

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Simone Forti

Columbia Center for Oral History Research

Columbia University

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Simone Forti conducted by Alessandra Nicifero on June 2, 2015. This interview is part of the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Note from the Interviewer:

In our email correspondence, while arranging the schedule for our interview, Simone Forti proposed what she called a “creative challenge and opportunity.” She complained of doing so many interviews in which she was asked the same questions, in the same order, such that there “is not much in it for her.” She mentioned an interesting interview she had in a 2010 symposium in Vienna – “Performing the Sentence” – with Carrie Lambert-Beatty. Lambert-Betty had created a numbered list of key words and asked the audience for a random number, which she used to select topics from the list for Forti to talk about.

(That interview is published in: Carola Dertnig and Felicitas Thun-Hohenstein, eds. *Performing the Sentence – Research and Teaching in Performative Fine Arts*. Vienna: Sternberg Press. 2014.)

Forti proposed that I come up with “some device that will throw some chance elements into our conversation.” I took the challenge and came up with a “classic” chance operation system à la John Cage. I drew a map of the world, since traveling, moving from one place to another has been a recurrent element in Forti’s life, and I created six categories with six elements each. Then we rolled the dice. One would determine the category, the other a more specific element. Below it is the schema we used:

<p>MEMORY/ HISTORY</p> <p>TIME</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) childhood ----- adolescence 2) the 1950s 3) the 1960s 4) the 1970s 5) the 1980s/1990s 6) more recent past/present/future 	<p>MEMORY/HISTORY</p> <p>SPACE</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Florence ----- Switzerland 2) San Francisco 3) New York ----- Woodstock 4) Rome 5) Vermont 6) Los Angeles
<p>FAMILY/ ENCOUNTERS</p> <p>WOMEN (mother)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Anna Halprin 2) Yvonne Rainer 3) Trisha Brown 4) Deborah Hay 5) Yoko Ono 6) Julie Martin 	<p>FAMILY/ ENCOUNTERS</p> <p>MEN (father)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Bob Morris 2) La Monte Young 3) Bob Rauschenberg 4) J. Cage/B. Dunn/S. Paxton 5) Bob Whitman 6) Charlemagne Palestine
<p>THEMES</p> <p>ACTIONS- ING</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Remembering 2) Creating/Composing 3) Dancing 4) Improvising 5) Singing/Talking 6) Writing 	<p>THEMES</p> <p>MOVEMENTS- ISM</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Minimalism 2) Modern Dance ----- Formalism 3) Happenings 4) Post-modern Dance 5) Pop Art 6) Tai Chi

Transcription: Audio Transcription Center

Session #1

Interviewee: Simone Forti

Location: Westwood, Los Angeles, California

Interviewer: Alessandra Nicifero

Date: June 2, 2015

Q: I'm Alessandra Nicifero. I'm here with Simone Forti. I'm honored to be here. It's June 2, 2015. We are in Westwood, Los Angeles, and we'll start our conversation in a little unusual way. I want to start with a question, but I took your challenge to do something more creative and odd, a change of rational mode and we'll see if we can create an alternative narrative to a very rich life history. So I'll ask first, one question: What's your first memory of dancing?

Forti: My first memory of dancing. I think it's rolling down the hill of the garden in the back of our house. I would call that dancing. There was a kind of plant that's like a bush, but it's very low and it's soft enough that I could roll on it. We lived in the Hollywood Hills [Los Angeles], so the backyard was very steep. It had some level places but generally it was steep to the bottom. I would say that is my first dancing.

Q: Sounds lovely and fun, yes. Well should we try and roll the dice? Would you like to do that?

Forti: Yes, let's roll the dice and see what we get. Two.

Q: So two. Two is in the category of memory/history: space.

Forti: Memory, history and?

Q: Space.

Forti: Space.

Q: Yes. So should we roll one more?

Forti: Yes, you roll the second one. One.

Q: Florence and Switzerland.

Forti: Florence and Switzerland, okay. So I go back to when I was four years old. I think what must have impressed me in Florence was the park, Le Cascine [Parco delle Cascine, Cascine Park], because we lived near there. I was born near there on Lungarno Vespucci, which is along the Arno [River], in a part of it called Vespucci. And yes, I do even have a memory from the park.

Then we went to Switzerland. I think I became five years old in Switzerland and I think that we left in December. I'm not sure of the exact details, partly because every time I heard the story, it was a little different. But we're a Jewish family; we'd come from Spain during the Inquisition to Italy. Then again during [the time of Benito] Mussolini, we fled to America through Switzerland. In Switzerland I think it's the first time that I saw the mountains and the snow. I've been in love with mountains and snow, even though I'm not a skier and haven't been so much in the mountains and the snow. But I did live in Vermont for ten years and the winters are so beautiful.

Vermont is mountainous, small mountains, not like the Alps, but still mountains and evergreen trees and a lot of maple trees and brooks and mountain lakes and a lot of snow in the winter.

What does that give you?

