

„A live performance is like a ripe peach that you pick from the tree, sweet and warm in the summer sun “.
Simone Forti in Conversation with Ines Goldbach, Director Kunsthau Baselland

IG: I would like to start our conversation with a first look at your performances, which you started in the 1960s and of which we are going to realise three – *Huddle*, *Platforms* and *Slant Board* – at the Kunsthau Baselland during your exhibition. Some of your performances were presented by you on stage with an audience, like *News Animation*, some were filmed in natural settings, following your movements (*Zuma News*, *Flag in the Water*), and others seem to be staged by you when alone, with a camera on a tripod. What difference does this make for you – maybe regarding the temporality, performing and filming at the same time on your own, having the camera as a form of mirror while acting or performing on a stage with an audience for example?

SF: I have been doing my work for almost sixty years and of course I have gone through different periods. A constant theme has been to call attention to how we experience through the body.

In a *Dance Construction* such as *Slant Board*, I ask the performers to do an action as directly and simply as possible, so that someone watching can appreciate how people naturally move to climb around together on an inclined surface with the help of ropes, and can even empathise with the climbers and feel the effort in their own body. I like to have the piece situated away from any wall so that it is seen as a sculpture as well as a dance. This work is from the early 1960s.

The *News Animations* are improvisations with movement and speaking. They are a kind of focused stream of consciousness where the focus is on the news. I think that the movement comes from thoughts or intuitions that are not yet fully realised into words. Then the movement itself brings ideas which I speak and then the spoken ideas bring movement. It is circular that way. As the improvisation develops there is some excitement about composing in the moment and I feel that I am following the performance together with the audience. I started doing these performances in the early 1980s.

In the videos *Zuma News* and *Flag in The Water* I physically immerse myself in the natural environment - in the sand and surf in one video, and in the river in the other. In both cases I carry something that refers to the political life of the world – a pile of newspapers in one video and an abstracted American flag in the other. And I don't speak. These videos, done in collaboration with cinematographer Jason Underhill, are from 2013 and 2015.

IG: Having the performance transformed afterwards from a three-dimensional experience to a two dimensional one (video, screen etc.) gives the possibility to perceive it and to let it travel through time. Being present during a live performance is a rare opportunity. Of course, the video enables the transformation of something ephemeral into a permanent experience. How do you see and experience this?

SF: I sometimes feel that a live performance is like a ripe peach that you pick from the tree, sweet and warm in the summer sun. And the video documentation is like the peach preserve you enjoy on bread, by the winter fire. But a video that has been made to be a video has its full original flavour.

IG: This is a wonderful description. Going more in-depth regarding the experiences of your *Dance Constructions*: performances like *News Animation* are performed by you, strong movements through the space, the body close to the floor and accompanied by language as well. The language seems to give the rhythm and strengthen the movement, and somehow movement and language become one – or the other way round as you said before – what you say becomes even stronger through the movement. Is this kind of acting the news and somehow becoming the news itself through the movement in order to understand political news or daily news, not only with the brain but with any part of the body?

SF: I like your description of these improvisations. It's difficult for me to say exactly what I'm doing in the *News Animation* performances because it's so intuitive. Maybe I'm expanding on something that we do naturally but are usually not aware of, a subtle flow of physical gestures. When I think of the world, I feel mental models of dynamics. I almost see swirls of histories and tensions forming in space and extending through my body. Maybe my movement doesn't so much embody news stories but rides on my pre-verbal thoughts as I speak. This does help me to understand as well as to communicate.

IG: You described yourself less as a performance artist, but instead as a movement artist, emphasising that you are mainly interested in what we know about things through our bodies. This makes perfect sense of the fact that most of your performances that were filmed are acted and performed by you; at the same time, I guess it's a wonderful opportunity to integrate local artists and dancers at the place where the exhibition takes place, to train them and give them the chance to get in touch with the performance but at the same time to experience themselves through different movements. Regarding the visitors, who experience and perceive these performances through videos, images or live performances: could this be an inspiration to activate one's own body? I somehow wonder if your performances can be a tool to learn and find out about different things that occupy us, not only rationally, but with our body.

