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Author(s): Virginia B. Spivey
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Old City Publishing, Inc.
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40605219
Accessed: 21/01/2013 06:01

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THE MINIMAL PRESENCE OF SIMONE FORTI

By Virginia B. Spivey

In May 1961, a young choreographer named Simone Forti (b. 1935) presented “Five Dance Constructions and Some Other Things,” a concert of experimental dance, at Yoko Ono’s Chambers Street loft. A few years later, in November 1964, Forti’s ex-husband, Robert Morris, exhibited a group of seven sculptures at New York’s Green Gallery. Commonly called the “Plywood Show,” this exhibition marked a shift in critical response to Morris and signaled an increasing interest among art audiences in the reduced aesthetic that would become known as Minimalism. Although some scholars have noted Morris’s plywood constructions resembled the props Forti used in her dances, her Chambers Street performance is relatively unknown to art historians. The dancer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer later said:

[Forti’s concert] proved to be way ahead of its time. As things then stood, it was as though a vacuum sealed that event. Nothing was written about it and dancers went on dancing and painters and ex-painters went on making painterly happenings and theater pieces. It would be another two and half years before the idea of a construction to generate movement or situation would take hold.

Forti’s innovative choreography has long deserved closer scrutiny, especially for its conceptual affinity to Minimalism of the 1960s.

Minimalism in art has typically been discussed as a movement originating in New York, when spare abstract forms began to emerge from the studios of Morris, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Frank Stella, Carl Andre, and Sol LeWitt. Women are conspicuously absent in this narrative, although female artists such as Jo Baer, Anne Truitt, and Judy Gerowitz (better known as Judy Chicago) were producing similar work at the same time. In an effort to extend the movement’s narrow construction, scholars have recently acknowledged the range of minimalist aesthetic practices that developed in the early 1960s. This new wave of research is not art historical revisionism, but an attempt to restore Minimalism to its place within the diverse artistic landscape of the period. Such an endeavor demands that art history expand to include previously overlooked individuals, and it forces us to re-examine Minimalism by recognizing how different disciplines were integral to its development.

These issues converge in a study of Simone Forti. Scholarly bias in art history has ignored many women like Forti. Her situation was compounded by similar attitudes in the academy that viewed dance as an uncritical (often feminized) art form, more rooted in bodily expression than intellectual activity. Another factor is that, like many women of the time, Forti chose not to promote her own career, which she saw as secondary to her husband’s professional ambitions. Morris’s interest in painting first led the newlywed couple to San Francisco in 1956 and later to New York. After divorcing Morris in 1960, Forti married Happenings artist Robert Whitman, who asked that she give up her own work and assist him while they tried to start a family.

When her second marriage ended in 1966 and Forti returned to her career, the radical developments in dance predicted by her choreography had already been established. This was largely due to the groundbreaking performances of the Judson Dance Theater, a group that is frequently discussed in art historical texts because of its interdisciplinary focus. Although Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, and other Judson members cite Forti as a significant influence, the fact that she never participated in the group’s performances led to her omission. Today, Forti is well-known among dance scholars; yet, her name remains unfamiliar to most art historians. A closer look at her work not only demonstrates Forti’s importance to art history, but also underscores the vital exchange between avant-garde dance and visual art in the 1960s.

Forti began her study of dance soon after she and Morris arrived in San Francisco. By the time of her first public performance in December 1960, at New York’s Reuben Gallery, she had developed a distinctive choreographic approach that synthesized a number of influences. One of the most important was Anna Halprin, co-founder of San Francisco’s Halprin-Lathrop Institute and a major proponent of modern dance on the West Coast. Around 1956, Halprin became concerned about the direction of contemporary dance, and she started conducting experimental workshops at her home in Marin County. The goal was to explore her preconceptions about what constituted dance, movement, and composition. Informed by Halprin’s knowledge of anatomy, Forti and other students analyzed movement to determine whether their actions were executed in the most anatomically efficient way, or whether they were learned motions performed according to
Forti’s frustration with modern dance changed when she entered Robert Dunn’s dance workshop at the Cunningham School in the fall of 1960. Dunn had worked extensively with Cunningham as a musician and composer and had attended John Cage’s class, “Composition of Experimental Music,” at the New School for Social Research from 1958-1960. Influenced by the innovative atmosphere of Cage’s seminar, Dunn’s instruction drew from an eclectic range of material, including Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and existentialism. He introduced his students to avant-garde music and explained to them John Cage’s chance-based methods of composition. Forti was impressed with Cage’s approach because it allowed for indeterminacy while retaining a sense of organized composition. She realized she could adapt his ideas to structure her own dances.

