

Interview

Simone Forti

by Ross Simonini



“I feel we’re on the crest of a wave and I feel it in my body that we’re going to fall over and down and the wave is going to break”

This summer, Simone Forti attended her first proper artist residency, at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California. This was only a few miles from the legendary dance studio of Anna Halprin, where Forti studied for five years during the 1950s and where she began to break down the fundamental syntax and grammar of human movement.

Forti lives in Los Angeles, but she had come north to spend a week in the sublime fog of the Headlands to focus on her writing. At the residency, she read some new work aloud in a show-and-tell forum to the other artists-in-residence, a process she found “very helpful”. Like many dancers of her generation (Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer), Forti has often used writing as a way to notate her philosophy of movement. Her best-known book, *Handbook in Motion: An Account of an Ongoing Personal Discourse and Its Manifestations in Dance* (1974) distils the first few decades of her life and art, including her time at the Woodstock festival, her LSD experiences and her studies with Pandit Pran Nath and Merce Cunningham.

During those years, when Forti was still in her twenties, she made some of her most historically significant work: the *Dance Constructions* (1960–61). These nine works created a relationship between functional movements and minimalist objects made of rope and wood: a seesaw, a slanted board, a box on wheels. The sculptures suggest simple activities, like climbing, leaning and standing, and the performances sought to demystify dance by focusing on quotidian movement, stripped of style. The *Dance Constructions* were acquired by MOMA in 2014 and are described in written instructions by Forti, but also require what the museum has called ‘body-to-body transmission’, from one performer to another, as the primary means of keeping the work alive.

During the 1980s, Forti introduced what she once called her “seemingly infinite” *News Animations* series, in which she translates current news stories into improvised actions. She speaks the stories aloud, or listens to the radio, and moves her body in response to world events. Around that same period, she also moved into Mad Brook Farm, a remote artist community in Vermont, where she lived for a decade before moving to Los Angeles to teach at UCLA for 17 years.

Now, at eighty-three years old and trembling with Parkinson’s disease, Forti continues to publish, perform and exhibit. In 2014, she held her show *Thinking with the Body: A Retrospective in Motion* at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg. In 2018 she performed a *News Animation* at the Castelli gallery in New York and released her book *The Bear in The Mirror*, a collection of ‘stories, prose poems, drawings, photos, letters, notes

and memories’. The book traces her family genealogy back to Italy in 1938, when Mussolini was at the height of his power, along with some of her anecdotes about bears – “because”, she says, “I just like bears”.

I spoke to Forti in her temporary Headlands studio, which was quiet, large and empty, except for a few simple elements: sawhorse, mirror, desk, notebook. We ate chocolate chip cookies, drank tea and spent a lot of time gazing out the window at the extraordinary view. I asked questions and she introduced each of her responses with an expansive, thoughtful moment of silence.

ROSS SIMONINI *Are you focusing on writing these days?*

SIMONE FORTI I think so. Every once in a while I kind of come to the end of a series of works or the end of a way of working – or I think I’ve come to the end – and I’m looking around for what my new focus might be. And I’m really interested in writing right now.

RS *Has that been a pattern for your writing? Does it come between other projects?*

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SF The end does not always come with writing. But for a long time I’ve been performing improvisations that I call *News Animations* and I’m talking and moving and I’m working with thoughts about the world, details of history. And I’m relating it to my movement. I’m interested in mental models of energies in the world and how I feel them through my body and in space. Sometimes I think of the words I speak almost as cards that I put faceup. Anyone listening and watching can partly see where I’m going with the thought and partly wander off in their own thoughts, stimulated by the connections I’m making, or the gaps I’m finding. And right now I just don’t know what to say about the world. It feels like we’re all holding our breath. And everything’s changing in so many ways and I’m having a hard time thinking about doing any more *News Animations*.

facing page Simone Forti performing *La Monte’s 2 Sounds*, 1961, at MOMA, New York, in 2009.
Photo: Yi-Chun Wu. Courtesy the artist

RS *On writing your first book, you said you were afraid to write about your LSD experiences, because you believed a demon would attack you.*

SF Yes.

RS *Any fears like that now?*

SF Yes. But not demons, just that the writing might be really stupid [laughs].

RS *You’ve often connected language with movement. Have you come to any conclusions as you’ve worked this way?*

SF Well, one is that blocks of thought don’t necessarily take the form of language, but they can. But really, I don’t know what have I understood about language and movement. Right now my consciousness is floating around trying to see how to answer that or whether I’ve found patterns and there’s that flitting that’s almost visual in space. Like sometimes when you hear music you can kind of visualise space in certain shapes or organisations. Thoughts are kind of like that. And then you can try to translate it into language.