SF: The *Dance Constructions* are especially good for integrating local artists and giving them a physical experience of the work. In the piece *Huddle* they must stand together in a very tight group with arms around each other, forming a kind of small mountain. Then one at the time, they climb over the top of the others, descend on the other side and again become part of the huddle or supporting mass. It's a very collaborative experience. The supporters make many adjustments together without anyone directing how to adjust, while the climber negotiates where to put a knee, where a hand or when to momentarily lie flat on the group. I consider *Huddle* a dance and also a sculpture. There is no front, and how it is placed in space is important. Maybe a visual artist in the audience would see the piece mostly as a sculpture, while a dancer in the audience might identify with the performers and to some extent feel the piece in their body.

IG: You mentioned once that you dream that these improvisations are part of a process that leads through generations, from informal grass roots to a highly evolved communal tradition. That every nation has its roots in different rhythms and dances, a kind of common store of movements and experience in relation to these various roots. In your words, each continent holds its own potential for kinds of movement that will manifest on its surface. I wonder then why it is important for you to invite dancers and artists with different backgrounds, from different generations etc. to your *Dance Constructions*, like here for the performances at the Kunsthaus Baselland. Is this also an opportunity to bring bodies, perspectives, interpretations, movements and experiences from different backgrounds into the performances – and at the same time to pass on this experience of the performance from one generation to another, from one country to another?

SF: Well, I wouldn't want the differences in backgrounds of the performers to change the 'style', or non-style, of the *Dance Constructions*. That's why in teaching those pieces it is important to convey their aesthetic and the kind of presence that is needed from the performers. I think it's important for these performance pieces to remain stable and not to change very much over the years, otherwise they become lost. Of course young performers today have experienced a lot more somatic practices such as Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's Body Mind Centering, and tend to be much more 'mindful' in their movements. But the original *Huddle* was very direct. You just had to climb. I try to retain that original quality.

IG: This question of different backgrounds and perspectives, is does this also relate to your own background – you were born in Italy, lived shortly in Switzerland and then moved to the United States, moving quite a lot there from country to city etc.?

SF: I came of age artistically in a moment when there was a lot of communication between poets, musicians, dancers, painters and sculptors. We were excited about reinventing what it is to make art, with the goal of working in ways that felt meaningful to us in the present time. It was important to each of us to be very aware of the concepts with which we were working and to create approaches that we felt a need for. From Europe we had the example of Marcel Duchamp and his readymades. Our messenger from Asia was John Cage with his relationship to the I-Ching and to chance operations. And a kind of California Zen that developed around Suzuki Roshi who was so important to the Beat Poets.

IG: When we were talking about the exhibition here in Basel we were thinking of combining the series *Largo Argentina*, a group of photos showing wild cats standing, lying, moving etc. within the ruins of Rome, with the structures of *Platforms*. It will be particularly obvious to visitors when the structures are activated during the performances by local dancers and performers that there could be a parallel reading. Some performers' movements do not seem far away from animals' movements. This is something that always interested you. I remember that you mentioned how you visited the zoo in Rome for a long time when you were preparing and then realising different performances at the Galleria L'Attico in Rome with Fabio Sargentino. These zoo visits stimulated drawings of animals and their movements. Would you mind telling a bit more about this and your interest in these animal movements?

SF: One thing that interested me about the animals is that they have no intention of moving in a certain style. So I could see their movement without distraction. I love the photographs of Eadweard Muybridge and how they so directly show how different bodies move, including humans. And when I adapted different animals' movement into my own body I was fascinated with how can you go from walking upright, to crawling on your hands and knees and all the way to going along flat on the ground like a turtle in a smooth succession, without breaking the rhythm of contralateral use of your limbs.

IG: Do you think this kind of movement, in an intuitive way and not a rational one, is something that we have to re-learn? Maybe it's not only a question of movement but also how to act and react within life and different situations – using intuition, feelings and not immediately the brain?

SF: Getting to know my body has been very important to me as an artist and also generally in my life. My own path to that knowledge has been through a lot of analysis of movement that I saw in other species besides my own.

IG: Is that the same interest that led to the piece *Fly* — an image of a fly, as a slide, on a lightbox?

SF: Oh, the fly. Sometimes things just happen. I had a closeup lens, I saw a fly. My father was in military prison for some time. He said he used to watch the flies, his only friends.

IG: Do animals for you mirror in general this kind of freedom and light-heartedness, communicating with each other in a non-verbal, pre-linguistic but very direct and powerful way. Recently, I was impressed learning more about the cognition of bees, for example, which one can easily underestimate because they seem to be such tiny little creatures.

SF: Yes bees. We are used to thinking that something small is not able to process much information, but technology is showing us that this is not the case.