Another source of influence was the group of New York Happenings artists that included Robert Whitman, Allan Kaprow, and Jim Dine. Forti found the kind of “wild action” that characterized Whitman’s theater pieces particularly intriguing. He often immersed spectators directly in his performances, providing them an immediate experience that ranged from vaguely threatening to spectacular. Whitman’s influence is most apparent in Rollers, a dance Forti presented in her performance at the Reuben Gallery in December 1960. Forti and Patty Oldenburg each sat in a small wooden box on wheels with strings attached. Audience members were asked to pull the performers around the stage area while both women would sing a single note, holding it for the duration. As the boxes careened and veered dangerously, however, what began as a musical tone transformed into a panicked,
shrieking scream, rising and falling according to the boxes’ uncontrollable movements.

Forti had sought a choreographic method that would strike a balance between the absolute control of ballet choreographers and the freedom of pure improvisation. Drawing from the influences of Halprin, Cage, and Whitman as well as the children she taught, her solution was to assign specific tasks, use props, and set certain limits for performers to negotiate according to their particular physical abilities. As Rollers demonstrates, this strategy propelled action in the dance, but remained outside of her immediate control. Forti’s work radically asserted that dance could derive from simple actions and fundamental movements of the body. Based on the physical skills and abilities of individuals, her choreography implied that anyone could be a dancer, regardless of body type, specialized training, or technical skill.

Forti’s mature work, like Minimalism, signaled a shift away from emotional expressionism and illusionism. Here, the dancer no longer appears transformed into a dying swan or nutcracker prince moving effortlessly across the stage; rather, the viewer sees a real person, made of flesh and bone, subject to gravity’s pull and limited by her or his body’s particular skills and range of motion. Forti’s reliance on props and predetermined rules to dictate choreography corresponds to the desire among Minimalist artists for an objective, systemic method of production, and her interest in spatial perception and viewer experience anticipates the phenomenological interpretations commonly used to explain Minimalism.

A comparison of Forti’s “Five Dance Constructions and Some Other Things” (1961; Fig. 1) to Morris’s “Plywood Show” sheds light on these aspects of Forti’s practice and brings deserved attention to her contribution to a Minimalist aesthetic. Forti’s concert included five new dances, Slant Board, Huddle, Platforms, Hangers, Accompaniment for La Monte’s Two Sounds and La Monte’s Two Sounds, and See Saw, which had debuted six months earlier in the Reuben Gallery performance. While a dance performance may initially seem unrelated to the exhibition of Morris’s artwork, Forti situated each of her dances, which she called “dance constructions,” in a manner akin to sculptures in a gallery. Showing each dance separately throughout Ono’s open loft, she apparently intended them to function like objects that viewers would experience from all sides.

Visitors entered the space to find Slant Board (1961; Fig. 2) directly before them. Forti instructed the performers in this dance to move simultaneously upward and across a wooden ramp, which leaned against a wall at a forty-five-degree angle and had long knotted ropes attached to help the dancers in their task. Although they could pause to rest, they had to remain on the board for the duration of the ten-minute dance. Forti did not dictate specific steps for the performers to imitate, rather each dancer’s movements derived from physical abilities including strength, stamina, and coordination, as well as their combined efforts not to interfere with the others on the board.

The next dance was Huddle (1961; Fig. 3), a work in which no additional props were employed, but six or seven performers used their bodies to form a circular web by bending forward and weaving their arms around each others’ waists and shoulders. The dance began when one person disengaged from the group and started to climb over the structure using foot and hand-holds formed by bodies of other participants. Once the first dancer had climbed over the other bodies, she or he joined back into the huddle and another would begin to climb. Forti did not specify a climbing order; palpable shifts in balance signaled the dancers to begin their task. Throughout the dance, the audience moved around Huddle to see changes that occurred in the mass of bodies as climbers detached and rejoined the group.

