Between the Conceptual and the Vibrational

Dorit Cypis speaking with Simone Forti
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Simone Forti today, is the same woman I met many years ago, and so much more. Her work in dance, from the 1950's to today, 2004, spans the aesthetic movements of expressionism and minimalism and has branched much further into a mature hybrid of both, embracing a deep humanism of extraordinary focus to the details of life and death, which surrounds us daily.

I remain truly inspired by her.
Dorit Cypis, 3.25.04

(Part 1, Day 1, October 2003) ***(Published Summer 2004, X-tra, Los Angeles*****)**

DC: I first became aware of your work in 1971, when I was 20 years old and studying art at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. You were there to work on a book project with Kasper Koenig, first director of the NSCAD Press, which brought amazing working artists to the college, including Vito Acconci, Emmett Williams, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Michael Asher…. it was all the more interesting to me when a woman was invited.

Your book *The Handbook in Motion* was published in 1974. I didn't have a context yet for issues like Fluxus, Dada or Minimalism, so I watched you with very innocent eyes. You were doing very weighted body movements on the ground; very slow, conscious movements that seemed to come from internal places. It wasn't anything that I'd seen before. The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design had acquired a reputation for intellectual, minimalist, language-oriented projects. Your book was quite unique in its look and its manner… What was it like working in the early '70s with the Nova Scotia Press?

SF: Kasper invited me to NSCAD for my work of the early '60s, the dance constructions that were considered Minimalist. Before doing that work I had come from working with Anna Halpern from 1955-59, improvising and working in a very rich, physical, sensual,

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

imagistic, expressionistic way. In the mid-50s, I met and married Robert (Bob) Morris at Reed College in Oregon. We both dropped out of school. He wanted to focus on painting and I also was interested in focusing on painting. In fact eventually I got my BFA in Painting from Hunter College years later. So I was in San Francisco and I was painting, had a part time job and took a dance class once a week at the Anna Halpern Welland Laythrop School for fun. That's where I first met one of Anna's senior students, A.A. Leith. One evening, instead of getting our usual technique—which I wasn't great at, but enjoyed—he taught an improvisation class. I really connected with that and he told me that Anna was leaving the school because she was completely focusing on improvisation and developing her voice of how to teach it.

DC: What distinguished this from other dance forms?

SF: An important catalyst for Anna was working with her teacher, Margaret H-Doubler at the University of Wisconsin. Margaret was teaching anatomy to dancers… working with books, with the names of the muscles and the bones…learning anatomy in an academic way, but also having people explore the sensations of how our joints function, explore the possibilities of the shoulder area, which is quite complex—and having people play around with the instrument that they were studying. She called it *Experiential Anatomy*. Anna recognized, as she was playing around exploring her body, that she was really enjoying the poetics of the movement, that she was dancing.

DC: Exploring with the *experience* of her movement?

SF: Yes.

DC: How is improvisation different than modern dance?

SF: In terms of performance, an improviser will be following thoughts and exploring forms and possibilities of movement while in performance. In dance improvisation you ready yourself, you ready your imagination, you ready the issues that you're working with and then you work with them in the moment.

DC: Improvisation in performance is framed by occurring within a certain period of time and a certain place.

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

SF: Yes.

DC: And how did that process evolve for you?

SF: Well, it's interesting that I'm still very much working the way that I learned from Anna, although I went through other periods, including my minimalist dance constructions which in some ways were a reaction to expressionism. There was a very important moment for me when working with Anna. I came across a magazine in her studio with images of the work of the Japanese Gutai Group.

This was still in 1958-'59. I remember a photograph of a work by Saburo Murakami, that showed a series of frames, maybe six feet by three feet, and maybe eight of them, each covered with paper—stretched with paper—placed one in front of the other with maybe half a foot of space between. They were standing like that. And then he just walked right through the whole series of them, breaking through the paper. This work had one action, and yet that one action was so eventful it just seemed like seeing an open space compared to the improvising I had been doing with Anna, which within five minutes had sixty gestures—or more. It was such an eye-opener to see one gesture that was big enough and plain enough to be a work. I don't know why that appealed to me so much but I was feeling in trouble and somehow that answered my feeling of trouble. I've also been curious that this was a moment when abstract expressionism had bloomed very fully… and then, it just seemed to disappear.

DC: There were other artists also working with that kind of minimalist action… Fluxus artist Robert Filiou created *The Gallery in the Hat*, where he'd walk down the street and stop to greet you, a stranger, then take his hat off to reveal the inside where there were little pieces of paper with text on them. And he'd say, "Hello. Welcome to my gallery in a hat." The exchange between him, the stranger and the action of suggesting the frame of the gallery was very resonant.