RS *What are you thinking about with your body these days?*

SF I feel we’re on the crest of a wave and I feel it in my body that we’re going to fall over and down and the wave is going to break.

RS *As a culture, you mean?*

SF Yeah.

RS *Did it feel similar in the 1960s?*

SF It feels different. I’ve been very interested in ethology in evolution of behaviour and I’ve read quite a bit of the work of [zoologist] Konrad Lorenz. He isn’t taken terribly seriously, I understand, but I take him quite seriously. And one of the things he wrote about was he had this fish tank and he had populated it with a certain kind of fish that supposedly have a very complex social structure. And in the fish tank he built a physical environment comparable to the coral reefs. He made it out of plastic blocks or something. And they were just hanging out there. They weren’t doing any of the things that they supposedly do. They weren’t organised. And then he dropped a predator in there. And *zoom*, they organised immediately. So I think when there’s enough to go around you get one kind of politics and when there’s the fear that there’s not going to be enough to go around, you get another. People organise in a different way. And to some extent and the more our environment degrades, the more there’s not going to be enough to go around.

RS *Threat is beneficial to society –*

SF Well, yeah, if you value organising.

RS *Right. But it's not necessarily beneficial to the fish, just to society. Do you think much about organisation in your work?*

SF Yes. How I'm doing this writing now, is I started by talking about the studio I'm in: the peacefulness, the light, the ease to concentrate. And then I start writing. I'll put a paragraph above it and the paragraph below it and then the paragraph above and then a paragraph below. I'm writing thoughts so that they're not in order. And it gives me a sense that I don't have to start with a beginning and state something and try to lock it down and be convincing. I can just put it there. And while I'm doing this, I keep coming back into the studio to move the furniture around. Not a lot but a little. Just certain things, like this sawhorse, and that pedestal, near that little mirror that's at an angle. Kind of activating the space. Then coming back to writing about particular memories of leaving a husband or of hearing from a friend that our mutual friend had died.

RS *A lot of people talk about memories being stored in the body. Do you feel that way?*

SF Some of them, yes. I can't tell if they're fresh memories or if I've reviewed them many times. Like a particular slide when I was five years old.

It was built like the face of a clown and then you'd slide out the clown's mouth. And I remember that slide. Do I remember sliding? Do I really remember it now at this moment or am I remembering that I've talked about it before, that I've told that story before? Remembering dreams is another theme I'm picking up in this writing. It's a recurrent dream where I'm among people and it's just like a normal day and then I realise that people are looking at me like I've done something terrible and then I remember I've done something terrible and I've no idea what. I can get back into that feeling. It's in the chest area. And I'd like to find words to help someone else have some sense of how I feel when that happens.

RS *Does art often evoke dreaming for you?*

SF Well, my mind goes to William Carlos Williams and to his long poem, *Paterson* [1946–58]. He doesn't seem to worry about using language that someone else might use. But he talks about this figure lying along the banks of the river with the falls at its head. And it's dreaming the falls.

RS *Do you read often?*

SF I'm reading some Jonas Mekas. There's a book called *I Had Nowhere to Go* [1991] and it's about his experience after the Second World

War as a displaced person. You get the feeling that as he's experiencing his environment, he's writing about it. And then I've got with me Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* [1914], which is like, how's she doing that?

RS *Do you think about movement differently now than when you were younger?*

SF I don't think so. I always worked with different aspects of it. Like with Anna Halprin, I was working with her way back in the 1950s, exploring weight. Like taking an area of your body – maybe the shoulder – and exploring weight-taking in that arm and moving it so then the whole body gets involved in supporting that exploration. So it's a lot of exploring the basic elements of experience with movement. Then in New York when I did the *Dance Constructions* I was interested in just looking at movement that was not stylised in any way. So, setting up structures or tasks to do. It wasn't really pedestrian because you wouldn't climb around on a 45-degree incline plane in your pedestrian life, but if you had to do it you could do it without trying to stylise it in any way. It's not easy to stay on that inclined plane, to use the ropes to get back and forth, up and down. I was looking at photographs of animals, people, somebody chopping wood, and then for years I was going to the zoo and observing how an



Slant Board, 1961, performance during *Thinking with the Body: A Retrospective in Motion*, 2014, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg. Photo: Rainer Iglar. Courtesy Museum der Moderne, Salzburg



News Animation, 2009, performance at the
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.
Photos: Alastair Fyfe. Courtesy the artist



Zuma News, 2014 (stills from *NONFICTIONS – Gorbachev Lives / Zuma News / Questions*, 2014, a joint work by Jeremiah Day, Simone Forti and Fred Dewey). Video: Jason Underhill. Courtesy the artist

animal's body is structured differently from mine. But I can try some of those ways of moving, like a bear will change direction by swinging its head and neck, and that weight pulls the body into the new direction. There's enough weight momentum to then pull the limbs into place and continue the walk and then change direction. The young ones that are growing up – like a puppy or a kitten – will play with movement. And I was looking at some of those games and starting to think about what I was calling the roots of dance behaviour.