Viewers then saw Hangers, where five dancers stood passively inside long loops made with ropes hung closely together from the ceiling. Four additional performers walked quickly between them, causing those suspended in the ropes to swing and collide. Although impossible to control, movement in the dance was affected by weight and size of the hanging performers as well as by how fast the others walked between them. Next, the audience watched Platforms (1961; Fig. 4), in which Morris and Forti hid under two rectangular wooden boxes, whistled for fifteen minutes, then got up and walked away.

The fifth dance, Accompaniment for La Monte’s 2 sounds and La Monte’s 2 sounds, was actually more a musical performance with dance serving as the attendant element. Forti hung from a long rope loop, similar to those used in Hangers, while another performer twisted the rope tightly before releasing it and turning on a twelve-minute tape recording of avant-garde composer La Monte Young’s 2 sounds. As the music played, Forti spun around as the rope unwound and then rewound from the momentum. Once this motion had completely stopped, Forti remained hanging until the music ended and
Herding began. This was one of three short “game pieces,” which Forti structured as a competition among participants. Here, the dancers played with the audience by gathering everyone together, then forcing them to move back and forth through the loft until they became irritated.21

By that time, they were in place to view See-Saw. Performed by Robert Morris and Yvonne Rainer, this dance relied on an eight-foot plank that sat on top of a sawhorse.22 For twenty-minutes, the couple see-sawed up and down, stood next to each other, and moved tentatively across the board, positioning themselves any way necessary not to fall. Because of the prop’s constantly shifting equilibrium, working together was an essential aspect of the duet. At one point, their roles deviated while Morris read a monotone discourse from ArtNews and Rainer began flailing her body about and shrieking loudly. However, throughout most of the dance, the performers had to coordinate their movements, remaining aware of how each one’s actions would impact the other. Also, during the presentation of See-Saw, another smaller version of Huddle occurred behind the audience. Forti says that she did not intend for viewers to pay close attention to this second performance of Huddle; she only wanted audience members to “be aware” of something happening behind them.23

Forti’s installation of her dances throughout the open space effectively blurred distinctions between real and performative space. None of these dances employed special lighting effects or costumes to provide temporal or visual cues. Predetermined rules dictated the beginning of a dance, which later ended when the performers completed their assigned tasks. Furthermore, typical of Forti’s choreography, all the performances relied on a set of rules, often combined with a central prop, to generate movements; however, instead of a seated proscenium, the audience gathered and milled around each piece as it was presented.24

While the identity of all the performers cannot be confirmed, a partial list includes Forti, Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown and Carl Lehmann-Haupt.25 When these people were not dancing, they would join the audience and later shift back into their roles as dancers when called on to perform. Obscuring such distinctions extended further throughout Forti’s event. Like the performers, Forti forced the entire audience to interact with her rules and obstacles as they navigated the dances shown throughout the loft. In this way, Forti’s dance constructions functioned as separate “objects” for viewers to encounter and negotiate according to their bodies’ kinesthetic and psychological response.

Visitors to Morris’s “Plywood Show” (1964; Fig. 5) at the Green Gallery three years later came upon a similar situation. To enter, they had to walk beneath a horizontal plinth that spanned two walls above the gallery’s entrance. Titled Untitled (Corner Beam), this object was like all of Morris’s work on view: it was built with plywood and nails, hand-painted Merkin Pilgrim gray, and lacked any notable surface texture or detail. Once inside, viewers had to move around Untitled (Floor Beam), a twenty-six-foot rectangular beam with one rounded edge, lying in the center of the floor. To their right was Untitled (Table), a symmetrical L-shaped form that abutted the wall at a ninety-degree angle, leaving a large square opening, and behind them to the left, a triangular shaped structure Untitled (Corner Piece) was wedged into the corner. Untitled (Cloud) hung at eye level from the ceiling. In another area of the room stood Untitled (Boiler), a four-by-eight-foot cylinder lodged between rectangular blocks. The final piece in the show, Untitled (Wall/Floor Slab) (1964; Fig. 6), was an eight-foot square form that leaned at an angle against a side wall.

