

Primary Sources

Lauren Redniss on the Art of Dance

Eyal Press: From [Public Books](#) and [Type Media](#), this is Primary Sources, the show where writers and intellectuals talk about some of the greatest influences on their work. I'm Eyal Press.

My guest today is the artist and journalist Lauren Redniss. Lauren is the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant" and the author of four remarkable works of visual nonfiction. These genre-defying books combine oral history, visual art, reportage, and archival research to create volumes that look a bit like graphic novels but read like nothing else you've ever experienced. Among them is *Radioactive*, a biography of the scientists Marie and Pierre Curie; *Thunder and Lightning*, a sprawling exploration of the weather; and *Oak Flat*, a work of reportage about an Apache family trying to protect sacred land from a mining company in modern-day Arizona. Her newest project, a children's book called *Time Capsule*, has just been released.

When I invited Lauren to talk about one of her deepest influences, I thought she might discuss an oral historian she admires, such as Studs Terkel, or a painter to whom she has been compared, such as Paul Klee. Instead, she suggested we talk about an entire artistic medium, which she considers to be her greatest source of inspiration: that of dance.

In today's episode, you'll hear Lauren discuss the ways in which the multimedia nature of a dance performance has inspired her to create books that readers can experience as events unto themselves. She also talks about how the elements of discipline, pacing, and improvisation—which are all crucial to dance—inform her approach to her own work. And she tells us about how the New York City Ballet became the location of one of the most memorable—and politically transgressive—projects of her career.

Just so you know, there will be moments when background noise can be heard during our conversation, as is sometimes unavoidable when doing remote recordings in a pandemic.

Eyal Press: Lauren Redniss. Welcome to the podcast. I'm so glad you're joining us.

Lauren Redniss: Well, thank you so much for having me.

Eyal Press: You've said that one of the most significant influences on your work as a visual non-fiction artist is the medium of dance. When did dance first start mattering to you?

Lauren Redniss: My mom was a dancer. I could say she still is a dancer. She was trained as a ballet dancer then became a modern dancer, and now, she's actually in her mid seventies doing competitive ballroom. So, I grew up surrounded by dance. It was always just a part of our lives. And I remember my mom talking about Martha Graham and one time when Martha Graham asked her to demonstrate a certain step, and she had my mom hold her arm above her head and she ran her fingers down my mom's arm and said, "The armpit is the most beautiful part of the body." And so I would always hear these incredible stories. I started taking movement classes as soon as that became an option—I must've been like three years old and then studied ballet more or less my whole young life, and I decided not to pursue it professionally, but I think the discipline and certain ideas from dance have stuck with me and inform more or less everything I do ever since.

Eyal Press: It's striking that your work is such a fusion of different elements. Text, images, photo collages. I think in one of your books, you have copperplate etchings that you feature. Is that one of the ways that dance has influenced you, providing a framework for integrating all those elements into one unified whole?

Lauren Redniss: You've said it so beautifully. I don't think I can say it any better. But I love the way that you might enter a theater and you're entering this world and you're transported; I love the idea of you're opening a book and you're entering that world and you're transported, and every element of that object should be supporting that time travel or other dimension that you're entering. I also like thinking about the book as a time-based medium, which we maybe don't always do. I love that thought that the act of turning a page is a suspenseful moment, even if it's like a millisecond and in that millisecond, there's an opportunity to create drama and surprise; that's something that I definitely took from dance in a way that felt just like really natural. I think when I started making books this way, it seemed completely intuitive that I would try to gather all of these different elements and make one unified whole. And then it was only after publishers started telling me, "This is weird and we don't know what to do with this." That's when it seemed like, "Oh, I guess this is unconventional."

Eyal Press: I have to say it really resonates hearing you say that because reading your books is that kind of experience. One turns the page from chapter to chapter, really not knowing what's gonna come next, and sometimes what comes next is a historical document or a lot of text, and sometimes what comes next is no text and just image after image after image. I wonder if you think of that as kind of acts in this event you've described the book becoming for the reader? The stage opens and then the curtain is pulled back and then there's more, and there's something new, and we don't exactly know where it'll go.