Q: Well, let's say, it makes me actually think of Rauschenberg. He was in Rome and Florence in the early fifties. He was traveling—he also traveled in North Africa with Cy Twombly. At a certain point he had an exhibit, not quite successful, in Rome and then one at the Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea in Florence. [Note: *Bob Rauschenberg: Scatole e Feticci Personali*, Galleria dell'Obelisco, Rome, 1953. Traveled as *Scatole e costruzioni contemplative di Bob Rauschenberg* to Galleria d'Arte Contemporanea, Florence, 1953] But he read this review that an art critic wrote, saying it was a “psychological mess” and that he should throw the paintings in the Arno. So before leaving Europe to return to the United States, he followed his advice and so found a spot in the Arno and—



Thirty *Scatole Personali* (1952–3) arranged on floor of the Pensione Allegri, Rome, 1953. Photo: Robert Rauschenberg

Forti: And threw his paintings in the river, great. And the critic thought it was a psychological mess.

Q: Yes, that's how it was described. Rauschenberg wrote a note to the critic saying, "I took your advice." So I think it's a beautiful story.

Forti: Were these paintings or were they already collages or Combines [1954–64]?

Q: I'm not sure. They probably were already collages of earlier paintings. I wonder, have you ever had this kind of action, to throw away things?

Forti: To throw things away? Not so much throwing things away, but—well at one point in San Francisco I was making very big Abstract Expressionist paintings because I was married to [Robert] Bob Morris and he was making Abstract Expressionist paintings. He taught me how to stretch a canvas and I was making big paintings. Then at one point I rolled them all up and put them in my parents' garage and then years later, they told me that they had thrown them away. They had unrolled the canvases and they were all abstract so they threw them away. And actually I was quite relieved.

[Laughter]

Forti: Because I didn't have to deal with that mass of material. I'm surprised that I kept as many drawings as I did because I thought I didn't pay attention to keeping things, but it seems I kept a lot of things.

At one point I made a clay newborn baby and I carried it around with me through many moves to different apartments, different homes, different cities.

Q: It was actually a realistic baby?

Forti: It was quite realistic but just curled up with its knees bent and its feet kind of curled up and its little arms and hands across its chest and its chin down and little closed eyes. Then at some point I didn't have it any more.

Q: What was your need to create this clay baby?

Forti: As they say in Rome, "Boh."

[Laughter]

Forti: I don't know. I think when I was quite young, I kept thinking, "Well one day I'll have a baby. It's not time yet. One day I'll have a baby." Then eventually I tried a couple of times and I carried to five-and-a-half months and lost it both times and so I don't know. I think that was always a question for me, whether I was going to have children or not.

Q: I'm going to roll the dice.

Forti: Do you have children?

Q: I don't have children. I had a very similar experience to yours, but I do have three stepchildren who now are adults in their twenties and thirties.

Forti: Okay. Nice. Three.

Q: Three. It's in the category of family encounters and it's the category of women. At a certain point while I was writing these categories, I felt that I had to separate, actually it naturally became a list of women and a list of men. So roll the dice and we'll see.

Forti: Will I come up with a name of a woman?

Q: Yes, you will.

Forti: Six.

Q: Number six is Julie Martin.

Forti: Julie Martin, she's great. She's a very intelligent and dedicated helper; she helps things to happen and she's very modest. She doesn't mind doing things like driving you around and yet she helps to organize things, for things to happen. I knew Julie Martin I think originally when I was married to [Robert] Bob Whitman and Julie was with someone, I think whose name also was Bob [note: Robert Fagan]. The two men were friends and—yes, I have the greatest admiration for Julie.

Q: I believe she was collaborating already with Bob, doing the video part for Bob Whitman's work.

Forti: Probably, yes. I don't know.

Q: So it was around early 1960s?

Forti: Yes, yes, or mid-1960s. She's very dedicated to him and his work now and really helps things to happen—from putting a spoon on the table to envisioning a possibility to making the contacts. Yes.

Q: Yes, she has this transformative capacity.

Forti: Yes. I was overnight at her house in upstate New York [note: New Jersey] pretty recently because I went to see Steve Paxton at Dia—

Q: Dia: Beacon [New York], yes.

Forti: Yes, yes. So I stayed overnight with Julie. The house is so full of stuff and yet there are these pathways through the house that are nice and clean. Somebody comes and cleans and organizes a little bit and yet, on first view, it looks very disorganized. And yet it is organized. I also know that before she goes to bed, she stands in this kind of passageway room and watches some programs on television, on a TV set that you have to stand to have it level with your head. She stands there and watches TV before she goes to bed.

Q: She's fantastic. I've been there to view some of the interviews for this project. She's been my Virgil to travel through the sixties and she's conducted extensive, wonderful interviews with many of you. It's your turn.

Forti: Okay. This is fun. One again.

Q: Time. This time, talk about the sixties.

Forti: The sixties, okay. The sixties, well, one thing I remember is Chubby Checker [née Ernest Evans].

Q: Tell me more.