Just walking into the room made visitors more aware of their surroundings. Frank Stella commented, “I’d never been so conscious of the space between the corners, walls, and floor.”26 Donald Judd wrote in his review of the show: “Morris’s works are minimal visually, but they’re powerful spatially. It’s an unusual asymmetry... The work looks well together, but it isn’t an environment.”27 Such comments indicate that, like Forti’s dance constructions, Morris’s structures engaged the viewer in a physical and psychological encounter. In his 1966 essay “Notes on Sculpture, Part 2,” Morris explained this effect in phenomenological terms:

The object is but one of the terms in the newer esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive, because one’s awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varied conditions of light and spatial context.28

Morris’s belief that sculpture might be understood phenomenologically not only called attention to the anthropomorphic nature of his work; it further implied that bodies and objects possess interchangeable characteristics, a notion which stemmed from ideas Forti explored in her choreography.
Forti viewed the human body as a material object defined by its weight, mass, and scale in relationship to the other things surrounding her. She recalls studying such spatial acuity by sitting on the floor beside ordinary household objects like a cereal box, a roll of toilet paper, or a fingernail brush. After a while, she would reposition herself in a different place among the scattered items. Forti’s intent in these experiments was to explore phenomenological perception of the space around her. By comparing her own body to inanimate objects, she hoped to understand better how their shared physical and spatial properties contribute to human perception.29

Forti conceived of dance itself as sculptural, hence her use of the term “dance constructions” to describe her choreographic work. She had first begun to sketch sculptural designs related to her movement investigations while in San Francisco. It was before her concert at the Reuben Gallery that Forti became panic-stricken about how to construct her plans. She explained:

I was sitting on my bed with a pad, or notebook, of newsprint and crayons, and I drew these pieces, and I said, “yes, I’ll do these pieces.” And then I remember one night, being awake in bed and just being desperate, thinking, “How am I ... I don’t know how to build this stuff.” And talking it over with Bob and him saying, “I’ll build it for you.”30

Even when there were no additional props, Forti viewed dance as an object. In Huddle, for example, she intended the viewer to walk around the mass of bodies as though it were a single sculpture.

Morris’s Minimalist structures reflect a similar understanding of the body as an object with measurable quantities of mass, volume, and weight. The obvious resemblance of Morris’s Untitled (Wall/Floor Slab) to props he built for Forti indicates his impact on his sculpture. Morris readily admits he “later altered [Forti’s designs] slightly” for some of his early works.31 Nevertheless, it is an overstatement to say his sculpture derived entirely from her innovations. While the couple certainly shared their artistic thoughts and concerns, the years of their marriage, from 1956 to 1961, were a time of experimentation and growth for both artists. Their similar experiences during this formative period suggest strongly that, together, they developed a common vocabulary to convey ideas in each of their chosen media. Morris credits Forti with introducing him to the tenets of experimental dance, and the couple even led their own movement workshops while living in San Francisco. After moving to New York in 1960, both Forti and Morris became closely involved with the city’s avant-garde dance and theatre community.

Recognizing Morris’s place within this distinctive milieu is important to understanding how his work developed outside of the circumstances motivating other Minimalist artists. For example, like his colleagues, Morris sought a way to eliminate subjective decision-making and expressive association from the creative process. However, in contrast to Stella or Judd who derived their solutions from problems in painting, Morris cites Forti’s task-based choreography as the primary influence on his sculptural method. He explained: “To follow a rule (rather than to consciously ‘perform’) altered the intentionality of dance making. By analogy, I employed ‘construction’ in making sculpture. Both provided a different structural way of working; a priori in both cases.”32

Although Morris adamantly resists the idea that Forti’s work suggested to him dance as a sculptural equivalent, his work clearly implies a bodily presence that was explicit in Forti’s choreography. Morris’s earliest abstract sculpture, Column (1961) reflects this relationship to the body most clearly. Although later exhibited as sculpture, Column first appeared in a performance at New York’s Living Theater in 1962.33 Two-feet square, eight-feet high and painted gray, it stood vertically on an otherwise empty stage for three and a half minutes before being pulled over by a string held off stage. It then remained horizontal for another three and half minutes until the lights went down and the performance ended. Morris had originally intended to stand inside the hollow structure and fall over, making Column appear to move of its own volition; but, a head injury from the fall in rehearsal forced him to substitute the pulling-string in the actual performance.

