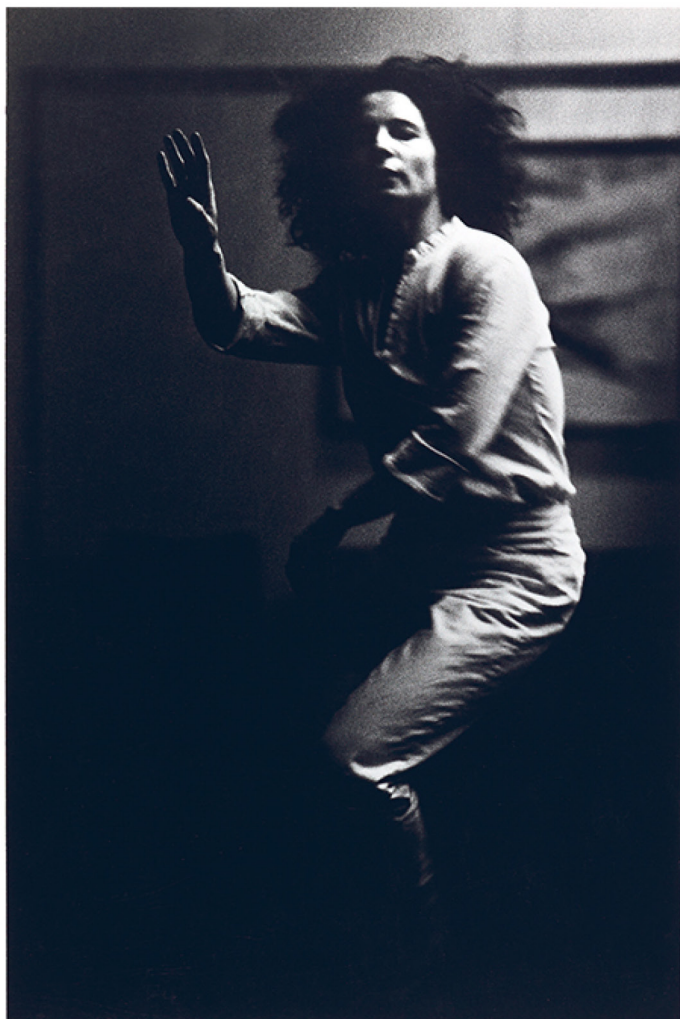


## Join the Movement

MONOGRAPH

Astrid Kaminski talks to **Simone Forti**, the legendary artist and choreographer who changed the course of both Postmodern dance and Minimal art. Artists **Gerard & Kelly** and **Maria Hassabi**, along with curator **Ana Janevski**, discuss Forti's influence on their own work



*Big Room*, 1975, performed by Simone Forti to music by Peter Van Riper at Fordham University, New York, 1976. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; photograph: Robert Alexander

The positive impact of Postmodern dance on life expectancy has yet to be proven, but it certainly prolongs the stage life of its

inventors. In no other era have 70- and 80-year-old dancers been known still to go on global tours.

Simone Forti was born in 1935. In 2014, she danced at MOMA in April and at the Louvre in October, with music, cognac and fluffy animal props provided by Charlemagne Palestine. The two artists began their collaboration in 1971, before Palestine released his first album, with a piece called *Illuminations*. Forti, fresh from her year-long Woodstock retreat, smoked a joint before each of the first three performances; from the fourth performance onwards, however, she danced straight. The piece became a series. Now, after numerous metamorphoses, it has been revived under the title *Illummminnnatttionnnsssss!!!!!!* The review in *The New York Times* closed by quoting the work's final words, 'bye-bye', suggesting that this might be a farewell tour. But Forti is still dancing.