SF: That's the magic of the minimal—it resonates. There were many influences within minimalist work. One came very much from language and from definition. Another, Fluxus, came from reaction against establishment and bigness. I feel strongly that another of the threads was Zen Buddhism, which, in a way, is why I don't really respond to Donald Judd but I do respond to Carl Andre. I think it's because Donald comes more

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

from a very logistical, strategic place, whereas with Carl… I sense something Japanese there.

DC: Andre's objects conjure what is not there—the empty space between his objects is about fullness. The plates on the ground suggest the absent body that could walk on them.

SF: And how they drift when they are walked on.

DC: They more suggest the un-fixed or the not positioned, whereas Judd is more about positioning still. I was also drawn at that time to Arte Povera… material as essence rather than as hard-edged presence.

SF: Definitely. I lived in Rome for a couple of years during that period and showed performances at the Gallery of Fabio Sargentini, where Pino Pascale, a beautiful sculptor who died very early, was also showing… as well as Jannis Kounellis, and Mario Mertz, who later did the fabulous "Igloos". That was in the late '60s…

DC: They suggest more of an organic body.

SF: And they are more imagistic.

DC: You had professional relationships with other dancers during that time. Historically we know about the Judson Church. You spoke about Morris. What happened with those connections?

SF: Bob Morris and I were married in 1955, until 1962. In 1959, after four years of painting in San Francisco, Bob was really wanting to go to New York to see the painters that he was interested in. I felt ready to break away from my mentor… you know, after four years. So we went to New York, and right away Bob went through a very interesting period where for a year he would read and go look at paintings and that's it. He wouldn't make stuff. When he started again it was with his minimal work. I at that time was bouncing around, looking to get myself oriented. We had a small loft; I was doing a little fussing around in there. I'd get a few objects, I'd sit on the floor in one place, put an object somewhere else and maybe a second object somewhere else, and then every once in a while I'd move one of the objects or I'd go sit somewhere else. I took some Martha Graham classes and tried Merce Cunningham and none of that was working for me.

DC: Why was that?

SF: There was no research in it for me. Martha Graham did her research, Merce Cunningham did his research; but you didn't get to do research in classes. I'm not an instrumentalist; I'm a composer. I was taking these classes and that's how I came across Robert Dunn. In his classes we were doing our own work. He introduced us to John Cage's work and gave us assignments like "Next week bring in a 3-minute piece and don't work on it more than three minutes during the week." So it had to be an idea.

Robert Dunn is the teacher that the Judson Group comes out of.

DC: He gave you a sense of the conceptual… to follow a thought.

SF: Yes. And a space in which to do it. We would bring in work and then in a few months we would invite some friends to see the pieces. It was the same group that then got access to Judson Church. Robert Dunn was married to Judith Dunn, who was in the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. He was also playing the piano for Merce's classes and studying with John Cage who was the company's musical artistic director.

Robert offered this composition class for dancers in Merce's studio but not many of Merce's dancers took the class. It was more people like Yvonne Rainer and myself and Steve Paxton… actually Steve and Debrah Hay were in Merce's company as well. Most of the dancers who were interested in being in the Company saw themselves in a perpendicular relationship through time to a dance lineage, whereas those of us who were taking Bob Dunn's class saw ourselves as artists in this modern time, working with the same concerns of the poets and the painters…Yoko Ono let us use her studio and there was a corner of an industrial loft that Yvonne and Tricia Brown and I and maybe Steve shared rent on and sometimes we'd meet there. Robert Whitman invited me to do something with the Happening's people at the Ruben. I shared an evening with Claes Oldenberg and Jim Dine, and partly on the basis of that and on the basis of the showings of Bob Dunn's class, La Monte Young and Jackson MacLow invited me to do something in the series at Yoko's loft. I still remember sitting cross-legged on my bed sketching all the pieces, which I called Dance Constructions and performed at Yoko's loft. These have been remembered as being influential in the minimalist discourse.

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

DC: I can see how it became a wonderful weaving of musicians and dancers, movers and visual artists who started to work with each other.

SF: We weren't necessarily collaborating but we were informed by each other's practices and we were sitting in bars together and having parties together. It was more about working with the urgency of ideas and using whatever materials were at hand—whether it was your own body or a piece of rope. As a dancer it would come naturally to me—I want to climb up a hill—okay, lean a board on the wall and you've got an incline. This became "The Slant Board". In fact I was really hungry to be climbing. Another Dance Construction was "The Huddle", with 8 or 9 people clumped together like a small mountain, taking turns climbing over the top. The mass of people always stayed coherent as one form and the audience could move around viewing it from different angles.

DC: It sure sounds like a sculpture.

***INSERT DANCE CONSTRUCTION NOTES AND DRAWING/HANDBOOK PG 60**

SF: The tools I knew were of movement, and the driving force was whatever the urgency seemed to be.

DC: Talk about your process of working with language.