Its materials, geometric structure, and scale make obvious that Column was a direct precursor to the abstract sculptures Morris would later exhibit in the “Plywood Show.” Its origins in dance suggest directions for interpreting these subsequent works. If Morris had been inside Column as planned, its debut would have resembled Forti’s Platforms. As the Living Theater performance transpired, Morris’s removal of a human
presence from stage proved that an inanimate object could evoke bodily action and assume its own anthropomorphic effect through scale, movement, and temporal experience. Yet, different from Platforms and Forti’s other dance constructions, Column did not interact directly with Morris’s audience since it was presented in a more traditional theatrical context. By contrast, positioning sculpture throughout the open space of the Green Gallery recalled the conditions of Forti’s 1961 concert. Placed directly on the floor and attached to ceiling and walls, Morris’s objects appeared integrated with the architectural space of the gallery. In this way, the viewer’s experience was similar to that of the audience that had moved through Yoko Ono’s loft to watch Forti’s next dance. Like Forti’s event, Morris’s installation required viewers to engage with each object physically in a way that blurred boundaries between the realm of art and real life.

This aspect of Morris’s work is precisely what led critic Michael Fried to call Minimalism “theatrical” in his influential 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood.” Fried argued that Minimalist sculpture, which had to be experienced over time in real space, obscured essential characteristics distinguishing visual art from theater. Bolstered by Morris’s phenomenological explanations, Fried called attention to Minimalism’s tendency to convey “presence” to the viewer, a term he used to denote the object’s anthropomorphic qualities. Whereas representational sculpture achieved this effect through mimesis or allusive form, the physical scale of Minimalist objects forced the viewer to interact as if they were other persons existing in a shared space. Although Fried was critical of these features, his observation accurately highlighted Minimalism’s performativity and consequently entered art history as characteristic of all Minimalist works.

The performatve dimension of Minimalist art demands scholars examine its correspondence to dance and experimental performance. While recent literature on Morris usually acknowledges his involvement with performance, the broader relationship between Minimalism and postmodern dance of the period has not been thoroughly explored. A notable exception is Yvonne Rainer’s choreography of the mid-1960s, which has long been mentioned in this context. Rainer is distinguished, however, from other performers and dance critics of the time by her own theoretical explanations of her work. Her inclusion in Minimalism’s history resulted largely from her appropriation of its critical language, as well as her liminal position between avant-garde art and dance.

Fried’s essay shows how Robert Morris’s phenomenological theories helped shape Minimalism’s critical reception and interpretation but overlooks Forti’s influence on Morris. Comparing “Five Dance Constructions and Some Other Things” to the “Plywood Show” clearly reveals the importance of Forti’s work to Morris’s aesthetic and conceptual development, especially his interest in bodily experience and perception. Her choreography of the early 1960s also reveals an affinity to Minimalism that challenges traditional conceptions of the movement. In their literal presentation of and emphasis on the body’s sculptural qualities, Forti’s dance constructions offer a correlative to objects later produced by Morris, Judd and other visual artists. When added to the Minimalist lexicon, Forti’s work expands our current definition by acknowledging the diversity of artists and disciplines that contributed to Minimalism’s development. The circumstances that once caused Forti’s neglect in art history are greatly diminished, and her accomplishment can no longer be sealed in a vacuum. Simone Forti must now be included in the complete history of Minimalism.

Virginia B. Spivey is an independent art historian specializing in late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century intersections of visual culture, dance and feminist performance, and issues of identity and gender expression.

NOTES
A Mellon Fellowship supported portions of this research conducted for my dissertation “Performing Relationships: Gendered Subjectivity in the Art of Robert Morris,” (Case Western Reserve University, 2002). An earlier version of this paper titled “Another Way of Being: Simone Forti, Minimalism and Dance,” was presented in the “Women’s Art, Women’s Vision” session at the 2008 Southeastern College Art Conference. I thank the other panelists and my colleagues at Longwood University and Hampden-Sydney University for their comments.
1. Forti’s concert, presented May 26-27, was part of a series of Proto-
Fluxus events, now known as the Chambers Street Series, organized by La Monte Young and presented at Ono’s loft between December 1960 and June 1961. See Owen F. Smith, Fluxus: the History of an Attitude (San Diego: San Diego State Univ. Press, 1990), 28-30.