Forti: *The Twist* [1960] had just come out and made sort of the minimalist, postmodern, young—what's the word I want? Made the aspiring young artist aware of black rock and blues. We were having these huge parties in these lofts and the table would have whiskey, vodka, grappa, rum, soda water, orange juice, everything. We were drinking. I guess we were talking a lot too. We certainly were interested in each other's work and what we were doing and we were not—this is something I've said many times, but it's worth saying again. We were not so much looking at the artists, in our individual fields, who had come before us. We were looking into each other's fields.

Q: Right, what I find extremely fascinating is how visual artists, then dancers, were all working together with their own individual specialties and interests. I always find it interesting that artists such as Bob Morris and Bob Rauschenberg and Whitman could work together at times, at Judson [Memorial] Church [New York], not in the case of Whitman, but Rauschenberg, Morris and you, Yvonne [Rainer], all very different individuals, but there was this sense of collaborating.

Forti: Yes, yes. I think we all kind of felt—maybe without even knowing, we felt the Green Mountain School—call it Green Mountain College.

Q: Oh Black Mountain College [North Carolina]?

Forti: Black, excuse me. Black Mountain College, we felt those openings. The communications that had happened between Merce Cunningham, John Cage—who's the poet? I'm looking at my shelf—Charles Olson, and the painter; they were all learning from each other's thinking and

thinking together and that continued to us. I think it came to us a lot through John Cage who was teaching at the New School [New York] and—

Q: And of course through the workshop that Robert [E.] Dunn—

Forti: That Robert Dunn. And we were excited about the *Bicycle Wheel* [1913] or the pissoir [*Fountain*, 1917], the artist I'm trying to think of.

Q: [Marcel] Duchamp?

Forti: Duchamp, we were excited about Duchamp and about *un* pissoir. That was the Surrealist theater. And so we knew about those things. We knew about the break from tradition and—

Q: And you have started already your break from tradition—from dance tradition, working with Anna Halprin.

Forti: With Anna, yes.

Q: And it was just before moving to New York from San Francisco.

Forti: Well, it was for four years. I worked with her for four years, yes, just before moving to New York. Yes. She very consciously made a break because she had been part of the Halprin-Lathrop School [San Francisco], which was kind of involved with [Martha] Graham technique

and she just stopped and moved away from there and completely focused on improvisation. She had some background to work with because she had worked with Margaret [Newell] H'Doubler who was exploring movement from an anatomical point of view, which led to a certain kind of improvisation. But I think that Anna also was drawing on ways of teaching that I think came from Bauhaus, which was to have us work with some basic elements of line, of weight, of space, of time, and explore different elements; more like what was happening in art schools than in dance classes.

Q: I'm thinking of Josef Albers, who was teaching at Black Mountain College and was one of Rauschenberg's teachers.

Forti: Okay. And of course, Lawrence Halprin, the landscape architect.

Q: So you were performing a lot outside—under the sun, in the garden, open spaces.

Forti: Yes.

Q: How was the transition to the city?

Forti: Bob Morris and I were married at the time. When we came to the city I know he had a very hard time and I had a very hard time and it's hard to sort out what was happening. He had a year of not doing any work except reading, reading, reading and going to see galleries, museums—going to see art. I've always thought that was a stroke of genius, to take a year to just study. But

he was very silent and troubled and I was very troubled, partly because there was that troubled atmosphere in the house and I missed the sun and the woods. But if he had been cheerful and happy, I think I would have been too and it would have been different. So it's hard to say.

Q: Sometimes that happens. We are all always individuals with others.

Forti: Yes.

Q: So since we are in the sixties and in New York, that must have been the time when you first met Rauschenberg. Do you have a memory of that?

Forti: I don't think I remember him so much— Well, in the sixties, yes, yes. Then when I was with [Robert] Whitman, I met Rauschenberg. Whitman and Rauschenberg were good friends, and that's how Steve Paxton and I became friends, because Steve was with Rauschenberg during that time.

Q: And do you have any memories of him?

Forti: There again, I'm turning to alcohol. I remember that Rauschenberg had this building, this I think five-story building on Lafayette [Street; Rauschenberg purchased it in 1965 and moved in the following year]. On the different floors, he had his work, on-the-floor storage; he had his studio on one, maybe two floors. He had his apartment on a floor. There was one floor that was the kitchen and a big room. Hisachika [Takahashi] was working for Bob and was constantly

cooking soups and little Japanese delicious things. We called him Sachika. There was an enormous table with vodka and orange juice and people were just dropping in. Once in a while Rauschenberg would come and sit with us and enjoy the fun and then he'd go back to his studio.



Rauschenberg in the kitchen of his Lafayette Street home and studio, New York. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Shunk-Kender © J. Paul Getty Trust

So it was very festive and there was Rocky the turtle—when it was hungry, it would go to the icebox, to the refrigerator and wait. And that's where I met David Bradshaw, around that table. I didn't know Rauschenberg personally that closely. It was more—he would show up and it was special when he came to the table. A lot of humor—he had a strong sense of humor and kind of a humorous wisdom. But I wasn't close friends with him.