Lauren Redniss: Yeah, definitely. I think I literally called the sections of my first book "Act 1" and "Act 2" and "Act 3." Also, sometimes, I think of the books or the structure of the book; sometimes I think of it as a kind of a song. There's the verses and then there's a bridge—each of my books has a moment where there's a bridge—and then maybe a break and then something slightly different that comes in the last third of the book. In one of my books *Thunder and Lightning*, I know you and I have talked a little bit about this chapter called "Sky" that comes about that two-thirds mark through the book. And that's a book about climate and weather. And the first set of chapters is looking at different weather phenomena like rain and fog and wind, and then you have this bridge, and then the last part of the book is more thematic chapters that look at weather control and geoengineering, and weather in religion and that bridge has a really particular role. Like you say, it is wordless and it's a kind of cloud atlas of chapters called "sky." And the first set of images are identifiable or semi-identifiable oil pastel drawings of different cloud formations, like Cumulus and Cirrus and there's Cumulonimbus, and then you get to a page that, if you had just come to it on its own, you would say, "Oh, this is blank, right? It's just a blue page. There's no horizon line, there's no text, there's no identifiable image." And, this, to me, was my moment of silence for the climate. My hope was that because of everything that has set up that moment, because of the context that's come before all of this information, and dense pages of text, and representational landscapes and figures that when you get to that page, it's a little shock.

To bring it back to what you were saying about dance, if you were to imagine that you've been watching a performance with a group of dancers on stage and there's music and there's movement and action, and then suddenly everyone freezes and the music drops out. Hopefully

the audience would hold their breath a little; “what’s going on?” So that’s my hope that you get to that page and you’re like, “wait, what?” But because of everything that’s come before you, it feels full of meaning even though it’s effectively blank. So, it’s fun to be able to play with all of those tools, when you have both texts and images and you can mess with proportions—how much text, how much image, how literal, how atmospheric or abstract can things get—and you can adjust the knobs on each of those things, depending on what you’re trying to say or how you’re trying to control the pacing, because I think that’s what a blank page can also do, it changes how a reader moves through the book. It changes what feels important, if there’s only one line of text on a page, right. You add emphasis.

Eyal Press: That is such a striking part of *Thunder and Lightning*, and in that book, because as, as you said, there’s a lot of text; one is reading at length in some of the earlier chapters, how much does setting up a chapter like that—that has no words—how much are you thinking about when it comes, the pacing of the performance, if you will?

Lauren Redniss: I think about structure a lot. It’s maybe one of the first things I try to work out in any book, even if it changes drastically as the work continues. I think having a list of chapter titles and a vague sense of the shape of the thing helps me figure out what I’m trying to say. I don’t exactly remember when I placed that chapter. I think I always knew it had to come kind of late. Because if it came early, it might just feel decorative. Or, almost like an ax? That page could look like a mistake. It’s like a printer’s error.

Eyal Press: Exactly. Where are the words?

Lauren Redniss: Right. So, you have to kind of earn that sense of intentionality by building toward it.

Eyal Press: That makes a lot of sense. What you just said made me think of something else I really wanted to ask you. It very much relates to dance. Dance can be highly choreographed, but it can also be improvised, spontaneous. What’s the balance for you in your work? How much have you plotted and planned it out as a choreographer would? And how much of it is, you have to sit down and just start drawing or creating the images that go into it to really know what you want in there.

Lauren Redniss: Oh, I love that question. I kind of want to ask it back to you in a certain way, because I think for me, it’s all about the reporting. I start with more of a question or a set of questions than, like you say, a very choreographed or plotted out plan. I think my hope is that I’m going to be surprised as I report it. My hope is that in what I learn in who I meet, I will find things that I never could have predicted that inevitably will be more interesting than what I would have imagined without going out into the world. So, I wait and work until I find those surprises. I definitely don’t lock it in before I’ve been educated.

Eyal Press: I can definitely relate to that. And likewise, feel like the greatest value in my own work is the stuff that comes unexpectedly and hits you and changes how you see a person or a situation you’re trying to depict. But, I am also curious about the after of the reporting. Can you create an outline for yourself or is going to work, sitting with the material, looking at it, that it spontaneously unfolds?

Lauren Redniss: I think the first thing I would do is bring my interviews home and transcribe them, of course, and then start editing them and seeing what emerges. And then as I write the narrative that goes around the interviews, the text is coming together; the shape is coming together. Then I'll literally bind a blank book. I'll just sew together a hardcover blank book that's the number of pages that's in my contract, not that it can't change, but I like to have that constraint to work against. So I have this object and then I will literally print out a Microsoft Word document and physically cut it up and scotch tape it into the pages and kind of map out the pacing and where the words are gonna fall, what text will fall on each page and then the chapters start to come together, and then I can start seeing what images would go where, because simultaneously to the text reporting, I'm also gathering a lot of visual resources. So, I'll be drawing on site, I'll be taking photographs, maybe gathering archival material. And so I have a kind of archive of that to pull from, and then I'll start, usually with the Xerox machine, just again, literally cutting and pasting these elements and then building it up like a layer cake.