9. Forti is satisfied with the attention she has received. “A lot of my invisibility has been chosen by me, as a guarantor of freedom to proceed through all my changes. . . . It’s not been a tendency as a woman; it’s been my path as an artist seeking my most empowering position.” Simone Forti, e-mail to the author, February 10, 2009.


12. Ibid.


16. Dunn’s workshop evolved into the Judson Dance Theater. The group’s first concert was presented as an end-of-year public recital of dances made for Dunn’s class. After Dunn ended his weekly sessions in 1962, the JDT developed into both an experimental forum and a vehicle for promoting avant-garde concepts in dance. For a thorough discussion of Dunn’s class and its impact on dance of the 1960s, see Sally Banes, “Robert Dunn’s Workshop,” in Democracy’s Body: Judson Dance Theater, 1-33.


18. Forti saw Whitman’s E.G. at the Reuben Gallery on June 11, 1960, and assisted with his American Moon in December 1960. It was through her connection to Whitman that Forti was invited to participate on the Christmas program of Happenings at the Reuben Gallery in 1960. Forti, telephone interview with the author, December 21, 2001.

19. No known photographs or film of the 1961 concert exist. Forti provides the most complete descriptions of her dances. See Forti, Handbook in Motion, 56-67.

20. 2 Sounds was a stereo tape of noises Young had recorded at Anna Halprin’s workshop while he was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley. Simone Forti, interview with Louise Sunshine, May 8, 1994, Oral History Project, Jerome Robbins Dance Research Collection, New York Public Library, transcription of Cassette 1, 45.

21. The others were Censor, where one person shook a pan of nails while another sang a song with their mutual goal to find perfect balance between the two; and From Instructions, in which one man was told to tie another to some pipes on the wall, and the other was told to lie on the floor for the duration of the piece. Forti, Handbook in Motion, 66.

22. Forti originally intended to perform with Morris, but an injury forced her to ask Rainer to dance instead. Forti, telephone interview with the author, July 14, 2000.


24. Forti says her treatment of the dances was, in part, a response to photographs of Japanese Gutai performances she had seen in San Francisco. Although the Gutai distinguished their actions from the final objects they would exhibit, Forti saw in their work a way to engage her audience without demanding direct participation. This strategy was an intentional shift from her use of the audience in Rollers, where the action of pulling the performers around the stage area became potentially hazardous to the participants. Forti, telephone interview with the author, July 14, 2000. On the Gutai, see Alexandra Munroe, “To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun: The Gutai Group,” in Alexandra Munroe, ed., Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky (New York: Abrams, 1994), 83-124.

25. Morris, fax to the author, November 9, 2000; Rainer, e-mail to the author, February 26, 2001; Forti recalls that she and Morris danced together in Platforms, and that in Accompaniment for LaMonte’s 2 Sounds and LaMonte’s 2 Sounds, she hung in the rope loop while Morris spun her. She also specifies that Morris and Carl Lehmann-Haupt performed the game piece From Instructions. Forti, telephone interview with the author, November 2, 2000.


30. Ibid.

35. Fried, who based his essay largely on the writings of Morris and Donald Judd, conflated the two artists’ ideas. Judd’s formalist goals were overshadowed, in Fried’s mind, by Morris’s insistence that sculpture involve the viewer. For this reason, Morris’s phenomenological focus served as a central premise of Fried’s criticism. See James S. Meyer, Minimalism: Art and Polemics, esp. 229-34. On performativity and Minimalism, see Maurice Berger, Minimal Politics: Performativity and Minimalism in Recent American Art (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery, Univ. of Maryland, Baltimore County, 1997).
36. Trisha Brown’s choreography and her work in visual art has been the subject of two recent museum exhibitions. See Hendel Teicher, ed. Trisha Brown: dance and art in dialogue 1961-2001 (Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 2002) and Peter Eleey, ed. Trisha Brown: so that the audience does not know whether or not I have stopped dancing (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2008).
38. Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson also use the example of Morris’s work in their phenomenological readings of Minimalist sculpture. Although both authors note Morris’s involvement in postmodern dance, they do not discuss Forti beyond the mention of her name. See Rosalind E. Krauss, Passages in Modern Sculpture (New York: Viking, 1977) and Annette Michelson, “An Aesthetics of Transgression,” in Robert Morris (Washington DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1969).