Her 'Dance Constructions' (1960–61) made her a pioneer not only of Postmodern dance but also of Minimal art. Hosted by Salzburg's Museum der Moderne in the autumn of 2014, 'Simone Forti. Thinking with the Body: A Retrospective in Motion' – the first major overview of Forti's work anywhere in the world – achieved two things. With a full set of replicas of the 'Dance Constructions' and daily performances by dancers from the Salzburg Experimental Academy of Dance (SEAD) interacting with them, the show highlighted the historical significance of these objects. At the same time, divided into five sections, it situated 'Dance Constructions' within Forti's overall canon: 'Personal Works'; 'Illuminations'; 'Holograms'; 'Animal Movement Studies' and other works; 'News Animations'.



*See-Saw*, 1960, performed by Simone Forti and Steve Paxton at Danza Volo Musica Dinamite Festival, L'Attico, Rome, 1969. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles; photograph: Claudio Abate

Most of the 'Dance Constructions' consist of three parts: object, instruction and performance. The stated task is almost always directly related to the object's shape, thus supplementing the sensory cues the object itself gives as to how it might be put to use. The performances differ, however, in regard to whether they are more strongly guided by the object or the task. In the case of *Slant Board*, for example, the object is a chipboard ramp angled at 45 degrees with knotted ropes attached to aid climbing. The task of the three performers is to traverse this sloping plane. *See-Saw* is the most theatrical and self-explanatory of the 'Dance Constructions'. Forti once described it as a 'domestic drama'. A board lies across a sawhorse in such a way that it can be used as a seesaw. Two performers balance on the board, shifting their weight and positions in order to compensate for each other's movements or surrendering to the forces at play: the heavier

partner can keep the other performer in the air. For instance, during the work's premiere, Robert Morris sat at one end of the seesaw, leisurely reading the newspaper, while Yvonne Rainer was suspended at the other.

*From Instructions* is a perfect example of a task-led work from the 'Dance Constructions' series. The instruction reads: 'One man is told that he must lie on the floor during the entire piece. The other man is told that, during the piece, he must tie the first man to the wall.' Apart from these two sentences, all that is required for the performance is a rope, attached to a wall or a sturdy object. In Salzburg, the work was performed by Anna Virkkunen and Theano Vasilaki, two slight dancers who would have no problem carrying each other's weight. But Vasilaki worked with gravity to multiply her body weight, while Virkkunen, rapt in concentration like a safebreaker, strove to bind her dance partner to the wall.



*Slant Board*, 1961 performed by Simone Forti and others at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1982. Courtesy: the artist and The Box, Los Angeles

*Huddle* (1961) is a temporal sculpture, and the only performance in the series not associated with an inanimate object. In 2012, it was performed on the High Line in New York. The number of performers may vary; in Salzburg there were seven, who intertwined to create a hummocky, modular form. As if by tectonic pressure, individuals were occasionally ejected from the tangle, before climbing up on top and slotting back down into the huddle.

A key aspect of these performances lies in the quality of their execution – a principle pithily expressed by Vasilaki and Virkkunen as: 'Nothing on top of it.' This derives from Forti's insistence on performance movement stemming from natural reactions to impulses without recourse to 'dancy habits'. The body-mind attitude required for this is both contemplative and alert – something that has entered dancers' basic vocabulary as 'active passivity', one result of the breakthrough of non-formalized and pedestrian movement in Postmodern dance. But, apart from the specific movement qualities of 'Dance Constructions', parallels can also be drawn to later works of object and material dance: to Trisha Brown's site-specific 'Equipment Dances' (1968–72) with the architectural stylization of the object reference; and to William Forsythe's 'Choreographic Objects' (1991–ongoing), in which the object has become a self-explanatory dialogical instruction for choreographic thinking.

Forti's complex *oeuvre*, which has been so influential to her many collaborators, is underpinned by phenomenological observation and methodical improvisation. In this respect, Forti's drawings formed a crucial part of the retrospective. Her lines – in ink, chalk

or graphite – are scrawled and sometimes naïve, but guided by a clear sense of space and direction. Many of the generously proportioned drawings serve as studies, sketches, storyboards or scores for dance. Combined with the videos shown alongside them, they create a kaleidoscopic effect. For example, some of Forti's charismatic animal sketches from 1968 – made at Rome zoo in an attempt to discern the animals' states of mind by studying their expressions in motion – appear in footage documenting the performance of *Sleepwalkers* (1969). Unlike Merce Cunningham's famous animal dances with their playfully stylized mimicry, the gestures here are characterized by a precise probing of the capacity for empathy between beings with different physiognomies: their ticks, tricks and recurring movement patterns.



