed there for a while. I'm sure that that worked into the performance pieces that he eventually made and probably also the sculptures.

Rail: And you talked about the work that you were doing, at least when you came to New York, as being in between minimalist sculpture and dance. You call them dance constructions.

Forti: Those early pieces, like *Huddle*, *The Slantboard*. or *Hangers*, which is not as well known and is a series of ropes hanging, looped from the ceiling so that you could stand in the loop. About five people would stand in those loops, in a sense hang there, and four people would walk among them bumping—not bumping on purpose but just walking through, which would cause them to bump and sway. I saw that as a sculpture and also as a dance.

Rail: What is it like to see these early works now, as we did recently at the Baryshnikov Art Center, when we watched "An Evening of Dance Constructions" (mostly made in 1961 at the invitation of the composer La Monte Young, reconstructed in 2004 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and released in 2009 as an ArtPix recording)?

Forti: I was about 25 at the time and I still remember when I sent out the mailing for that concert: I stood there at the mailbox frightened out of my wits and thinking, if I dump this in the mailbox I have to do it, and wondering if there was anything there. And then I got very good feedback, so right away I was much more settled about it. But, you know, Bob and I were going to break, I didn't know it then but within a year or two we had separated; I think some people in their 20s are going through a lot of turmoil and fear and now I have a lot

more peace of mind. I've kind of got a lot of stuff under my belt. If a truck hits me tomorrow it's okay.

Rail: Oh dear!

Forti: Well it won't, I'm not in a hurry and I knock on wood.

Rail: Like a good Italian.

Forti: Yeah. So I look at them in a different way. I look at them with satisfaction and I love those pieces.

Rail: Sally Banes wrote that when you were with Robert Whitman you stopped making work for about four years. Is that true?

Forti: Yeah, yeah. I stopped making my own work. I was on his team, I was performing in his things and helping sew costumes and build ladders or whatever. I had wanted to have kids, and it happened that I had two miscarriages quite far along in the pregnancy. He didn't want me to do my work, so I guess that was kind of a paternalistic oppressive relationship—it could be looked on that way. I think that if I had had the kids—I certainly was interested in his work—who knows...

Rail: I was showing one of Whitman's works, *Flower*, to my students at SVA last semester; they were rather taken aback, and wondered what it was like for a female choreographer like yourself to be in *Flower*, which offers such a male point of view about women.

Forti: Well, you know, I'm not so against paternalism. I'm kind of a Taoist and I think that maybe at the time when the home was a very rich, elaborate place and there were children to raise and the tone of the home was like the inside part of the world and then there was the outside part of the world, that the women were as influential as the men but to a different realm. I don't know, I grew up in a family where that kind of worked.

I loved Whitman's work and I loved being involved in it. I also didn't feel that I only acted as a kind of a stereotypical feminine being. There was a lot of rough stuff that I was involved in, in the pieces, maybe more in the *American Moon* than in that piece, *Flower*.

Rail: Could you talk a bit about your relationship with La Monte Young and with other composers?

Forti: I met La Monte at Anna Halprin's in the late 1950s. Actually La Monte and Terry Riley. Especially in Anna's summer workshop, the morning would be body work, the evening would be improvisation with different structures, the afternoon we would be working on our own projects or she would give assignments. Or, she would invite an outside artist to do the afternoon, and she had invited La Monte a few times. I don't remember that we ever specifically collaborated in any way—

Rail: Although he invited you to present the work—

Forti: —to present the work, and then also, one of the pieces is *Accompaniment for La Monte's "2 sounds,"* which is a recording that La Monte directed. He and Terry were playing;

one sound I think is a glass or a nail on a window, those are the high pitches, and the other one is a wooden mallet rubbing on a gong. So I made an accompaniment for that which is a single person, usually me, standing in a loop of rope that only reaches about a foot to the ground so that I'm hanging there. I get wound up in one direction by an assistant who then lets me go and I unwind, and depending on the situation of the rope, ideally, after it unwinds it still has momentum, so then it winds up again in the other way but a little less, and then it unwinds and winds up again. It does that until it completely comes to a stop, which takes at most a couple of minutes. Then I'm standing there for the duration of the music, which goes on for I think about 13 minutes and I'm listening to it and the audience is listening to the music, and I have some idea that I help them listen.