SF: My first experience with working with language was with Anna Halpern. We were weaving two media—movement and language—and using them to juxtapose each other. The more our choices were non sequitur the better. We would set up something that seemed to make sense so that we could flip it and have it not make sense.

DC: Was that an unspoken goal, to interrupt sense or to interrupt logic and expectation?

SF: Yes, it was. And I think it was within the context of being aware of Kurt Schwitters, being aware of Ionesco, and the delight in it was close to Zen, that it would just kind of blow your mind. You'd be in one mindset and all of a sudden you'd be out in space. That's what we were working for.

DC: Were you studying Zen or reading or practicing Zen or other forms of Buddhism those early years?

SF: I was just kind of aware of it through osmosis. I remember that I named what we were doing the Nez Plays. A lot of people were interested in Zen and I had some sense of having heard a few lectures or something, or read something. Maybe I read Suzuki Roshi, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. I tend to pick things out and put them together from a few clues without really studying. I'm into whatever I'm into, aware of influences and of picking things up…

DC: The peripheral.

SF: With Anna, we were improvising moving and speaking and I remember towards the end of my time there, one evening shouting out, "Say what you mean! Say what you mean!" In improvisation some things happen spontaneously but there's also some editing. You might see a possibility and you say, "Oh, no. No, I should hold back." I was amazed at the thoughts that came up that were really on my mind. I started to be interested in the things I wouldn't say, which are more the things that I'm saying now.

DC: "Say what you mean!"

SF: Then in 1960, after moving from San Francisco to New York, I left improvising with language and movement and did the more minimalist conceptual dance constructions. In 1961, I met Robert Whitman, became completely involved with his Happenings and pretty much left my own work. He called his Happenings Theatre Pieces, very imagistic and very like moving sculptures too. The performing took place in the environment that also held the audience. The stage where action happened and the physical theater itself were all part of the performance. When our relationship ended, I went to Rome.

DC: You were born in Italy?

SF: Yes. My father was Italian; many generations of Italian Jews…they came to Italy from Spain during the Inquisition. My mother's background is very mixed, also Jewish. Every time I hear the story of where her father was from, it's different. But I think he was Russian and French and Polish and Italian…Her mother was French. Mother and Father lived in Italy where Father's family was and we came away in 1939 to America…

DC: Because of the coming war? How old were you when you came to this country?

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

SF: I was five when we got here.

DC: In the late ‘60's you went back to Rome?

SF: Yes. I wanted to get back to my own work. Fabio Sargentini of the gallery Galleria Latico was very enthusiastic about my work. He was showing the Arte Povera people. His gallery was closed in the mornings and I was welcomed to use it as my studio. I was within walking distance to his gallery and to the zoo, so I’d spend the afternoons in the zoo, the mornings in the gallery. That’s when I got going on studying the animals… it gave me a starting point again to watch movement and then to try those movements in my own body structure—to adapt the movement I saw the animals doing. And then also… I had the blues and they had the blues. I would start to get to know some of them and we’d sit together and kind of hang out together.

DC: What was it that impressed you and drew you deeper into watching and recreating animal movements?

SF: At first I was just watching how they moved. Again, for me research is what interests me. It interested me how reptiles… their limbs were to the sides and their trunk was very close to the ground so that in order to move, the spine had to move laterally. It interested me to try that and to just have some material to study. I liked that there were no questions of style.

DC: Or whom they studied with.

SF: So it helped me study my body and to see it in very direct, concrete terms, and then also I realized that some individual animals were really *into* movement, inventing movement games or practices. I just recognized them as fellow dancers, and it seemed that they’d found a way to bring a little richness into the poverty of their lives—in their captivity. I don’t know if they would have done that in the wild.

***INSERT NOTES AND DRAWING/HANDBOOK PG 150/GRIZZLY BEAR**

DC: It's an interesting idea to think about space that way, that in captivity where movement is restricted, you would go into a deeper, more incremental, subtle movement to achieve the same large arc you could in open space.

I'm always curious about captivity and confinement and how one survives that. How does a human body, a human psyche, a human spirit survive cultural confinement?

SF: Yes. And I felt that I had been exiled from my world—from the world of being married to this person, of having these interests together, and I had given up my own work. I'd entered into his world. So, here in the zoo were these "folks"—because finally we're folks—who had been taken away from their life and imprisoned. It struck me that you're still yourself wherever you're put. If you're put in solitary confinement it's still you there. You've changed; you're patterns have changed—but it's still you. I felt a kinship and I felt that we were working on similar problems, and that some of us had similar solutions. In Torino, there's an Egyptian museum where I became interested in sculptures of animal gods and their postures, for example the Pharaoh and his wife where he's very big and she's small. Her feet are together while his feet are astride, one foot further ahead than the other. I became interested in the transitions between my feet parallel in movement, or pivoting on my heels to the diagonal. I could become parallel again and could either stand there like a person or squat and jump like a frog. I was interested in finding the transitions between different gaits and how I could go from standing like an animal god to striding to crawling without breaking a beat; I could just go right down to crawling and come back up. The transitions became a kind of morphing from one position to another.

