

## "Simone Forti: The Box"

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Dance has long been overlooked in the art world. But in the past decade, a handful of modest retrospective exhibitions have used the gallery setting to redress the medium's wide-ranging role in the postwar avant-garde, with institutions from the Musée d'art contemporain de Lyon to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis granting overdue attention to the careers of such figures as Anna Halprin, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer. The most recent subject of this renewed interest is Simone Forti, who received a solo exhibition at the Box, a young gallery committed to exhibiting underrecognized artists and that has, so far, directed much of its focus toward figures who established their careers in the '60s. Forti began dancing with Halprin in 1955, and has since worked with many of the most significant artists of her generation. After the premiere of her seminal *Dance Constructions* at Yoko Ono's Chambers Street loft in 1961, she became a rare figure able to circulate among the conceptually oriented Judson Church group and the more expressionist Happenings scene. Forti's innovative use of props, such as the incline affixed with ropes that dancers climbed in *Slant Board* and the human-enclosing boxes used in *Platforms* (both 1961) influenced the sculpture of her then-husband Robert Morris, and she was called upon frequently to perform in works by Robert Whitman and Robert Rauschenberg, including the latter's *Open Score*, 1966.

Titled "Work in a Range of Mediums," the show surveyed nearly fifty years of Forti's movement-based practice, and displayed a surprising array of media: video and photographic documentation, drawings, paintings, notebooks, artists' books, audio recordings, and a hologram. The last - *Angel*, 1978 - requires the viewer to circumnavigate its cylindrical form in order to bring the artist's body, an iridescent pixie, to life.

Forti was formally trained in painting while studying at Hunter College in the mid-'60s, and draftsmanship has remained important to her practice. Here, a suite of eighteen drawings, titled *Great Thanks, Empty Words*, 1984, hung in the exhibition's first room, revealing the artist's careful attention to bodily forms and their individual qualities of movement. Inspired by Thoreau's nature studies (which she discovered via John Cage), Forti made the drawings while observing pigeons in Central Park; she reduced the birds' gestures standing still, lifting one wing, shaking tail feathers - to just a few ink strokes. Unlike the indexical mark-making for which her contemporary Trisha Brown is known, Forti's sketches align surprisingly with Maria Lassnig's semi-abstract body-awareness drawings (in which the artist translates her physical sensations into visual forms) yet work toward an *out-of-body* experience, a self-estrangement from the body in order to rediscover it through the movements of another.

Forti's work explores the limits of physical relationality, with the body imagined as a kind of tuning fork to the world. To that end, she has turned her attention not only to other species, but also to how dance might resonate with current events. In her ongoing "News Animations" series, begun in 1986, Forti seeks to "dance the news" through improvisations that employ props such as newspapers or, as in a 2004 performance at the Getty Center, the American flag. These objects become the artist's dance partners, and their associations structure movement and speech. New performance works presented alongside the exhibition show Forti thinking more deeply about language cross-culturally in a time of



extended political conflict. In *To Borrow Salt*, which premiered at the Box just prior to the show's opening, written placards were hung on the wall and strewn across the floor, performers spoke over one another, and Forti narrated her ambivalent feelings toward pro-Iranian democracy rallies that have taken place near her home. The intergenerational audience at these events - Forti's old friends mixed with emerging LA artists such as Elana Mann and Vincent Ramos, nondancers who incorporate movement into their work - is one more welcome indication that if avantgarde dance once struggled to be recognized within art history, we are now entering a time when that will no longer be the case.

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