*Sleepwalkers (aka Zoo Mantras)*, 1967, performed by Simone Forti in an unknown location, New York, 1978. Courtesy: © Babette Mangolte (all rights of reproduction reserved)

One of the more recent works exhibited in Salzburg was *Song of the Vowels* (2009). Alongside graphite drawings that sketch out the cavities and uvulas of the speech apparatus, there is a video featuring these same drawings as dance scores. The footage shows Forti standing in front of a concrete wall, focused, open to both inner and outer energies. It is as if she is plunging her arms into the guttural realm – not the fissured chasm of the consonants but the airy opening of the vowels. Her legs mostly remain still while her torso wavers like a tree in the wind.

In later decades, the search for interfaces between formulations of the voice and the body – based on a method the artist calls 'Logomotion' – occupied a major place within Forti's practice. An important series in this context is 'News Animations' (1986 – ongoing), works that take daily events as reported in newspapers and process them in improvisations that combine vegetative sensitivity with Dada-esque echolalia. The resulting scenes sometimes take the form of movement poems or, at other times, of physical commentaries.

The influence of Cunningham, whose space-body tensions affected much of what now counts as Minimal dance, left no trace in Forti's *oeuvre*. Forti works with a body marked by pulse and impulse, a body awake to the rhythms of the organs and the curves and angles of the joints. The pinnacle of improvisatory virtuosity may be difficult to measure, but the documentary footage exhibited in the Salzburg show testifies to Forti's ability to project through her bodily presence the full spectrum of mental states from introspection to radical openness.

## Astrid Kaminski

Your 'Dance Constructions' room at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg includes *Onion Walk* (1961) – an onion placed on the mouth of a bottle. While sprouting, its weight shifts, it falls and then continues to grow. I heard that you conducted experiments of this kind in your bedroom when you were a child.

## Simone Forti

It was not really my childhood bedroom – I was already at high school. I also grew chives. I loved to have things around my bed. I had a little commode where I would put them. In high school, I had a lot of homework to be written by hand. I think people who spend a lot of time at their desks like to put things on them. Right now, I have a high desk so that I can stand at it. I have a lot of rocks and shells on it. I also had a Cartesian diver that I'd made myself.

**AK** Did you like sciences at school?

**SF** I loved sciences. Before I started college, I wanted to study biology. We had a wonderful science teacher. Every Friday she would ask us what we most wondered about and directed her lesson towards the questions that came up. When I finally got to college, it wasn't like that at all. We had to remember thousands of Latin names. So, I changed course.

**AK** There is a scene in Henrik Ibsen's 1876 play *Peer Gynt* when Gynt expresses his desperation by comparing himself to an onion: all peelings, no core.

**SF** I don't think Gynt's experience is necessarily a negative one. He's not considering the onion as a presence. I see the onion in all its possible states; I'm very interested in how it reacts to light and to the forces of the ground.



*Onion Walk*, 1961/2014, installation view at Museum der

Moderne, Salzburg. Courtesy: Museum der Moderne, Salzburg

**AK** The onion seems to relate to another of your works from 1961, *Hangers*, displayed in the same room in Salzburg. Both of these pieces are about bodies occupying space – or, rather, breathing, forming space. Although we are living in bustling cities, our bodies themselves are often not considered as having a direct impact on concrete, material spaces.

**SF** When I first came to New York in 1959, after having been in the San Francisco area working with Anna Halprin in her studio, which was a wooden terrace in the forest at the foot of a mountain, I very much felt the pressure of being surrounded by so many people. With *Hangers* I wanted to observe my body as taking space, having weight. Those dancers hanging in the ropes are truly experiencing the force of gravity, how it pulls on them: it is such a strong feeling when you really perceive it.