DC: That's interesting—you're using the word "morphing", because earlier when you were talking about the work in Anna Halpern's studio, you were saying that it was a goal or a focus to interrupt and break through. That's a very different movement than a "morph" where there's no break. It's allowing a blending or a transitional movement to bridge one form with another, rather than to break the first form in order to have the other, which is very dialectical.

SF: Right.

DC: Were you presenting your work publicly during this time as well?

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

SF: Yes, and working with Charlemagne Palestine and Peter Van Riper. I met Charlemagne at CalArts in 1970. He started doing a kind of drone on the piano out of which melodies seemed to come just from the physicality of the harmonics. I was doing a bit of substitute teaching for Allen Kaprow and living in the Orange Groves with friends from New York—Allison Knowles, Nan June Paik… and studying Tai Chi. Charlemagne and I had access to this beautiful space that we called the Temple. It had a grand Bosendorpher piano in it and fantastic acoustics and space for me to dance in.

DC: I remember a story you told me when we first re-met in 1999, in Los Angeles. It was a story about Kasper Koenig and his publishing of your book, *Handbook in Motion,* in 1974.

SF: He invited me to write about my work based on my early '60s dance constructions. Well, meanwhile, I had been to Woodstock. I had really turned into a Hippie. I'd been on acid for a year—a whole year.

DC: Shook some minimalism out of you!

SF: I had a different view of the world and showed up with my beads and wanted to write about my year in Woodstock. This was not what his book series needed.

DC: Kasper Koenig was not a hippie.

SF: He was not a hippie.

I was interested in my change of perception. I had to reconcile the vision represented by my early '60's minimalist work and this new experience I just had through acid. On acid you really see things differently… for instance, the western scale—Do, Rey, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do—breaks up the sound wave forms. I had a sense that different civilizations break up wave forms in different ways and that what acid did was give me a view without the break up of the wave forms, or without the filters…

DC: And you'd just spent a couple of years watching animals and working with transitional movement as morphing—where there are no seams, there's no break up…

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

SF: But even the animals have to break up the waveforms. You have to fight entropy, and fighting entropy is breaking the waveforms.

DC: And not fighting entropy is…?

SF: Well, it's "all you need is love."

DC: So that's the hippie?

SF: Yes. I could flow with the flow. I could go behind the supermarket and find three-day old fruit and cabbage that's got its outer leaves a little brown. I remember wandering around with my friend Martha. We used to walk into a house where no one was home, we would just find an open door and walk in and take showers. She'd bake a loaf of bread, leave it on the table, take all her green clothes off, find yellow clothes in the closet and we'd leave…However, the house we walked into…they're paying insurance, they're paying taxes.

DC: Reality versus your improvisational movement through that reality.

SF: I was interested in questions like that. Well, Kasper wasn't. But it became interesting then for me to look at the relationship between the conceptual and the vibrational. So I wrote the book the way I did and Kasper didn't like it. It just wasn't cool.

DC: I saw that book as a student. As I said, it was not like the other books. Text and image were not placed on the page in a rigid way. There was handwritten text that was scribbled and some of it illegible or crossed through. There was erasure. There were drawings that were like snapshot drawings rather than formalized drawings.

SF: He didn't like my thinking. But he stuck to his commitment of a book. In the end I think what came out was much more interesting than what either of us had had in mind because it was this clash of two worlds.

DC: I remember you telling me that initially you had given him a manuscript which he wouldn't publish, so you and he decided to ask Emmett Williams, the Fluxus poet whom you both knew very well, to intervene, to create some kind of bridge between the two of you. Emmett's solution was to ask you for the manuscript. He looked at it and he said,

“Simone, I’ll take care of this.” He put it in his dresser drawer and left it for several months…you didn’t see it during this time…you imagined that he was taking care of it in some way. Then when he thought time was done, he handed back the manuscript unchanged and said, “It’s solved.” And you said, “What do you mean?” And he said, “All you have to do is re-transcribe your manuscript with one adjustment… add exactly a 1.5 inch margin on each side of each page."

SF: That’s pretty much the story.

DC: Well, he, in this brilliant Fluxus way, was saying, “Okay, we’ll play this game—we’ll give it an authority by giving it equal margins so it’s very formal,” mimicking minimalist and post-structuralist strategies. Handing it back with that “look”—that look of balance and framing perhaps helped Kasper accept it.

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(Part 2, Day 2, October 2003)

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DC: Today's date is October 24, 2003. We're meeting for the second time, around the kitchen table and we're just going to start from where we are …
So you were saying, Simone, that you're addicted to watching *C-Span*?