Eyal Press: Wow. I can imagine a choreographer listening to that and relating to it. I want to ask a little more about echoes of dance and connections to dance in your work. One of the most direct connections to the world of dance in your work was an installation you did, I believe, at the David Koch Theater at Lincoln Center which is the home of the New York City Ballet. Can you describe that work?

Lauren Redniss: So, it was Fall 2019 and, Sunday morning I checked my email. I see Wendy Wheelan in my inbox. Wendy Wheelan, she's one of the great ballerinas of the past many generations. And my heart stopped because like, "Oh my God, Wendy Wheelan!" And then I was like, "Oh wait, this is probably a solicitation for the fundraiser or something. What am I kidding myself?" I click on the email. It turns out it was not a solicitation. She wrote me this very cryptic note: "Can you meet with me at the theater?" I go up to the theater, meet Wendy, and for the past—I was the eighth—the previous seven years, they have invited an artist to create an installation in that atrium space of the theater, which is about 8,000 square feet and four tiers. She said, "We want you to do something here, create something for this space." You know, I'm very used to working within constraints, so I ask "Oh, okay. So what are the limitations?" And she was like, "No, no limitations." I'm like, "What?"

I was brought into the world of New York City Ballet in a really interesting way, because I think that was the *ethos* that the founding choreographer, George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein worked with: just give people artistic freedom and] see what they do. And, so, I was trying to figure out what would be a meaningful project to do here, and, like you say, this is the David Koch Theater, and obviously, that gives me pause. I started to think about that neighborhood, what it had been prior to the building of Lincoln Center. It was a place called San Juan Hill. It was a place where there was a vibrant Black community, a Puerto Rican community. There was actually a very vibrant art scene there, and it was declared a slum and cleared out and Lincoln Center was built. So my first thought was, "Oh, maybe I could do something about San Juan Hill. Maybe I could find people who had lived in San Juan Hill before Lincoln Center was built" and just mulling these things over.

And, of course, the clock is ticking, because this is the end of October and the installation would be at the end of December, so it was a pretty tight turnaround time to make the work. I ended up...as I was sort of spending time at the theater while I was trying to figure this out, I was spending time backstage, and I was just thinking about looking through this massive building: Who changes the light bulbs? There are thousands of light bulbs here; And who launders the

costumes after a performance? And so I was just thinking about all of the invisible work that goes on; the work that's, I should say, invisible to the public. You have these celebrated dancers on stage, but then you have hundreds of people who work at the theater, whose labor and creativity goes largely unrecognized. So, I decided that I was going to interview and create larger-than-life size portraits of people who work behind the scenes at the theater: security guards and ushers, and the people who changed the lightbulbs and the people who cleaned the bathrooms and the people who do the laundry, and all sorts of others—the piano tuner—all sorts of people. So, that's what I ended up doing. And the portraits are transparent. They hung all around the different tiers and then some were about 40 feet high hanging from the top of the atrium to more or less the base.

Eyal Press: How many portraits did you do, Lauren?

Lauren Redniss: 105.

Eyal Press: 105! So, for a period of time, I guess for that, this was pre pandemic, I take it?

Lauren Redniss: Um, yes, just pre pandemic.

Eyal Press: Just pre pandemic. People are coming to the New York City Ballet and walking through a series of portraits of these hidden workers that surround them. Is that right?

Lauren Redniss: Yeah. And reading their oral histories, which were included as wall panel text.

Eyal Press: Is there a particular portrait that stands out to you, that you'd want to describe to us?

Lauren Redniss: Gosh, there are so many! I sort of fell in love with everyone, so it's hard for me to choose. There was the head of security, Clem Mitchum; he was a really wonderful guy, originally from St. Kitts in the Caribbean, and he actually has three sons who are stagehands, so I did their portraits too. And, it was a very intimidating moment, because you're doing this portrait of people who work in this building. So you know they're going to come and judge this installation with a very, very sharp, critical eye. So, as the installation is going up, there are some funny moments where the person who's helping with the installation, doing the physical labor is installing their own portrait. And so Clem Mitchum comes in. I see him from across the atrium. I'm way across and I see him walk in and I see him go from portrait to portrait to portrait. As he's getting close to his portrait, I ran down the corridor and I caught up with him and I stood next to him while he was looking at his portrait and he examined, examined, and then he looks at me and he's like, "I'm much more handsome than that."