**AK** You are a pioneering figure in the development of Minimalism and Postmodern dance. But, in your Salzburg retrospective, I discovered your works on paper, some of which seem to have a Bauhaus influence. Which aspects of your early art practice led you to dance?

**SF** It was really important to me to meet Anna. She had just turned away from modern dance – from modern choreography and technique – and begun completely to focus on improvisation: on how to develop it, teach it. Right before I met her, as a very young person, I had been sharing a studio with other young people and was making Abstract Expressionist paintings. I don't think they were very good but they were very big. I was very much into the idea of Action Painting and jumped to put the paint on them. At the time, I was also taking a dance class, just for fun, which is where I met Anna. I started to come along to her studio in the woods and realized that bodily movement could give me exactly what I enjoyed in painting, without leaving behind those big, wet, oil-covered canvases that I didn't really know what to do with. I could dance and then walk away from a clean studio. The drawings are different: they are often from times when I had personal pain. It's the first time I've shown them. As for the Bauhaus: Anna was married to the architect Lawrence Halprin, and through him she was probably aware of teaching methods that came from the Bauhaus. Also, I worked for five years with Robert Whitman – not only performing in his pieces but also helping with painting the sets. He very much used primary colours and I always liked them. I like to wear red.

**AK** You once said that your interest in politics was awakened quite late. With your 'News Animation' dances of recent years, it seems quite present.

**SF** Yes, they are a manifestation of that interest. The 'News Animations' came out of a personal turn in my life. I broke up with my partner of the time – the artist and musician Peter Van Riper – so our work on music improvisation and animal movement came to an end. At around the same time, my father died. He had always read two or three newspapers per day. And I think it is because of that reason that we, as a Jewish family, were able to escape Europe at the right moment. He was very aware of what was happening in the world. When he died, I thought: I had better start reading the newspaper. Through moving, I can better understand what I've read, the weight of what happens.

**AK** In the exhibition, there is a painting of your father but none of your mother ...

**SF** He certainly had an almost mythical place in my life. My parents were separated for seven years when I was a teenager and my father and I corresponded by mail a lot. That helped me very much. During that period, my mother was very sad and depressed and difficult to be with. Now, as an older woman, I can look at her

situation and feel a lot of compassion for her. So, yes, the painting does somehow show the family dynamics.

**AK** *In addition to Peter Van Riper, you were married to Robert Morris and Robert Whitman. Forgive me if these are not the right words, but were these marriages somehow in sync with your development as an artist?*

**SF** Robert Morris and I didn't really make art together. For sure we talked about it and we were influenced by each other but that's not how we got together. We kind of just fell in love at college. I think I did fall in love with Robert Whitman's work. And, with Peter, for years we were like brother and sister. This was in the early 1970s. We lived in a big community with three houses and we were very much friends. He was with someone else at the time and we didn't look at each other in a romantic way. When we met again and got together in 1974, it was a nice surprise that we could also work together. This is only about how it began. But, for sure, all of them had an artistic impact on me.

**AK** *The history of Postmodern dance is often described as quite a linear process, from Robert Dunn's dance composition class at Merce Cunningham's studios to the Judson Dance Theatre. You were part of Dunn's class. You premiered the 'Dance Constructions', which today are seen as a major step towards Minimalism, in Yoko Ono's studio in 1961. Why weren't you part of the famous Judson Dance Theatre?*

**SF** Because of my personal life. I was married to Robert Morris and I was taking those classes and I was part of that group which was doing Conceptual pieces. But then we broke up and I married Robert Whitman. So, during the years that Judson was going on, I was involved with Robert Whitman's happenings.

**AK** *Did the 'Dance Constructions' have as much of an impact on your own work as they had on the art world?*

**SF** In the dance world, they are not necessarily more important than some of the other works I've done, but I do recognize their importance to the art world. It is because of the 'Dance Constructions' that people in the art world take an interest in what I'm doing now. But I stayed with the work for only a few months – it came because I needed it. I was unhappy, trying to get a hold on life. It was very important to me but, in the long run, it didn't satisfy my kinaesthetic needs. Why did I change? I think it is because I love to move.