RS *What is the natural dance behaviour for humans?*

SF A human kid will walk down the street and if there is a little ledge to jump on, they'll jump on it and then jump off and then they might touch something and twirl. And I think as artists, we give ourselves a situation where you can do that. It's fun to run around.

RS *Do you think the jump-on-the-ledge impulse stops for adults?*

SF I don't know. What do you think?

RS *I think as you get older you become more aware of conserving your energy. So you start limiting extraneous movements.*

SF In Mekas's book I'm amazed how everybody was always singing. He really picks up on that. He's Lithuanian and all these displaced Lithuanians, they're singing wherever they go.

RS *Do you feel like the experience of having Parkinson's has changed your ideas about movement?*

SF That's an interesting question. For one thing I feel that movement's really good for me, that it's a medicine, I really need to be moving. It's changed my self-image. I've really accepted this shaky-old-woman image, which I enjoy. It has a Samuel Beckett edge to it, which I feel I can exploit.

RS *In society we suppress the experiences of shaking or twitching. It's less accepted as a form of movement. But when you look at animals of all kinds, they tend*

to shake throughout the day: for stress, to shoo a fly, to dry off.

SF Yeah, I remember seeing a documentary in which a deer gets attacked by a lion, but then something bigger than the lion scares the lion away. And so the deer is saved and it goes into this shaking and it shakes for a while and then it stops shaking, gets up and runs away.

RS *It's dealt with that fear now.*

SF Yeah, shake it out. The kind of movement is important to me. I do a lot of tai chi, and in the last eight months, I've started doing push hands. It's a sparring form of tai chi, and the way I do it with the people I do it, we try to get the other off balance. Your feet are on the ground and you're trying to get the other person to have to move their feet and get off balance. It happens very fast. You see two people like this and then boom, one of them has flown off of the circle that limits their space. I love competitively working with a partner.

RS *What kind of movements are you thinking about now?*

SF Well, I recently made three videos together with [filmmaker] Jason Underhill and I'll briefly describe the three. The first one is called *Zuma News*. I take a stack of newspapers to Zuma Beach and put them in the water and I'm trying to not have them carried out to sea or blown away so I can be proud I didn't leave a mess. But I have a stack of wet papers that I'm wrestling in. And then there's a heap of seaweed and I pull that in and just get in the stuff and get soaked and am

reading the papers. Then a wave comes and I'd have to catch the paper and the wind comes and I have to catch the paper. That's the first movement.

Then I put flags in a tributary to the Mississippi River. I had these two canvases, big canvases, one with red stripes and one with blue stars, and I got into the water with them and I drifted with them. I found myself really drifting down the tributary towards the river. (We were right where it meets the Mississippi.) I felt that I could get away with taking something as obviously symbolic as a flag and getting in the water with it because I didn't know what I was doing. I wasn't making a statement. And I think it comes across. So it's the woman in the water, you know, with Parkinson's. And then I come out and I've been drawn quite a way with the current and then I get on this trail back up and I'm soaked and this clothing is sticking to my body and I'm a mess and I'm walking up the trail. That's the second movement.

And then recently I did a performance at the Castelli gallery in New York with a bunch of felt that was all leftovers from Bob Morris's felt sculptures. Bob and I were married when we were in our twenties and that lasted as long as it lasted, but we're still friends. And so we've talked about maybe doing something together. So what we did was that he provided me with this environment of a lot of felt scraps. There were weird shapes and ones where he cut out letters and words. They were heavy. And I just dealt with the felt. The rolls were heavy and I picked them up and let them fall down and engaged with how this felt behaves in relation to gravity. I wrapped myself in them. And I talked, like I've done with the *News Animations*, but maybe if I didn't, I could have really gotten into the felt a lot more. I could have not been worried about the world. But mostly, I wrestled on the floor with these scraps. It seems like the older I get, the more I just feel like wrestling with stuff.

Ross Simonini is an artist and writer living in New York and California



From Instructions, 1961, installation for performance during Thinking with the Body: A Retrospective in Motion, 2014, Museum der Moderne, Salzburg. Photo: Rainer Iglar. Courtesy Museum der Moderne, Salzburg