SF: One of my favorite formats to watch on *C-Span* is either the Senate or House of Representative Hearings with people reporting in… they're called "Witnesses". I also enjoy hearing Amendments being proposed for legislation, where the Senators or Congress people give their thoughts and rationale, then read the wording of the Amendment and then explain exactly what the Amendment would do. Sometimes their thoughts expand around some question that they then boil down into particular wording and particular actions that they recommend. Another interesting thing is the difference between propaganda and when someone is really speaking their mind. I love watching Maxine Waters; she just cuts to the chase and says things that are already on everybody's mind but that are always being treated very politically…of course she's speaking politically, too.

DC: But using a different strategy. In your most recent book *Oh, Tongue*, published through *Beyond Baroque* in 2003, you're alluding to political events, like your family being caught up in the events of the 20th Century. You also describe processes in your dance work of the 80's and 90's, which open up a territory of questioning your sentiments around political events….for example, the News Animations. How did they come to be?

SF: I was at a loss in my work, partly because I had been working with the musician Peter Van Riper, who I was married to. We were travelling together for seven years. He mainly played saxophone, small flutes and small percussion instruments and I was working with the animal studies and observations in nature as improvisational movement in relation to his playing. When our marriage broke up the work partnership broke up. Again I found myself

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

with the rug pulled out from under and I didn't know how I was going to work. Also, my father had recently died, so it was a hard time. My father always read the newspaper; every day he'd read the *LA Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, at least, and I came to have a sense of security because he would be scanning the world. For instance when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened, I got a call from him saying, "If something terrible starts, we're meeting in Ojai. There's some money in the bank, there's an account for us there and that's where the family's going to sit it out."

DC: Sounds like a man of war experience to me.

SF: We got out of Europe when many people waited too long and weren't able to.
I think we got out of Italy in December of 38. He was hooked on reading the news. That's how he knew where to invest and when to flee.

DC: The two important things in life.

SF: When to get the hell out. So when he died I started reading the newspaper because I figured…

DC Someone had to…

SF: … it was a sense that he didn't read it anymore so I'd better. I wasn't involved with investment and there was no question about needing to flee. My relationship to the information was that I was just learning. I was very naïve and very interested. I started a workshop called *Work In Progress*. This was in New York in 1981 or 82. I tried working with the news in the workshop, speaking out my questions, moving my body and moving newspapers around on the floor to make maps… trying to understand tensions and collapses and things lingering there on the horizon.

DC: What did you find?

SF: Well, for instance, that was the time of the Iran-Iraq War. My understanding was that Iraq wanted the estuary that went into the Gulf because they had such a tiny, tiny bit of land touching the Gulf that they were almost land locked. That estuary was also a fly away for birds…and then the human waves, the vision of human waves… I'd find myself flinging myself through space and then rolling with this sense of human waves…and the tragedy of it, and also I had the sense of blood soaking into the ground and of the oil underneath—the petroleum which is organic matter—almost calling organic matter to itself… seemed like

petroleum calls blood to it; down into it….and then the Arab Peninsula, I read that it was drifting towards Europe and that's what had made the Alps….so the sense of drama between people and then these larger, ongoing phenomenon around it…

DC: You're covering what is the fabulous, the spectacular about life and the world, which the newspaper reports on a literally flat surface… always defined by some political framing. You're including that frame but you're juxtaposing it with huge movements that are geographical, geological, psychological, psychic… human.

SF: And also the tension between the Sunni and the Shiite…that the Shiite…, I read snippets…are more the line from Mohammed, the bloodline of the daughter, and that the Sunni are more the line of the apprentice, the intellectual line… that interested me, too. This comparison between the intellectual and the bloodline really changed my posture… whether up in my verbal mind or in my womb…

DC: You're suggesting in a poetic way a separation that is mind and body.

SF: And between the powerful and the salt of the earth.

DC: What is held as powerful.

SF: Or what's given a certain kind of power, money power.

DC: Verbal power, language… how that then is embodied by identities. How people embody cultural heritage, history, and tradition in their bodies and live them as identities… that separate them from others who perceive their identities differently or as in opposition… vicious circles. This has something to do with how we speak; where our intention comes from… where we're speaking from.
Somehow it comes back to *C-Span* and Maxine Waters….

SF: Yes, political positions or where you're speaking from. I was speaking this morning with my mother's helper. My mother is starting to fail and Maria is looking after her in a Care Unit. Maria's there every day. Maria is more Right Wing and I'm more Left Wing and we were talking about the grocery workers' strike in LA. She was saying that the Unions are nothing but trouble… and saying, "Well, but the markets aren't losing money because they're still open." And I said, "Yes, but not many people go in there." And she said, "Yeah, because they don't want trouble." And I said, "Not only that, but they want to support the striking

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

workers." I suddenly realized that what we were doing… was she was giving me her line; I was giving her my line…

DC: The "position"…

SF: She was saying, "I'm a Right Winger" and I was saying, "I'm a Left Winger". We were essentially giving more information about ourselves then about the situation.