Q: But you were in *Linoleum* [1966].



Deborah Hay, Simone Forti, and Alex Hay in Rauschenberg's *Linoleum* (1966), NOW Festival, National Arena roller-skating rink, Washington, D.C., April 1966. Photograph Collection. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Peter Moore © Barbara Moore

Forti: Yes, I was in *Linoleum* and I was in the potato sack. I sang “Il ventinove luglio.” Yes.

Q: So can you tell me more about your participation and also your performing at the Yoko Ono studio.

Forti: Yes, yes, that was before I met Rauschenberg, yes.

Q: Yes. In the early 1960s.

Forti: Yes. What would you like to know about it?

Q: Well, I know that some of the performances that have been reconstructed in recent years were performed there; the *Dance Constructions* have become famous in a way. Do you think there is a reason why those survived, of the dances being reconstructed and restaged, rather than others?



Simone Forti's *Roller Boxes* (1960), performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2004. Photo: Carol Peterson

Forti: Yes, I think because they're so re-doable. It's easy to redo them. That's one reason.

Another, I think that they were important. I think they are an important breakaway. However I must say that without having first seen photographs of the Gutai group of Japan, I would not have known to make them.

Q: What did you learn from the photos that you saw?

Forti: Well, for instance, I saw photos of the piece "walking through paper" by Saburo Murakami [*Passing Through*, 1956], which consists—as you know, but I'll say it for the recording—it consists of a series of frames that must be maybe 5 1/2 feet high and 3 1/2 feet wide with paper stretched across them in the way that canvas might be stretched on a frame. But these had paper. They were placed one in front of the other so that there was this series of frames, one in front of the other. Saburo just walked right through all of them, just crashing, crashing, crashing, crashing, through this series of pieces of paper. The idea that you could make one thing that had one major gesture, that was completely satisfying. I loved it. There was

something so solid—in fact I think the word *gutai* means “concreteness.” Also in relationship to object and not an object that you pick up and turn around and drape and place. But something that you really put your strength against and it resists you. It just felt good, like it wasn’t like bread—this fluffy bread. It was bread you had to really tear off with your teeth and really chew it. I needed that and I think that in a way again, it was bringing something from Japan to Europe, to America, to European America, and it made sense.



Saburo Murakami's *Passing Through* (1956).
© Makiko Murakami and the former
members of the Gutai Art Association

Q: Should I roll again?

Forti: Roll again. Five.

Q: Let's see. Five, so it's in themes. Themes as in actions, with suffix-ing, and themes as [art] movements. So roll a dice and then—

Forti: Oh that's interesting. A theme. Six.

Q: Six: writing.

Forti: Writing, writing. As a theme. Language. Well I remember with Anna, at a certain point, we were using a lot of language with our moving. We were improvising and through the improvising, slowly settling on a piece and it had language. There were four of us when I was there, Anna, A. A. Leath, John Graham and me. We were working with nonsense. I think we were very aware of Kurt Schwitters and of that theater. So we might set up a scene that started to make some sense and then we would bring in something that just didn't make any sense and I think we were aware of Dada. So language was like that. We weren't writing.

Q: When did writing—

Forti: When did writing come? One time in Amsterdam, I stayed at the home of Christie Svane, a dancer who spent many years in Amsterdam related to the School for New Dance Development. So I spent the night at her house and next to the bed was a book by Natalie Goldberg, who was a writer, a Buddhist and a teacher of writing. She described her writing exercises or her writing practice and the rules. The basic rules were, you know for how long you're going to write. You know if you're going to write for five minutes, for sixty minutes, for one minute. You know ahead of time. You have to keep your pen moving the whole time. Then she talks about things like, "Don't worry about writing well." It turns out to be a kind of stream of consciousness, but

sometimes there's a starting point and so I like to call it a focused stream of consciousness.

Because it's a stream of consciousness but you know the theme or the general field that you're going to be streaming in.

Natalie Goldberg talks about the first class that she gave with this and she said she was ready except that she knew she wanted to give them some point of reference but she'd forgotten to think of one. And she took in a breath and found herself saying, "Elbow." Everybody in the class looked down, took their pen, and started to write.

I started working with this practice and I started using it before I do an improvisation—either in class or in performance, I'll prepare with a focused stream of consciousness. I've found it a good way to find out what's on my mind and what my associations are. I think also the experience with Anna of nonsense helps me a lot. Because I think in our daily life, we do make strange jumps and so those strange jumps come into this focused stream of consciousness too and give a kind of network of information that otherwise I don't really have access to.

Q: I'll roll again.

Forti: Two, I call that.

Q: So should we skip, because we did space and we'll return to the family encounters? This time you roll the dice and we'll have a man come up.

Forti: A man, three.

Q: Bob Rauschenberg.

Forti: Bob Rauschenberg.

Q: So we started talking about him. I'm going to read you something that John Cage wrote about Robert Rauschenberg and says, "Certainly, Rauschenberg has techniques. But the ones he has he disuses, using those he hasn't." [Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," 1961]

Forti: Wait a minute, but the ones he had?

