

On Radical Dance: Yvonne Rainer and Simone Forti

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AVANT-GARDE CHOREOGRAPHER and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer introduces *Work 1961–73*, a chronological, comprehensive survey of her early practice, in her characteristic deadpan. “It goes without saying that a dance is a dance and a book about dance is a book,” she writes. She proceeds to expand upon her impulse to write a book about and around more than a decade of dance, a book that will — inevitably — ontologically fail at being a dance. “I have a longstanding infatuation with language, a not-easily assailed conviction that it, above all else, offers a key to clarity,” she explains. “Not that it can replace experience, but rather holds a mirror to our experience, gives us distance when we need it.”

A book about dance is a book, but it is also a mirror. And when a choreographer puts a mirror up to her work, angling to see it with new clarity, she often encounters her own reflection: her image and the mythologies of that image, her layered and conflicting legacies, the ways in which she has moved through the world — or appeared to. That is to say, as *Work* archives performance, it also archives persona. Mirrors, of course, are something to be wary of, as Rainer — who wrote a memoir, *Feelings Are Facts*, in 2006 — notes in *Work*’s second preface:

Why won’t someone please get me off the cusp of this plague [...] this ravenous for admiration, this contemptuous of those who provide it. [...] [T]his contagion started spreading in the 17th century when they brought in silvered mirrors, self-portraits, chairs instead of benches, the self-contemplative self.

Work had its first printing in 1974. Over four decades later, Primary Information has now reprinted 3,000 copies in facsimile. Cleverly scaled to evoke the composition books that served as a fledgling archive for Rainer, the anthology surveys a period in which she found her footing as a dancer, co-founded the historic Judson Dance Theater (which undercut the grandeur of modern dance with a form of dance rooted in games, tasks, quotidian movements, and unspectacular props), and developed an interest in narrative, choreographing performances with cinematic elements and gradually moving toward filmmaking. *Work* fleshes out several of the artist’s most radically innovative choreographies, storied performances that pushed dance up to and beyond its limits. Examples include *Parts of Some Sextets*, a mid-’60s dance partly determined by aleatory

pencil marks and performed by a troupe of 10 people and 12 mattresses; *Trio A*, from 1966, a string of continuous movements originally accompanied by the sound of wooden slats being hurled from a balcony; and *Grand Union Dreams*, a 1971 piece that featured a cast of “gods,” “heroes,” and “mortals” who read excerpts of critical theory and squirmed through a Plexiglass box.

At nearly 350 pages, *Work* spares no detail. It includes personal and didactic writing of all stripes, including Rainer’s famous “No Manifesto”; photographs, film stills, and event programs; dialogic scripts for performances, which blossom on the page; chronologies, interviews, and correspondences; and reviews, including a commendable selection of unfavorable ones, which paint a fuller picture of the time (my personal favorite is a review of Rainer’s 1969 *Rose Fractions*: “One suspects part of [her fans’] admiration is for her nerve in taking the audience’s money and then ignoring them”). Perhaps most significantly, the collection contains a trove of extensive dance notations in the form of diagrams, numbered and unnumbered lists, floor plans, charts, and dense blocks of written descriptions. Each dance becomes an object to pick up, to look at from every angle, to amass and untangle and distill. Rainer expects her readers to do the *work*, to recognize that sometimes the reward of understanding requires labor — because dance, as she famously said, is hard to see.

In *Work*, Rainer expresses great admiration for Simone Forti, an experimental choreographer, dancer, and peer who was affiliated, though less overtly so, with the Judson group. Forti was a close friend and collaborator of Rainer’s, particularly in the early 1960s (the period covered in the opening sections of *Work*). Their trajectories had significant overlap: both women grew up on the West Coast; Rainer relocated to New York in 1956, and Forti did the same in 1959, after four years spent studying improvisational and mindful movement under dancer Anna Halprin in the Bay Area. Rainer’s and Forti’s romantic partners at the time, artists Al Held and Robert Morris respectively, played roles in prompting their moves east.