DC: The position is only the surface of an identity, the posture. More complex meanings are behind it or underneath it. Tell me about one of the News Animations.

SF: At the very beginning of the first Gulf War in 1991, I did one that I liked a lot.
I like to sometimes have what I call an arbitrary object if I don't have the newspapers. In this case I'd found this little, little piece of a board. Just a little broken piece of plank that was book size. Somehow I identified myself with it as being one of the hostages who was holding back the beginning of the war and thought if they could rotate these hostages so no one would have to do that for very long, then I'd be ready to go volunteer and be a hostage for a month. Then once we, the US, started bombing, I stopped doing the News Animations.

DC: Do you know why?

SF: I think because I'd been treating events which were full of human suffering with an Italian black humor which I could do as long as it wasn't my own people that were so obviously causing the suffering.

DC: When you say your "own people", you're meaning Americans?

SF: Yeah. I'm trying to remember how much domestic resistance there was. There wasn't marching and demonstrating at that time… I remember being very worried for the American soldiers because many of us did believe that they were likely to get gassed. The next thing that comes to my memory is the Iraqi soldiers trying to get back and being bombed and burned…

DC: Ambushed when they were trying to run away…

SF: That whole highway was littered with the dead retreating army. I remember being horrified.

DC = Dorit Cypis
SF = Simone Forti

DC: In your lifetime, being on the Left, you also got involved in the politics of the Viet Nam era?

SF: I didn't…it didn't occur to me to get involved. I had sentiments but I didn't march; I didn't participate. I don't know why.

DC: Were your peers involved in any way?

SF: I think that my peers early on, that is the Judson people like Tricia Brown, Steve Paxton—I think they were much more involved. During a lot of that period I was more with the *Happenings* people like Bob Whitman, Claes Oldenburg, and Lucas Samaras—I don't think they were involved.

DC: That's so interesting. Can you imagine what the difference was in political sentiment? What compels an artist to allow their aesthetic practice to overlap and connect with social and world political events, and what estranges some artists from that and keeps them outside as if they're really outside of it?

SF: When I was outside of it, I just was outside of it. I wasn't thinking about it. I'm sure I felt that the Viet Nam War was a terrible thing for all sides, but it wasn't in my daily thoughts…I didn't feel that I had any leverage, although in hindsight the demonstrations had a lot of leverage.

DC: I remember being swept in emotionally watching the Czech Revolution soon after 1989 … identifying with the artists and the writers who were at the forefront of that movement…including the writer Vacel Havel who became the President. Much of the process of that resistance came from artists working at the foreground. At what point does it sweep us in… and at what point—because our practice does have a kind of built in mental privilege, a sense of "we're outside of that stuff anyway, we're only affecting a certain minor population with our work", are we distanced? I have a sense of having been taught a conceptual cushion of privilege in a way. I am always conscious of playing into it, and always feeling guilty and uncomfortable with accepting it.

SF: I've seen photographs of the Judson Flag Show that took place at the Judson Church that Al Carmines was the Minister of … a whole evening around the Flag...including photographs of Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton and David Gordon naked with flags draped around them, but I don't know how involved any of them actually were. Having been brought up to feel that I should never get involved in any kind of resistance…I didn't.

DC: Being brought up in Europe as a Jew in your era, it certainly was dangerous to get involved; you were supposed to just disappear.

SF: Yeah. I don't feel that anymore.

DC: In *Oh Tongue,* there is your passion and questioning of your family's position and the events that they went through, trying to grapple with and come to a clear recognition of what that was. That fed other texts that were about war and more contemporary events—certainly we were way into the Middle East at that time—Bosnia, etcetera. This focus on world events is dominant in your new book, as different from the 1974 book.

SF: Yeah. Not at the time that I wrote *Handbook In Motion*, but later I noticed that I'm talking about the Vietnam Years and I do not mention Vietnam in that whole book and don't mention not being involved either. I just was completely oblivious to it. I was aware of it, and in fact while I was in Canada from 72 to 74, I knew that Canada gave amnesty to the draft dodgers coming from the US.

DC: And to war deserters…I met up with many of them at that time.

SF: I took my Landed Immigrant papers at that point too, thinking I would stay in Canada. I was aware enough to take my advantage, but I wasn't going to stick my neck out in any way.

DC: I was also aware that in my studies while at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, between 1971 and 1975, the war never came up. The artists that came to teach, whether they were from Europe, the States or Canada never directly dealt with the politics of the moment.

SF: And finally the Judson work also didn't deal with it. I bet Yvonne was involved in demonstrations, but I don't know that anyone else was.

DC: So talk more about your own recognition in writing *Oh, Tongue*, of a different kind of sentiment, a looking back to bring time forward.