Q: He disuses.

Forti: He disuses?

Q: "—using those he hasn't. I must say—"

Forti: Let me look with you. Let's look at it together.

Q: You can read the quote that I'm reading—I have it somewhere else as well.

Forti: “Certainly Rauschenberg has techniques. But the ones he has he disuses, using those he hasn’t.” You mean, the ones he has, he disuses, using those he hasn’t. “I must say he never forces a situation. He is like that butcher whose knife never became dull simply because he cut with it in such a way that it never encountered an obstacle. Modern art has no need for technique.”

Q: Do you agree with John Cage that modern art doesn’t need a technique? And what is a technique?

Forti: Oh, wow. Well, I think it’s important to say that an era came where it was possible to work without a technique. But then, what is a technique? So if Marcel Duchamp offers a urinal to the exhibit, I would say that’s a technique. It’s a technique of thought. It’s a considered philosophical position. And also I think that Rauschenberg did use technique, but I think that’s beside the point. That’s not what Cage was talking about.

But I will jump to a way that Rauschenberg has influenced me. I was working with a group at one time and it was called Simone Forti & Troupe. We were moving and speaking. We were making portraits of different places and we would go to that place and—anyway I was doing a lot of speaking. One of us was a geologist and so he would explain to us how the land there had come to the shape it’s in and how it was still moving and we would reenact that. I would read about any battles that had happened there and shoot myself out of a cannon and talk about the battle. David Zambrano didn’t want to speak and he just wanted to dance. I remembered Rauschenberg’s collages or where he got the imprint from a newspaper to bleed onto the surface

that he was creating an image on and that he had maybe the obelisk upside down and an airplane taking off and all these different images. Then he'd have some paint and I said—I realized that David could just be paint. We would be making all these images and he could just go dancing through however he likes.

Q: That's a beautiful image.

Forti: That's a technique I learned from Rauschenberg. Words are tricky because the word technique really sets off a whole panorama of ideas, of traditional ideas, and if you really look at technique as a way of doing, then yes. Rauschenberg did have many techniques. But what John Cage was saying there opened doors.

Q: Absolutely, I love the idea of techniques of thought that you were talking about.

Forti: Yes. Okay, roll again. This is good. Three.

Q: We are again on the women and let's see who—we talked already about Anna Halprin and Julie. Two, Yvonne Rainer.

Forti: Yvonne Rainer, okay. One time Yvonne and I did a public talk performance that we called *Tea for Two* [1980] because we had a little round table with a teapot and our two cups. We started talking fifteen minutes before the audience was able to come in so by the time they came in, we were going. We see things very differently and we have a lot of affection for each other.

It's hard for me to say how it is that we see things differently because she's very much a feminist. Philosophically I think she's of a developed form of Freudianism, all of which I don't have much understanding for.

I remember after our talk—I'm going towards saying something that I know I might forget a name I will need, but I'll try anyway. After our talk I made a cartoon of the psychoanalytic couch and [Sigmund] Freud is on the couch. The couch was like a chaise longue so it had a back. On the back, there was a crow and the crow for me was—who was the teacher of King Arthur? The teacher of King Arthur who spoke to the animals in the woods? If I'm quiet for a moment, I might think of it.

Q: I'll make a note.

Forti: Merlin, Merlin the magician. So there was Merlin the magician, as crow, analyzing Freud. I think it's because I tend more towards looking at things in terms of ethology and behavioral development in many species that behave in different ways, and looking at us as a primate, and also really separating out feminism from human or from—well that people should be paid the same for the same work, that people should have what they need. I think I'm understanding more as I get older, but men have been so good to me. And also the men I've known, some were not so fragile, but many were very fragile.

Q: Who are you thinking of when you talk about fragile men who were in your life?

[Laughter]

Forti: I mean everyone's fragile in his own way. All of them. The women too. I think we're in a time when it's difficult to be a man. I think in European American society or culture or civilization, I think it's easier to be a woman now than a man. I'm not saying that for Saudi Arabia for instance, but— I just have to live with my experience and—yes.

Q: Return to actions.

Forti: Action.

Q: One more roll.

Forti: Four.

Q: Improvising.

Forti: Improvising. Well, the only choreography I was ever able to learn was a twenty-minute series of moves that's a t'ai chi form and it took me two years. There's no way I can learn choreography. But that's not why I improvise. Improvisation—well to a great extent Abstract Expressionism is a form of improvisation or action painting. It's traces of an inspired moment of response and perception. Also I think that even though for instance Isadora Duncan really didn't like jazz, I don't think that dance improvisation would exist as it does if it hadn't been for jazz. I

think that that circular process of putting something out there, seeing it, responding to it, developing an idea in the moment, seeing what can happen, making a gesture, responding to the new situation, that circular response—I'm looking for a word.

Q: It's a level of attention that—

Forti: A level of attention and also when you have a desire to make a particular move and you make it and then you see—so it's responding. It's a word I use all the time.

Q: A specific gesture?