Rail: That was my experience, even just seeing a recording of it. One of the things that really strikes me about your work—whether it's something like the improvisation with the dancer K.J. Holmes the other night, or the very early work—is this sense of there being the thinnest membrane, if that, between your experience of being in the world and of making art. *[Forti agrees.]* That seems such a simple thing to say but it's a very hard place for us to get to, whether we're writing poetry or making dances.

Forti: The other two musical composers that I've worked a lot with are Charlemagne Palestine and Peter Van Riper. I met Charlemagne at the California Institute of the Arts where he was a student or doing some student teaching. I was living with a group of people who I had known in New York, who had a big house in Los Angeles. I had a certain kind of relationship with Cal Arts where I was doing a little bit of substitute teaching for Allan Kaprow, I was studying Tai Chi with Marshall Ho, and I ran a workshop in one of the studios—not through the school—but the students took it. My parents were supporting me, so I was able to do that. I ran a Friday night jam called the Open Gardenia, and I met Charlemagne because La Monte contacted both of us to say that we should organize a concert for the raga master, Pandit Pran Nath. So we did and we started working together. There were wonderful pianos and beautiful spaces to work in. We ended up doing many concerts together with a certain vocabulary that we developed. Charlemagne was playing the piano and getting harmonics going. He could get the piano to sound like wind instruments, and I think he just would get these chords going so that the action of the sound waves would mix and make melodies that he wasn't specifically making although he had different areas of combinations of chords that would break into melodies. And I was mainly circling very fast, running in a circle or oval according to the space, and tilting my weight slightly as I went around and that would make me start to weave in and out. And then I'd swing an arm that would change my balance and change my trajectory so I was also like Charlemagne working with delicate balances of natural phenomena of harmonics of momentum, centrifugal force leaning in as I was being pulled out. I think we called that *Illuminations*.

Rail: When you met Charlemagne had you started to look toward animals as a way of creating movement studies, or did that follow?

Forti: I had already touched into that, and then there was a hiatus when I did about a year of being a hippie in Woodstock.

Rail: You were tuned-in in another way.

Forti: I was tuned-in another way. I was doing acid and running around naked in the

woods and doing all of that. A little late for my age, but I was doing it. I was in my thirties and most of the other hippies I was with were in their twenties.

Rail: Better late than never, right?

Forti: Better late than never. When I came out of that it took me a while to get back to the animal stuff. I think that the acid had gotten me more on to harmonics—which makes sense (*laughing)* — that played itself out for a time.

Rail: Did you very quickly come to the improvisational work that you're doing now? Or for a time was it more the rule games and the constructions and then you found improvisation later?

Forti: Well, I started out with improvisation with Anna. Then coming to New York it was more the dance constructions and the rule games. Then for a while it was checking into the animals, which happened because I was living in Rome and a couple blocks from the zoo. I was kind of alone there, so I happened very naturally to start really watching the animals, which was a call back to Anna's having us observe nature. Here, the animals were in captivity, but I was observing them. And then Woodstock really kind of threw a spoke in my wheels. [*Laughing*.] I loved moving and the dance constructions were very interesting but they weren't about that joy of movement. And now partly I'm drawn to writing, and partly I don't have that joy of movement anymore—very seldom—and only at a party. And now I hurt my knee if I let go at a party—my body's more fragile. My attention has shifted. I just don't have that lust anymore to run around.