**AK** *In the 1960s, collaboration and the influence of your peers was very important to you. Does this still hold?*

**SF** I'm very much in touch with Steve Paxton. And I'm still following the work of Yvonne Rainer.

**AK** *The work of important personalities of your generation who are still on stage today is connected to language – I'm thinking of Paxton, Rainer and Deborah Hay.*

**SF** I didn't think about this, probably because a big element of the work of the 1960s was a rational mind. Perhaps a rational mind even more than kinaesthetic awareness. Although language – which is the rational mind – and kinaesthetic awareness come into play.

**AK** *What, for you, is the difference between the instructions for making art and the piece itself? Cage-like 'chance operations', for example, are often used as means to trigger a creative process. The objects used in your 'Dance Constructions' could be seen in a similar way.*

**SF** You mean that someone could take Cage's chance-operations and make a piece?

**AK** *Maybe.*

**SF** I don't think so. I think the signals are very subtle if you know what you are doing or not. I don't think I could take chance operations and make a piece that was anything but a copy. Every single one of the 'Dance Constructions' came as an idea. The idea and the piece that it enables are not different. If you divide them, it is like taking half a dance piece from somebody and coming up with another ending. You can do that, of course. But when people perform the 'Dance Constructions' today, it takes quite a while to learn them. They don't do whatever they want. Either I go there to teach the pieces to them or I send somebody whom I have trained to do so.

**AK** *I heard you keep a kind of treasure chest under your bed – Sigrid Gareis, founding director of Vienna's Tanzquartier, told me about it, as did Sabine Breitwieser, Director of Salzburg's Museum der Moderne. A lot of your works have been stored that way. Are there still more treasures to be uncovered?*

**SF** Of course I still have stuff. And some stuff is with The Box gallery in Los Angeles, which helps me a lot.

**AK** *What about future treasures? Are you continuing to do new work?*

**SF** You could just as well ask: what about breakfast – will you still have breakfast in the morning?



*illumminnatttionnnsssss!!!!!!*, 1971, performed by Simone Forti and Charlemagne Palestine at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy: The Museum of Modern Art, New York; photograph: Julieta Cervantes

### **Ana Janevski**

'There are thoughts. There are structures of thoughts. There are thoughts in the structures of thoughts. But it would be brutal to put them together.' This was one of the phrases spoken by Simone Forti during her performance *King's Fool*, which took place at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in spring 2013. It was part of her ongoing series of 'News Animations', begun in the 1980s, in which the news becomes the choreographer, determining Forti's physical and linguistic improvisation. For the MOMA performance, she circulated between two galleries – surrounded by newspapers, notes and her audience – commenting on the headlines, the world we live in and the basic concerns of life. As the aforementioned quote conveys, the work was not defined, it played out more like a thought process – how much to bring into focus and how much to leave out.

Forti's work is inherently ephemeral, interdisciplinary, collaborative and resistant to the usual channels of distribution. Collaboration is a driving force in her practice, as is teaching, which often becomes part of the work. Cultivating personal

interaction, communication and trust, the collaborative aspect of her practice makes it fascinating and inspiring for younger generations. Using improvisation, Forti creates a complex mental and physical space that can be occupied by several people. This space collapses if someone tries to impose him/herself too much, but it allows performers to assert themselves. It is a place for criticism, polemic and confrontation – but not for ego. Brennan Gerard, a New York-based artist of a younger generation, studied the 'News Animations' in Forti's Advanced Improvisation Class at UCLA. Gerard later performed a 'News Animations' piece as part of '20 Dancers for the xx Century', within the *Musée de la danse: Three Collective Gestures* dance programme at MOMA, in the same space Forti herself had performed it a few months earlier. Forti was in the audience watching and, when I described Gerard as her student, she corrected me in her distinctive, witty tone, disclaiming: 'You mean my colleague!'