Forti: Impulse. Impulse, to be aware of your impulse, to do some editing as you go along. You might have an impulse and you say, "No, come on. Let's break away now. Okay, that's better. Break away to where? I don't know, to here." Then you see what the new situation is and you see, "Oh." So it's that kind of working in the moment, being aware of your impulses, selecting which ones to follow through on, and reading the situation, seeing the arc of the composition, seeing the ideas that are happening. Yes, I get enthusiastic. Yes.

Q: That's very much similar to the jazz session.

Forti: Yes, it's like the jazz session. And when I work with language, then I'm working with ideas, and being very sensitive to when an idea changes my energy, when I have to get down and make a map on the floor because I'm thinking about something, and being down there makes my

body feel different, and I can start talking maybe more about—I don't know—some mud or something. So there's that circle of response and impulse and thought and recognizing ideas, getting a new idea, being aware of physical sensation. It's challenging. Yes.

Q: Would you like to take a break?

Forti: No, let's keep on.

Q: We'll continue. Okay. Would you like to roll one more? As you were talking, something came to my mind. Let's see if I have it written down. It's about what Merce Cunningham talks about, chance operation, that's very similar to what you were saying in a way.

Forti: Yes. "It is a present mode of freeing my imagination from its own clichés and it is a marvelous adventure in attention." [Cunningham, "The Impermanent Art," 1955] That makes me also think of Anna Halprin and when we were working with nonsense because I remember a lot of ideas would come up and you'd almost—I think we were all doing it, but I remember almost saying to myself, "No, that makes too much sense. No, that makes sense in terms of the movement. No, that makes sense in terms of a repetition of something. No, that makes sense. It's an obvious association. Oh my god, where did that come from? I'll use that." Very quickly, like that. So in a way Merce Cunningham would say that's really almost impossible to do—and Cage too—that when you're improvising you always have your old habits. But we were using our own mind to find something that was not an old habit.

Q: We'll roll the dice again.

Forti: Okay. One.

Q: One, we return to time. Would you like to roll and decide?

Forti: Six, did we do six already?

Q: No, we haven't. It's more recent past, present, and future. I saw two days ago this beautiful performance with [Naoyuki] Oguri and Roxanne Steinberg. How do you adapt or use your own experience with improvisation and dance with two or new people, people you haven't worked with before? I know you worked with Oguri in the past, right?

Forti: Just one time and outdoors. Yes.

Q: So is it easy to communicate, even teaching your own *Dance Constructions* to a younger generation—how easy is that process?

Forti: Oh, when you ask me about working with Oguri and Roxanne and then you asked me about teaching the *Dance Constructions*—they're so different that I don't know where—

Q: Let's start with working with Oguri and Roxanne.

Forti: Well I realized that we were working from very different sources, that Oguri becomes a character. I have said to him that I feel that the character he becomes is the sacred fool. He smiled and nodded. I am myself and I'm exploring different movement themes, different movement ideas. Roxanne, every evening, when we performed those three evenings [*Flowers and Vessel*, Electric Lodge, Los Angeles, 2015], she had in her pocket before she started dancing *The Pillow Book* of Sei Shōnagon [1002]. So there we are, the three of us, and I think that one night was not so successful. Saturday night was very difficult and then Sunday I felt was a very good performance. I think on Sunday, what we managed to do was to really watch each other more and to compose together those three very different approaches.



Roxanne Steinberg in *Flowers and Vessel* (2015), 2015.
Photo: Eoin McLoughlin

Q: Going back to the second question, do you find it's becoming easier or more complex to explain your previous work to a younger generation?

Forti: I've been very happily surprised that the young dancers really appreciate the *Dance Constructions*, love to perform them, enjoy the physicality, appreciate the simplicity of having one task to do, appreciate that they kind of are sculptures in space besides being dances; which in a way is a way to understand their simplicity, that they don't have to have a beginning, middle, and end with a lot of gestures in between, that they have the moves, that they are, and that's it. Young people seem to like that.

One happy thing is that when I made those, I wasn't very happy. Now, I see them as very, very cheerful pieces. The piece *Accompaniment for La Monte's 2 sounds and La Monte's 2 sounds* [1961] includes La Monte [Young]'s piece *2 sounds* [1960], which is quite tough; the sound is very grating. It's very loud. It keeps going for about fourteen minutes and the performer is standing in the loop of a rope which is hanging from the ceiling, standing there in a very meditative way listening to the music. And in its grating-ness and loudness, it's quite complex with high pitches and low pitches, there's a lot to *listen* to. It too becomes—I don't know. A peaceful piece. [Laughs] Six.

Q: Six, return to themes and this time, movement.

Forti: Two.

Q: Two we probably covered a little bit, but it's modern dance and formalism. So when you came to New York in the sixties, you were taking Martha Graham's class before the Robert

Dunn workshop. How was your experience and were you going to see performances while you were in New York? What was your memory of that?