The two women met in the spring of 1960, when they were enrolled at the Martha Graham School in New York. At Forti’s urging, Rainer took a three-week summer intensive with Halprin, a decision that greatly expanded her mind as well as her network. That fall, Forti and Rainer were in the first crop of (five) students at Robert Dunn’s Cageian composition workshop in New York, arguably the wellspring of the Judson Dance Theater. They shared a studio twice in 1960, participated in one another’s dances (Rainer was in two of Forti’s most famous: *See Saw* in 1960, and *An Evening of Dance Constructions* in 1961), and performed at the same European dance festivals. “I am indebted to Simone for my awakening as a dancer,” Rainer wrote in a letter to her brother in 1961. “I can honestly say that my creative life began when I met her.”

Both women were pioneers in stripping dance of professionalization, spectacle, and hierarchy and instead building choreographies around tasks, games, patterns, and chance. Forti, who embraced the corporeal mindfulness and intuitive movement learned under Halprin, increasingly derived her inspiration from animals, developing a preternatural ability to inhabit and recreate their movements. Rainer's approach, by contrast, was relatively cerebral and cool: as reflected in her predilection for floor plans and charts, her rules were human rules, mathematical rules.

In 2018, Forti also came out with a book, a relatively slim and freewheeling volume titled *The Bear in The Mirror*. Like Rainer's *Work*, Forti's book takes the form of an expanded collage, spanning writings, sketches, short stories, notes, correspondence, photographs, film stills, and chronologies. It intersperses her reflections on the history of her Italian Jewish family — her own recollections as well as those derived from the oral or written accounts of others — with her observations and feelings about bears, culled from the Native American legend of “The Woman Who Married A Bear” as well as from personal experiences, which Forti intertwines with the fable.

Unlike *Work*, Forti's anthology contains only two performance photos, both of Forti performing *Sleep Walkers/Zoo Mantras* in 2010. Against a Brutalist wall at her Los Angeles home, an elderly, shockingly limber Forti folds forward to the ground, her white hair whipping in her exertion. The dance, originally performed in 1968 at Galleria l'Attico in Rome, was inspired by hours upon hours spent examining the gaits and games of bears in their cramped enclosures at a local zoo. *The Bear in The Mirror* contains several related observational sketches from 1968. Forti, who is also an acclaimed visual artist, is skilled with a pen. The lines in these sketches are simple, energetic, and intentional. A bear manipulates a stick in its mouth, turning it over delicately with its teeth. “Flood of affection,” she scrawls next to the illustration. Another bear turns around in a confined space, his carefully choreographed movements recorded in scribbled contrails.

When Forti was five years old, her Jewish family fled Florence for Bern, Switzerland, eventually making their way to Los Angeles. In her memories of the event, “Bern” is equated with “bear,” recalling the bear pits that she and her sister regularly visited. When she is not writing about bears — and sometimes when she is — Forti shares her experience of attempting to understand and connect with her family history through reading theses and memoirs, having conversations (often over old photographs), and visiting the Prato textile factory owned by her great-grandfather. Lived and learned history, human and ursine experiences, constantly blur. “All this, I'm reading about,” she writes at one point. “It's not part of my experience. But in a way, it is. And this is the way, all mixed together, that it is my experience.”

When she recounts the legend of “The Woman Who Married A Bear,” the narrative is collaged with Forti's own memory of being lost in the woods of Vermont, where she wound up sleeping in the snow. Forti begins to absorb the story of the bear into the narrative of her

own identity, to look in the mirror and see not a choreographer, not a dancer, not an archive of work, but a bear, a bear who tries and often fails to locate herself — her experiences, her thoughts, her movements — in a human narrative. She concludes the chapter: “I’ve lived in the snow before / Though I don’t know where / Or who I was / But I was comfortable / More than that / Joyful.”

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