

**‘Soft is Fast: Simone Forti in the 1960s and After’**, by Meredith Morse,  
Massachusetts, MIT, 2016, pp255, £?? (Hardback), ISBN: 978-0-262-03397-8

Meredith Morse’s thoughtful exposition of Simone Forti provides a welcome addition to writing on post-modern dance in the 1960s and fills an overdue gap in the literature of this period. Much is written about Forti’s contemporaries including Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and others who came together under the Judson Dance Theater banner. Far less is documented about the profound influence Forti’s work had on the Judson dancers and other artists in dance, music and visual arts from that time. ‘Soft is Fast’, written with Forti’s consent, redresses the balance by way of a lively narrative that engages the reader and provides illuminating connections across the arts of the time. As I was finding my way into its pages, two aspects drew my eye, namely a quote from Yvonne Rainer that refers to the book as ‘a page-turner’ (back cover) and a statement from Forti in which she describes an improvisation session with Trisha Brown as ‘almost’ reviving her interest in movement (Frontispiece, letter from Simone Forti to Anna Halprin, c 1960 – 62). As someone whose dance experience sits well outside this particular genre, my curiosity was immediately piqued.

The introduction provides a contextual overview of Forti’s early influences, Anna (Ann) Halprin and Margaret H’Doubler, in which Morse offers a detailed discussion of their respective and connecting philosophies of dance. Halprin’s anatomically based movement practice was heavily influenced by the ideas of her own teacher and influential dance educator, H’Doubler, whose movement tenet was grounded in ‘an analysis of the smallest physical and sensory aspects of movement and one’s complex responses to them’ (4). Forti’s art of the 1960s is examined in detail as a negotiation of the radical ideas expounded by composer John Cage set

alongside Halprin's teachings. One set of connections I found of particular interest were the important relationships Forti formed with the quite diverse ideas of Cage and fellow composer La Monte Young, and how both sets of music/sound-based ideas resonated with her in movement terms.

Forti referred to her dance works as 'dance constructions' and the reader gains increasing insight into a selection of these works as the author examines different facets of Forti's practice through the chapters of Part One. We encounter *See-Saw* (1960), *Rollers* (1960), *Slant Board* (1961) and *Huddle* (1961) early in the book, with further layers of meaning and insight added as each chapter progresses. One accrues knowledge in a rolling, fluid manner that is, arguably, more satisfying than reading discrete analyses of each work one at a time. I enjoyed the element of surprise as I realized that I knew a great deal more about each dance by Chapters 4/5, almost by stealth.

Forti sits at the core of this book in terms of her work, practice and influences. Around her, Morse has situated an array of artists from across the performing and visual arts. The author cleverly uses examples of Forti's practice as starting points for broader discussion that weave in the ideas and/or works of other artists. A neat example is the reference to Forti's first text in 'An Anthology' (74/75) that brings in extended discussion of Merce Cunningham and John Cage. Such examples appear throughout the book, creating a series of connected tangents within the broader vibrant landscape that was the arts scene in 1960s Manhattan. A further example is the discussion around the significance of the Chambers Street event held at Yoko Ono's loft in 1961, when Forti presented *Five dance constructions and some other things*, including *Slant Board* and *Huddle*. Rainer described the performance as 'one

of the seminal events of the early sixties' (86), although it was seen by relatively few people at the time.

Part Two of the book focuses on Forti's practices from the 1970s onward in relation to her early works and *Huddle* specifically. From the 1970s, Forti's work was more deeply concerned with the minutiae of movement and perception in terms of the kinesthetic method and improvisation. Further influence came from the work of photographer Eadweard Muybridge, particularly his investigation of spectatorship through a series of locomotion studies from the 1870s – 1880s that had wide appeal amongst visual artists. Forti is described as 'an important cross-pollinator' in the arts from the 1960s on (174) and did not align herself specifically with dance or with visual arts, preferring instead the open-ness of working across forms. Numerous touch points are provided along the way that will inevitably chime differently depending on the artistic perspective of the reader.

In terms of the book as object, there is a pleasing clarity to the design and typographic style and to the tangible feel of the volume itself. An extensive 'notes' section provides informative insight for each chapter, although a personal preference would be for the inclusion of a full bibliographic listing rather than references spread through the notes. The book will appeal to a wide array of readers and warrants continuous reading to do justice to the flow of the narrative, which brings us neatly back to Rainer's 'page-turner' assertion. It is.

Lesley Main

Middlesex University

[L.Main@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:L.Main@mdx.ac.uk)

c 2016 Lesley Main