Forti: Well first, the class. It was a June intensive and it was a very hot June. I enjoyed sweating and being in class and trying to do it. I was not very good at it and it never occurred to me to try and be in the company. It was too different from anything that had interested me before. But it was fun. I enjoyed it.

I don't remember seeing any Graham performances and I might not even have gone. What was I seeing? I don't remember. Well, La Monte Young, hearing his music.

Q: The Happenings probably in the galleries?

Forti: I don't know if the Happenings were—I don't know if I was aware of them yet at that point.

Q: Well, I guess you were taking the Martha Graham classes in '59, the first year that you arrived?

Forti: Probably, yes.

Q: So you started soon after the next couple years. And what was the experience of walking in the city? Was New York very different from San Francisco?

Forti: Yes and I grew up in Los Angeles. At first, we lived up near Columbia [University], actually. I got a job as a nursery school assistant teacher. When Bob Morris and I came to New York, I knew Nancy Meehan, the dancer, who had been at the Halprin-Lathrop School. She was in New York. She was just moving and changing jobs. She had been in this apartment, which suddenly became empty, and Bob and I took that apartment and Nancy quit her job at the nursery school and recommended me and I got her job. She might have been studying at the Graham School, because she eventually worked a lot with Erick—

Q: Hawkins?

Forti: [Frederick] Erick Hawkins. So I think I may have studied a little with Graham because of Nancy and then I studied a little with Erick Hawkins, which I had completely forgotten.

Q: Did they use completely different techniques? They must have been very similar, no?

Forti: They were similar, but Erick had a way that he could make you fly a little bit for a few seconds. It was much softer and more towards—almost folk, more folk, and it was cheerful, yes. But I wasn't very good—I didn't have a turnout. I wasn't going to hold in my stomach, that just seemed undignified, to have someone tell me what to do with my stomach.

[Laughter]

Q: Especially after Anna Halprin.

Forti: That's it, after Anna Halprin and learning to listen to your body and to trust your body and to not let any idea of beauty tell you what to do. But I needed to do something and Nancy was doing these things and so I did them too. Yes, I think it was like that.

Q: Sometimes it's also important to do things in order to know what not to do.

Forti: Yes, yes, and to start meeting people and find out that there's Merce Cunningham and going to those classes and meeting Steve Paxton and Deborah Hay.

Q: Right, did you—

Forti: And Robert Dunn.

Q: Yes because that's where you also met Yvonne Rainer and then you became aware of the Robert Dunn—

Forti: No, I think I met her through the Robert Dunn classes.

Q: Because at a certain point, I believe, Yvonne was also taking Martha Graham's classes.

Forti: Oh, I met her at Martha Graham classes. That's what she says and she has a better memory than I do.

Q: Yes, I don't know. That's what I read before.

Forti: One time, I said to her, "Oh, we had the same sweetie," and she went, "Oh!"

[Laughter]

Q: That's the beauty of memory, having different perspective. A few more?

Forti: Yes. One.

Q: Oh, we return to time. Let's see.

Forti: Two, did we do two before?

Q: Well, I think we talked about the fifties and, I believe, your being a teenager in Los Angeles and then going to college.

Forti: Yes, yes. Well, I went to a high school that had some very good teachers. I was at Fairfax High School [Los Angeles].

Q: Tell me more about that, yes.

Forti: And I especially remember my biology teacher. In fact when I went to college, I thought I was going to study biology. I don't remember her name, but four days a week we would work with a textbook. And on Friday she would ask us what we most wondered about and then she would try to answer those questions, maybe even give us some special reading for over the weekend. I remember I had a question about fever; why we had a fever, maybe I had just had a fever. So she would give us little experiments to do that somehow related to the area that we were questioning about and she had me find out my mother's—what is it when you drop your egg? Her fertility cycle—yes because your temperature changes at that time. You can track it by tracking your temperature, so that was an experiment Mother and I did. She would take her temperature every morning and we would write down what it was. Just the idea that you could wonder about something and there were things you could do and things you could read and that it could give you a direction to research.

Then when I got to college, they gave us lists of Latin names to memorize and I realized, research doesn't happen until much later and I wasn't going to go through all that memorization. Instead I found that art is research, that it can be research, and that that's where I could bring that kind of passion that I found Anna had and that she was researching.

Q: Makes sense.

Forti: Five. That's the neighbors maybe—I don't know, they're doing something. Grinding coffee [note: referring to a noise outside].

Q: More action. Roll one more time. Two. Creating, composing.

Forti: Creating, composing, yes. You've got to do it.

[Laughter]

Q: But if we talk more about your relationship with music, and you've worked with composers, and you've performed and improvised with composers. Is there anything specific that—

Forti: Well, yes. I remember in working with Peter Van Riper; he had certain areas of sound that he worked with. I had certain areas of movement that I worked with and so before performance we would say, "Okay, Peter would want to start with this of his material." And I'd say, "Okay, I won't come in on that. I'll wait until—" "Then you're going to do this." "Then I'll start with this." And so they were almost studies, different sound studies, different movement studies that we would put together in different ways. Then of course composing happens in the moment too.