SF: For one thing the performance of *War and Variations*, which was Terrence Luke Johnson's idea…some of the writings in the book came from the writings we were doing in preparation for this work.

DC: Post September 11th?

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SF: September 11th had a lot to do with it.

DC: September 11th fell on the first Tuesday that you and I were co-teaching a workshop at Cal-Arts. We had just lived through and witnessed September 11th.

SF: I remember a student having us walk a circle in a swamp with little radios all around. I squatted down to try to catch some news and I was watching the ants and I was thinking about my impending trip across the sea to Brussels. Making my decision to go really made me feel, "Whoa, we've got to keep going. If something happens, something happens." But that I can't not go.

DC: You can't flee.

SF: I can't flee. And I think that it got me past certain fears, generally.

DC: In a way it's expanding on your father.

SF: He never did any kind of activist…well, in his own way he did…. towards the end of the war, he tells about a time when he was at the factory—he was at some event and someone was there from the State, the Fascist State—and asked for a particular part of the land…and father said, "Oh, what a shame. I just gave it to the church."

DC: What a choice. The fascist state or the church—

SF: Choose whom you give it to and run, yeah.

DC: How would you characterize the work that you're performing today?

SF: Well, I'm performing a lot of different kinds of work. I did a News Animation recently at *The Bates Festival*, a dance festival at Bates College in Maine and also one at Bennington College, the transcript of which is in *Oh, Tongue*. Before I perform, I can't imagine how I can possibly do it or what I'll possibly do, but I decide I have to do it…

DC: Is it like that every time?

SF: Pretty much, yeah.

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DC: Because it is always new?

SF: Yeah. My own use of speaking and moving has branched out to different areas depending on where I am… when I was in Vermont and had my garden, I spoke and moved very much about gardening…. about digging in the earth, about watching the worms, the spiders, the centipedes—all the life that's in the earth—and the life of the plants and the strategic arrangements between the different insects and crustaceans … and the strategic arrangements between the plants… and then my role as gardener…

DC: It sounds like the process is actually quite similar to the News Animations where you're trying to make sense of this other terrain—the newspaper, your role as maybe hostage… trying to create these relationships between species, between physicalities, between eras and time and…it's really very relational—you trying to make sense of relations and relationships.

SF: Right. Right.

DC: And making them as they are, complex and synergetic, rather than hierarchical and quantifiable.

SF: They become hierarchical when you want to put something on your table—and then they're the bad plants and they're the good plants.

DC: And they're there to feed you; that's a hierarchy, but then you have the opportunity to reseed the garden… making a circle again. You're not either political and social *or* organic and natural. You allow a kind of attention or looking… experimentation, placement… re-placement, location…relocation, juggling systems around, whether they're natural or cultural. …it doesn't really matter because they cross over all the time.

SF: But then again, it's very new for me to want to have some leverage in the human game...I'm just feeling a real urgency right now about what's happening, about the political forces in the world… a sense that there is a place where I can add a little bit of my own weight to it… and that it would also feed my poetry, in a broader sense.

DC: That's the sentiment that allows me, an artist, to go and study Mediation … allowing for a different kind of cross-pollination with being in the world.

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SF: Yeah, yes. I feel that I'm living in a moment with my fellow artists where we're a little bit stumped. I don't look towards art so much for inspiration, although there are individual art works that inspire me very much. I saw a very interesting small performance piece at the Electric Lodge in Venice, California, where every first Monday of every month they do *Max Ten*… a maximum of ten performers with a maximum time of ten minutes each. In one of them this guy Tom Moose comes on with two stools. He sits on one and he puts his boom box on the other. He turns on the boom box and here's this very strident shouting voice in German…. Da da da da da da! Da da da!!…..and my skin just kind of responds.

Then he turns it off and speaks the same text in German with the same intonation, very strident, very excited…obviously he's memorized it. Then he stops and he says, "Fascism does not live in the German language." and then he rewinds the tape back to the beginning, turns it on, and plays it in little bits and translates. You start to realize that it's a sportscaster at the World Championship soccer game that Germany won, and then he talks about how this event was the first time since the World War II that it felt all right in Germany to get excited… that anyone who followed that game remembers where they were the moment that they heard that Germany had won….the way in America you know where you were when you heard that Kennedy had been shot….and in that moment I saw myself again in the subway station, the moment I heard that. And then he says, "In soccer, the game goes on for a certain amount of time and that's it. So if you're ahead, you want time to fly. You want the game to be over." And he says, "And the word "it's over" is…" and he said the word in German. And then he turned the tape on again and you hear the sportscaster yelling, "It's over! It's over!" You hear it as language… as *language*….because you hear the meaning of it… because you know the word now; it's not just these sounds that you've learned to know are German and that you have an enemy response to. The sportscaster was so excited, "It's over! It's over!", and Tom yelled, "It's over! It's over!" He brought me through a whole passage of change. I really heard the language differently, not inhabited by Fascism. The piece was transforming and structurally very interesting… delivering a lot with very simple means.