Rail: Mark Morris had a great line a few years ago: "Well, you know, it used to be warm-up for two minutes to dance for two hours, and now you warm-up for two hours to dance for two minutes." [*Forti agrees, laughs.*]We've got Cunningham and Graham up on these pedestals; they're untouchable. So one of the things I loved in reading your thoughts on arriving in New York is how you say, "Well, you know, I took the classes. I wasn't interested. I didn't want to hold my stomach in. And I saw what Cunningham was doing and it was okay, but." You were very certain. You did take a few Cunningham classes, but then you found Robert Dunn (whose class in the early 1960s was a major spark behind the seminal Judson Dance Theater collective).

Forti: Then I found Robert Dunn's class, yeah. Coming to a new city you try different things, and you're looking for something on your path. Cunningham was certainly not on my path, I mean, not only was I not interested, but I couldn't do it. [*Laughs.*]

Rail: You were more interested in John Cage's ideas. Not so much his scores and his way of working but just his ideas about figuring out what you need and figuring out how the art can deliver that.

Forti: Yes, yes. How you can create a situation that gives you what you need in your art.

Rail: And at that point, what you needed was nature, right? When you were in New York?

Forti: It was nature and it was also simplicity.

Rail: And the idea of the body just doing one thing or just being. With some dance you said

something like “I can’t see the body”—

Forti: —“Because there’s so much movement going on.”

Rail: We have a tendency now to mythologize the 60s as this moment when all of the art forms were colliding and there was so much collaborative work happening. Your comments suggest that really it was about what was happening at the parties.

Forti: I think it was an important place to talk about ideas. In terms of direct collaborations, yeah, I guess that was going on too.

Rail: But you said it was doing the Twist?

Forti: Yes, I think the Twist helped us a lot. God, we were drinking then. If there was a party, there’d be a table full of whiskey, vodka, tequila, gin, all kinds, and then at the end of the party the next morning there’d be cigarettes in glasses half-full of whiskey. The place would stink, and nobody would have cleaned up; now, before they go home people do a little bit of the clean up. It’s a different time and I think we can’t afford that kind of carrying on now.

Rail: Why do you say that?

Forti: Well, I think we’re becoming aware that our civilization is not sustainable on the Earth. We’re aware of some really major endgames here. And I think that you don’t have to be referring to it, but you know that you’re operating in that context. And it brings a certain, I don’t know, a certain sense of urgency.

Rail: Yet you’ve also said that you feel more cheerful now.

Forti: Yes, personally I do. For the world I’m more worried, and it does come on me from time to

time I’ll just get sad. Right now I’m not feeling very optimistic. And Obama now, to my mind, seem very young and caught in the tides of how things have been done for decades, and naïve about being able to turn things around.

Rail: Trisha Brown talked about New York, when she arrived, being like the Wild West. What was your experience? What’s it like coming back?

Forti: I know it’s changed, but I don’t feel it. I mean this neighborhood has completely changed. And the knish place on Houston is gone. I’m sure there are other knish places. It just feels like New York. I think that I pretty much loved New York right away. I had my problems with it. I missed the woods. It was hard for me to have everything around me be designed by humans. I wasn’t used to being that much the majority animal around. I was used to being there among lizards and gulls. I mean we have pigeons and cockroaches. That didn’t do it for me.

Rail: How quickly did you find your way to a community that was sustaining here?
Forti: It took a little while. Finding the Robert Dunn class is what did it for me.

Rail: I know for some people those classes were just a revelation, but you knew a lot of that

stuff through Anna Halprin.

Forti: Maybe. Although there was a lot of revelation in it, too. Anna's work was more expressionistic —in a kind of abstract expressionistic way. It was a lot about the heart opening, whereas in Dunn's class it was about the mind getting a little blown and tickled.

Rail: It makes sense that you have both of those worlds in you, when I think about that early work you were doing, because you were operating under rules and there were games and structures. But lots of work from that period feels very strict and dry and serious, and your work has this wonderful sense of play. So the mind is being tickled, but the heart is beating too. You've talked about *Rollers* (1961) where you were in a little wooden cart on wheels, being pulled by other performers, as being terrifying.

Forti: It was. Because the space was small, the audience was pulling us around.