So I was working at the time with a lot of the vocabulary from watching the animals. I had also brought that information to the Egyptian Museum in Torino [Turin, Museo Egizio] especially, but also in New York and the Egyptian collection, some of the deities that are half animal, half deity—or deities that are half human, half animal. And direction, like if you put your feet side by

side, you can stand like that and then if you just pivot to a diagonal, you have one foot in front of the other. In a lot of the Egyptian sculptures of the king and the queen, she has her feet parallel and he has his feet one in front of the other as if he's walking. So also from studying the animals, I saw that I could walk like a person and then start to bend down and start to bend down more, and more and more, and walk and the swing of the arms becomes the step of the front paws. You can go down without breaking the contralateral action. So studying those and in different ways and putting those pieces of the vocabulary in different combinations, and then some especially went well with certain combinations of Peter's music.

Q: So you did study the animals' movement when you were in Rome in '68 and you were working with some of the artists of the Arte Povera in Rome.

Forti: I wasn't actually working with them. Well I worked with [Michelangelo] Pistoletto for a few months. Yes.

Q: Was that influential somehow, was he inspiring, or in a sort of mutual way?

Forti: No, I don't think so. The writer in the group, Carlo Colnaghi—we had a bit of an affair for about six months. He was with the Pistoletto group and I think I joined that project first and then got together with the writer. We finally never did a project. I was going to bring in the students of the Academy there at Turin, because I was teaching a workshop in the Academy for the students and I was just doing my thing with them. I was going to bring them in and then that

never happened. I remember more—Maria [Pioppi] cooking and that we'd have some very nice meals together.

Q: So there was not much of sharing ideas in the way there was happening in New York?

Forti: Not much, no. I remember one time that we did some performing in the street and I'm very embarrassed about performing in the street. I was half a block behind them and watching them, but almost pretending I wasn't part of that.

[Laughter]

Forti: I was very impressed with what I saw of the work of Pino Pascali, who had died just before I arrived. It reminded me a little bit of Whitman.

Q: In what way?

Forti: Well, for instance, he had a piece that was like the fins of sharks placed in this space, like a group of sharks swimming in an arc through the space [*Pinne di Pescecane*, 1966]. You had the feeling that the floor was the surface of the water so it was this gesture of these natural fish swimming through the gallery.

Q: I'm trying to think of some of Whitman's work—

Forti: That it would remind me of? Well, images, working with a theatrical image in kind of a cartoon way.

Q: Yes, I find that Whitman's objects, like actors, always have a very strong sense of humor and they are very present on stage and then dissolve and then return.

Forti: Yes.

Q: Should we try one more?

Forti: A last one.

Q: It's your turn to roll.

Forti: Two.

Q: We did the creating, composing. We talked about the dancing and writing. How about singing?

Forti: Singing has been a personal thing for me. When I was twelve, thirteen, we went back to Italy after the war and I learned a lot of folk songs. Once in a while, I got to go with my cousins. I was not quite the youngest, but the almost youngest of all the cousins and we would sometimes go arm in arm through the street after dark, singing. And one time, with Mother and Father, we

visited my grandfather on my mother's side, who was living in the countryside somewhere in northern Italy. I got to go arm in arm in the fields singing and so that was the custom in Italy at that time; I don't know if it's still very strong. Some of the songs were kind of dirty songs too and some were very sad war songs. A lot of sad love songs and a lot of cheerful songs. That impressed me and I loved singing those songs. I love that some of them, you just sing really loud, your voice is like an iron pan. You just sing loud.

Then as I grew up, I would sing in the shower, especially stall showers that have tile and resonate. I would make up little songs and then at one point, I guess sort of in the seventies, I made up a lot of songs that I now call hippy gospel songs. Now we're thinking of making a record of them and I'm singing them in public. At first I was embarrassed because they're kind of naïve and they're hippy. They're very hippy, but they're sweet. I can step outside of myself and imagine listening to them and enjoying them. They're not major music, but they're sweet songs, yes.

Q: I don't know why, but I'm thinking of the connection with Mad Brook Farm in [East Charleston] Vermont and Deborah Hay. I'm thinking of the circle dances. Were you there in Vermont at the time while she was working?

Forti: No, I came to Vermont quite late. I came to Vermont in the mid-eighties because I had visited from time to time and I went through a breakup in '81 and started visiting there more often and then it just seemed good to turn a page and to go there.

Q: What brought you back to L.A.? Was it the family, that you grew up here?

Forti: What brought me back? My mother turned ninety years old and needed me and I thought, “I’ll be in L.A. two or three years, four years and Mother will die and I’ll go back to Vermont.” She made it to ninety-nine and a half; she was almost one hundred when she died. By then I had started working with people here, yes. I had gotten used to being here and I think it’s been very good for me. Sometimes chance knows what’s good for you.

Q: Is there any question that I didn’t ask, that didn’t come up, that you would like to talk briefly about?

Forti: No, I think this is good.

Q: Okay, we’ll take a break then.

Forti: This was good.

[END OF INTERVIEW]