I don't think that 'animals' have any more freedom and or are more lighthearted communicating with each other than we are. Many species have complex social structures and life can be very hard. And we too watch each other's bodies for clues of how words are meant. But yes, we depend very much on the verbal, the rational.

IG: You mentioned before the notion that looking at pieces like *Huddle*, *Platforms* or *Slant Board*, all from 1961, there seem to be a strong connection to sculptures and objects of the Minimal art in the late 1960s. But at the same time, instead of laying the focus on the object, the human and his or her movements seem to be most important with these pieces — and in fact these *Dance Constructions* are very early compared to many keywords of Minimal Art. As I am aware of your personal background, between Italy and the USA, knowing that you worked with Fabio Sargentini who was central for many artists of the so-called Arte Povera, like Jannis Kounellis or Mario Merz with his gallery L' Attico — I wonder if your *Dance Constructions*, *Performances* and *Moving Sculptures* in fact mirror the in-between of these years — between structure and sensitivity, object and human, material and movement. Is this true of your work?

SF: It's true that the relationship between the object and the person is key to my *Dance Constructions*. I feel that my work of the 1960s was in a family very similar to Arte Povera. Often objects gave a context for the performers' movements. The performers had things to do. And they simply did these things with no thought of style of movement. I think that is also true of the work of the artists of the Japanese group, Gutai, such as Saburo Murakami and his *Walking Through Paper* or Kazuo Shiraga and his *Challenging Mud*. Gutai was contemporary with Arte Povera. I don't know how much these artists were aware of each other. I think 'Gutai' means 'concrete'. We must have all felt a similar need.

IG: I would also like to focus a bit on music as one other important element at the time you start working. In many of your texts you mention the Woodstock Festival which you were at in the late 1960s. Reading this, dance and especially music seemed — and still seems to be — the same as language — an important element within your work. I also recently found two music pieces/works, a CD and an LP, titled *Hippie Gospel Songs 1969-70* and *Al Di La*, both from the late '60s and early '70s. Did composing, singing, moving, dancing and performing come together quite naturally within that time when music and dancing were synonymous with liberation and understanding the body and its surroundings in a different way?

SF: It's true that the *Hippie Gospel Songs* came to me in the 1970s when I was smoking a lot of dope. They are very influenced by Italian folk songs that I grew up with. On the other hand, the sound works in the *Al Di La* album are from various periods. And they are more conceptual. They include, for instance, *Censor* which was first performed in 1961 and which consists of one performer singing any song as loud as possible while another performer shakes a pan of nails as hard as possible.

But you're right that music has been very important to me. I worked for many years with the musicians Charlemagne Palestine and Peter Van Riper. With Charlemagne I was exploring the dynamics of circling, while with Peter I was working with the movement vocabulary from the animal studies.

IG: But looking at your performances, music doesn't seem to be an element that you ever involved. Are these more about the music and especially rhythms everybody carries inside?

SF: While in the *News Animation* performances I worked with language rather than with music, in my collaborations with musicians Charlemagne Palestine and Peter Van Riper I was very much listening to their music and working with it. I have never worked with recorded music. I need the live communication between me and the musician.

IG: When we launched our annual program here at the Kunsthau Baselland many people, especially artists and art lovers of different fields, mostly of your generation and a bit younger, remembered the rare opportunities to experience your performances in the 1980s in Switzerland or elsewhere. All of them are now very excited to be able to experience your work again. I am very happy that a younger generation will now also be able to get in touch with your work and at the same time — as some are involved directly in your performances — they will

know how to perform your *Dance Constructions*. Knowing that all over the world there are people that were trained by you or dance colleagues like Sarah Swenson and Claire Filmon, is this a possibility for how artworks might travel through time and remain contemporary because of the people who realise them?

SF: It's wonderful to be again in touch with people of my generation who remember me dancing, and with younger ones who are keeping the *Dance Constructions* alive. And I'm so thankful to Sarah, Claire and others who keep the original spirit of these pieces intact. My hope is that the *Dance Constructions* will provide a concrete point of reference for new generations of artists as they respond to new cultural needs.

Performances by Simone Forti at Kunsthhaus Baselland.

Huddle, Slant Board, Platforms

Wednesday 12 June, noon, Saturday 15 June, 10am, Wednesday 19 June, 6.30 pm

Performed by artists and dancers from Basel

Performance coordination and instruction by Sarah Swenson

For full details of the events and education programme see our website: www.kunsthhausbaselland.ch

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