Eyal Press: That's great. What a great story. I have to say, hearing about that installation, which I wish I'd seen, I've seen the images you created because there are some of them are online, but creating these portraits of these invisible workers reminds me of my own recent book, *Dirty Work*,

Lauren Redniss: Which is amazing.

Eyal Press: Thank you, thank you. But, as you know, it's a book about hidden labor, hidden, morally troubling labor that society very much prefers to keep hidden from view, and the issues of class and politics are pretty explicit in my book. I wonder what role you see class and politics playing in your work? You mentioned the David Koch theater, and it seems that you had a bit of a pointed message or a motivation to have the hidden made visible to the audience members, to the world surrounding this august cultural institution, and, I'm just curious if that is an impulse you often feel?

Lauren Redniss: I think it is. Sometimes I feel like I don't necessarily have the vocabulary to discuss these issues properly. I think this is one of my deficiencies that comes from having a background in dance and visual art, and then becoming a writer sort of by accident—this nonverbal communication is a much more comfortable place for me. But yes, we look around at the world, it's such a mess. What you described in your book, it's heartbreaking, and I don't want to ignore that. I guess the way that oral history functions and in my work is just to just listen to people, just to hear their stories and, and hopefully convey them in all of their complexities and contradictions.

Eyal Press: Lauren, you've said that one thing dance taught you back when you yourself were a dancer, is discipline; showing up every day, putting in the work. Can you talk a bit about our process and how it relates to dance? What is a typical Lauren Redniss workday?

Lauren Redniss: Right. So a dancer, at least a ballet dancer, it's a very formal and pretty universal process. So dancers show up for class in the morning and go through this set number of exercises, and that's the start of every day, without fail. So having had that habit formed in me, I think, made me feel like, you just show up, you just draw every day, you just do this. You don't wait for lightning to strike or whatever. I think another pretty driving force in my life is like the sense of time goes too fast. I think that's why I started drawing just as a recording tool. And even when I started interviewing people. I just started recording my grandparents because I was like, "Oh, time is moving too fast. I'm going to lose all these stories." So, I think there, I have that sense of urgency, which is good and bad. It can make you feel pretty anxious unnecessarily, probably. But yeah, so I think I keep a steady pace.

Eyal Press: Your work is grounded in history and facts, but all of your books have this dreamlike quality. Some of the images are abstract, they're surreal. Is dance part of what figures into that?

Lauren Redniss: I think that the aesthetics of dance definitely have influenced me, whether it's the emotional impact of abstract elements, like color and light or pattern. And one really early influence on me was Busby Berkeley, the dance choreographer who made those psychedelic films in the 1930s, where you see hundreds of girls playing the violin in this aerial view of these kaleidoscopic spinnings swirls—there are mirrors and all this really ahead of its time strangeness. Sometimes a sense of light and shadow and movement in line in space. You talk about a dancer's line, but also of course there's the drawn line. And I think that my sense of bodies and space and anatomy is definitely rooted in my study of dance.

Eyal Press: Fascinating. Let me just ask one final question. What are you working on now, are you at liberty to talk about it and, does dance figure into it?

Lauren Redniss: Well I finished a children's book, which will be out in Spring of 2022. It's about who gets to write history. It's about what we want to preserve and what we imagine the future to be. And there's no explicit connection to dance, I would say, but there is something funny that does connect to dance, which came to me because people have asked me a number of times like, "Oh, what age group is that book for?" And I never knew how to answer that question. It always tripped me up, and I realized it's because any children's book, or at least any decent children's book, I hope, really has two audiences—you're writing for the child, but you're also writing for the parent. And so, hopefully, the book is meaningful to both the child and the parent. And I thought of that. I was like, "Oh, it's a kind of *pas de deux!*" You have these two people in this dynamic experiencing this story together.

Eyal Press: Well, Lauren Redniss, thank you so much for joining us and for talking about your work and for talking about dance.

Lauren Redniss: Thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure.

Eyal Press: Primary Sources is a co-production of *Public Books* and Type Media Center. *Public Books* is an online magazine of ideas, arts, and scholarship. You can learn more at www.publicbooks.org. Type Media Center is a non profit home for independent journalists. It is committed to building a more equitable future for journalism in the public interest. Learn more about its flagship programs at www.typemediacenter.org.

Our show's executive producer is Caitlin Zaloom, the founding editor of *Public Books*. Our producer is DJ Cashmere. Our engineer is Jess Engebretson. Special thanks to Kelley McKinney, the publisher and managing editor of *Public Books* and Taya Grobow, executive director of Type Media Center. See you all next week for a brand-new episode.