Rail: I heard you say once, you were supposed to be keeping a tone—

Forti: But we ended up screaming!

Rail: Like a roller coaster.

Forti: Yes!

Rail: Did you feel that the Dunn classes balanced out what had been happening in Anna's studio?

Forti: When I left San Francisco it was a little bit pushing my teacher off and going on my own. Although I went back for the summer workshops.

Rail: And you brought Yvonne Rainer with you, right?

Forti: Yes, and Trisha, yeah. But I think different things go on in us at once—especially that pushing mommy away.

Rail: Are you in touch with Anna at all?

Forti: A little bit. Like when she came to Los Angeles just maybe a month ago, because a French group was doing *Parades and Changes*. When she and I see each other it's like no time has passed.

Rail: Are you in touch with a lot of the artists you were working with or living with then?

Forti: Well, I had lunch with Bob Morris while I was here. Whitman, I'm less in touch with, but whenever I see him we're very happy, you know, to see each other, say hello. Charlemagne, we e- mail, you know, at least every 3-4 months, I'll get a "Hi Simone." Oh, I promised to go to his brother's grave, and I haven't done it. Okay, I have to do that, see? Yeah, I kind of stay in touch. We call each other on each other's birthdays. The important stuff.

Rail: What is your movement practice like these days?

Forti: I walk a lot. I love to walk. And once a week I meet with this group in Los Angeles. There are four of us: Terrence Luke Johnson, Sarah Swenson, Douglas Waddle, and then Kristin Smirovsky came in as an outside eye. We meet once a week, and we all start out with something we call "warm- up to improvisation." And then pretty soon we're moving together. We work a lot with language too. One of us is a trombonist, but a wonderful mover, too. So I move once a week. Ten weeks a year I teach at UCLA, so I move with them. But I don't really have a movement practice, and I never did. In fact, when you told me about Mark Morris—I never warmed-up and I still never warm up. My apartment isn't real big, but I'm walking all the time. If I'm on the phone, if all I can do is walk round and round the table that's what I'm doing. I'm always on the move.

Rail: So maybe the movement practice is just so mixed in with daily life?

Forti: I guess so, yeah.

Rail: Do you see much work these days?

Forti: I go to see a lot of performance. For one thing, in Los Angeles it's over ten years that I've been teaching one quarter a year at UCLA. So I have a lot of former students who have been out there for some time developing their own work, and we support each other. When it's my birthday, I'm liable to have a party and they all come.

I need to go to more readings. In New York, I'm much more recognized, and so I feel much more open, I talk to people much more. In Los Angeles, I feel like the writing community is more insular. They've all known each other a long time. If I were an 18-year-old newcomer it would be easier. But a 75-year-old newcomer.

Rail: I don't know much about the reading scene in LA, really.

Forti: Well, there's Beyond Baroque that brings in wonderful people, and so sometimes they bring in someone really important, and a really small audience turns out. I find Los Angeles, in many ways, a little provincial. Which also is nice. But I think we could shake each other up a little more, and go see something and say "Come on. You can't get away with that." Instead of just "Oh, I really enjoyed it." [*Laughs.*]

News Animation. Photo © Carol Petersen.

Rail: The other night in the gallery, when you started one of the improvisations you said “I’m going to do this without speaking, I haven’t done that in awhile.” And then you started speaking, pretty soon after. And I wonder when you’re writing, do you tend to be moving or sitting?

Forti: I do both. The only way I’m able to approach writing is one day this way, one day that way. But I still believe that part of what I have to offer is this kinesthetic awareness: how the syntax of movement—the energy, the timing, the shifts—and the syntax of language—the new thought, the staying with a thought—how these two modes of syntax interact with each other. When I’m not too lazy, I’ll record my improvisation, then transcribe it if it was a good one. I’ll edit it, maybe work it a little more. But also sometimes I do something that I call waiting for a thought: I’ll sit there at my desk until a thought comes, and then I’ll write and then I’ll put the pen down and sit there and wait for another thought, write that. And that’s a sitting down kind of writing.