*Ana Janevski is Associate Curator, Department of Media and Performance Art, at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.*



Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining*, 2014, performance at Mona Bismarck American Center, Paris. Courtesy: the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York

### Gerard & Kelly

We're looking at a stack of newspapers bundled in string: last Sunday's news on its way to the recycling bin. We're thinking of the speed of information as it passes through us and how Simone Forti transmitted a practice to us, an improvised choreographic writing, as a way to slow down the flow of information, ground it to a source (this mind, this body) and connect it to memory (this life, this subjectivity). Dancing and writing are ways to make sense of a world full of contradictions, gaps, things that don't make sense; both are practices to connect experiences, memories and events that seem, at first, on paper or on the front page of a newspaper, to be utterly disconnected, fragmented, unreal.

We met Forti four years ago while in art school at UCLA; she was teaching a class called 'Advanced Improvisation'. We weren't able to properly enroll, so we just showed up. She sat on the floor in blue jeans and a loose T-shirt, her white hair a fuzzy halo. Her easy manner was startling and cooled our fan-boy eagerness to touch history. We did touch history but it came to us over time, huddling and scrambling, writing and reading, performing together; everything a gerund, a doing, a task. One day, Forti came in with her rolling suitcase of books on Postmodern dance and back issues of *Contact Quarterly*. We signed out copies of her 1974 publication *Handbook in Motion* with pencil on ledger paper, dutifully noting how many weeks we would keep hold of the volumes. This book, this practice, sutured our many parts –

dance, art, writing, improvisation. In our collaborative, interdisciplinary work today, Forti's influence persists whenever we push to make connections between the chaotic speed of the mediated world and the slow burn of lived time, between abstract ideas and the material body, between waning moons and cold stars and the hot breath of the people moving and speaking in front of others who listen and watch.

*Collaborating since 2003, Gerard & Kelly (Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly) are artists based in New York, USA. In 2014, they had a solo exhibition at The Kitchen, New York, and participated in 'Made in LA' at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA. They are currently artists-in-residence at the New Museum, New York, where they will show new work in February 2015.*



Maria Hassabi, *Show*, 2011, performance as part of 'Le Movement: Performing The City', Biel/Bienne, 2014. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Alex Safari Kangangi

### Maria Hassabi

Simone Forti presents the body as a sculptural form, reimagining and bridging the definitions of sculpture and performance. We share this emphasis on the performing body. In Forti's work, the performers act with clarity of intent, highly aware of the circumstances of each unfolding moment. Viewers see them cope with the constraints put in place by Forti and witness the labour involved in the performance. My work draws its strength from the tension between the human subject and the artistic object, the dancer as a performer and as a physical entity. Exercised through the reduction of movement in relation to time, my use of abstraction develops a perception of the body as a fragmented

form and, ultimately, as an affecting force. With its stillness and gradual progression, my choreography enables a 'waiting', in which form is captured and can be contemplated. This foregrounds both the enormous demands made on the performers, and every last detail of the performing body in its most vulnerable, perhaps most unnatural, state. Forti has set a precedent for allowing viewers to experience a subtle and shifting relationship between space, time and physicality, showing work in museums, galleries, theatres and public spaces in which bodies and movement are distilled with Minimalist intent.

*Maria Hassabi is a choreographer and artist based in New York, USA. Hassabi's newest work opens at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA, in January 2015, and will be presented at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2016.*

#### **Astrid Kaminski**

*is based in Berlin, Germany. She writes on literature, dance and performance for a number of newspapers and magazines.*

*Simone Forti is an artist, choreographer, dancer and writer living in Los Angeles, USA. In April 2014, she performed with Charlemagne Palestine at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, and in October at the Louvre, Paris, France. A retrospective of her work was on show from July to November 2014 at Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria. In March 2015, she will be teaching a dance workshop at the Atelier de Paris – Carolyn Carlson, and in June at the Centre National de la Danse, both in Paris, France.*