Rail: In class the other day, you talked about not stopping when you’re writing. Then I was thinking about the idea of writing as movement, not as a separate act, but as a kinesthetic thing.

Forti: As a kinesthetic thing, yes, so that writing in a little notebook is different than big writing. And also, the beauty of those little marks on the paper is something I’m very tuned into.

Rail: Do you use the timed continuous writing exercises as fodder for poems? **Forti:** They can be. They can be. They often become a prose poem. If it’s a good one. But I have so

many of those. Most of them have something interesting about them, but it’s really not a priority to go through them and mine them. I got the continuous writing practice from Natalie Goldberg’s books. But it was Fred Dewey of Beyond Baroque who took an interest in my writing and published my book *Oh, Tongue*.

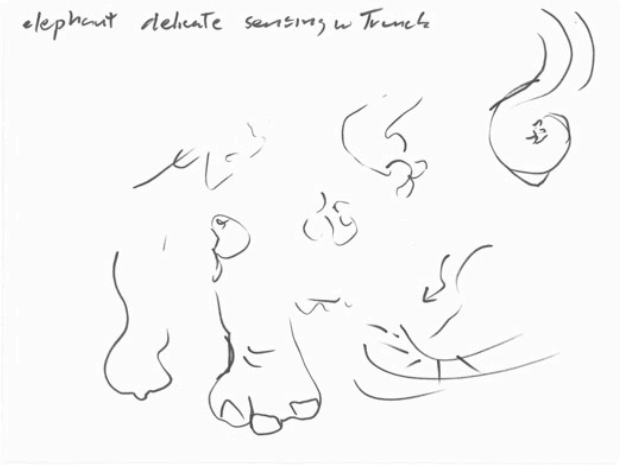
Rail: How do you experience the work you’re doing now as somebody who has thought very strongly of herself as a dancer and now is more invested in language?

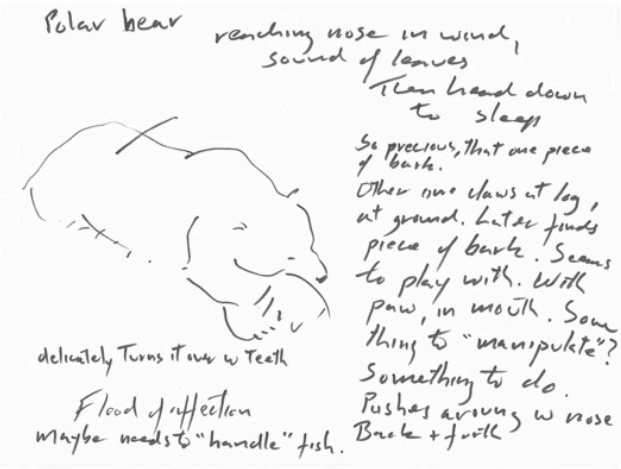
Forti: I thought of myself as an artist. I don’t know that I thought of myself so strongly as a dancer. Although, I mean, I mainly danced. I also made pieces that were sound work. I don’t know. It feels natural to be writing. It’s exciting. I like the beginning of things, I like to be finding a form. It feels exciting and natural and I don’t feel it as a big change of identity.

Rail: That’s right, now that I’m thinking about it. You talked about movement as your medium, right? That it was a way to structure your thoughts, but that you were an artist among other artists. That’s probably the smartest way.

Forti: I don’t know, but it’s my way. It’s what comes

Across my barefoot path a snake slithers and stops. Both startled, I step back. We hold. I make my move, and giving berth as wide as can pass in an arc and on. The snake moves straight away.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CLAUDIA LA ROCCO writes about performance for the *New York Times* and is the founder of thePerformanceClub.org, which won a 2011 Arts Writers Grant. She is a member of Off The Park press, where she is editing an anthology of poems by painters. She is on the faculty of the School of Visual Art's graduate program in Art Criticism and Writing.

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