DC: We need to re-look at old ideas in new ways or we're just recreating the same… I see this in Mediation all the time…it's one of my satisfactions in doing it. I so identify with the things you're saying—makes me realize that having been born in Israel and raised there, in a culture of European survivors—quite hysterical and quite blinded by their own hysteria….doing the only thing they knew how to do—survive….without the ability to step back… to step back and look at, assess, process, evaluate, witness…their own reactions, which continues today in the State of Israel. But this continues everywhere. It continues in Small Claims court; it's not just about Israel; it's not just about Germany.

SF: Right.

DC: We each collude in our own blindness….there is transmission between us if we really look for that and recognize that…

SF: That would challenges our sense of identity…

DC: Absolutely…because it allows you to expand rather than to stay within fixed notions of whom you think you are.

SF: I remember as kids taking pride in things like, "I don't like spinach", and someone else saying, "I love spinach". It's these little things that make up your identity… you automatically have pride in who you are and what your likes and dislikes are, even as silly as something you like to eat.

DC: You recognize yourself and your difference, but if you don't recognize the other in their difference, it becomes a plus for you and a minus for them.

SF: Yes.

DC: I still see you, working in that word you use, "researching"…what's in front of you, what's underneath, above, behind—trying to make some kind of synchronistic sense, some kind of movement—both literally and figuratively… moving through the layered sequences of our lives. I know that today you're moving through something that's very present in your life…. your mother and her aging process and her dying process.

SF: And in fact, it is coming into my writing.

DC: Writing, you obviously see as movement… something moving through you; you're tracking something. The world of language is the world of others.

SF: Maybe. It's hard to know. When I'm in the car and turn on the radio, I need to hear talking as if the vibration of the sound is physical. Some people need music. I need talking.

DC: You're familiar with Butoh, a Japanese form of very emotional internal body movement… it is about physicality and simultaneously about non-physicality and what invisibly passes

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SF = Simone Forti

through the physical—history, the emotion of history….what's held in the body—memory…not language.

SF: No, not language.

DC: Kazuo Ohno, I remember dancing with him in a workshop in Japan in 1988.

SF: I was just in Japan and saw a lot of Butoh, and like any form the masters didn't set out to make that form; they pursued an internal need and it took that form. I saw many performances while I was there, including 2 terrific ones by Min Tanaka.

DC: Kazuo Ohno and Hijikata started Butoh in the 60s. Min Tanaka is second generation Butoh.

SF: And he's very much himself. I think he's really a very moving, very strong artist. I also saw performances by others and started feeling, "If I have to see another Ophelia stumbling around one more time, completely out of context—just kind of being sad and crazy"...but the solo that Min did, he did because one of the young dancers who was supposed to perform that afternoon died on a construction crew a few weeks earlier—so Min took his place.

The location was out in a field that had been plowed at least six inches deep, so as you step your foot sets down. It was kind of muddy and very fluffy. He drove a pick up truck out into the field and got it stuck and got it going again, got it stuck, got it going again. Then he came out in a black suit and went to the end of the field and stood with his arms out in a signal position…and then he ran towards us across the field as fast as he could, and threw himself to the ground, and slid for quite a ways. Really threw himself. Then he got up and walked back… eventually repeating this about five times—starting back in the field and then going a little further over… running and diving into this earth. And then you notice that he's carrying something…some bread. He walked away eating this bread that had dirt on it, walked away, left the truck stuck in the dirt. And I looked back over to him after a while…he was sitting at the side of the road eating this bread. It was such a connection to the young dancer who had died and who had gone into the earth.

Movement wise it was so beautiful to see him run and dive into the earth, only like a Japanese can—with no holds barred, no worry about hurting himself—just diving down into the earth. You understood what it was about, you understood what he was doing, and you were very moved by it. The workshop that I did with young Japanese dance students was also very internal, but it was also joyful. We took a walk up the mountain and ended up going up the stream in the rocks and we got sopping wet. We really got "into" the mountain

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in a very joyful way so that we were working very much with the beauty of taking a breath of clean, pine-smelling air….watching a tiny bug… teeny, tiny legs moving across a leaf. They took to it. It was like opening a window.

DC: Butoh evokes death, and you're very interested in evoking life, the incremental, the cellular…

SF: And death as a part of it…but as a joyous part of it.

DC: Butoh actually came out of post Hiroshima—Nagasaki. It was about allowing those sentiments of death to be released in performance….the grieving. That's why the evocation of death, to allow the pronouncement that death happens …that it lives in our bodies, even though we're alive…and the memory of it, even though it may not be ours, is with us because we have our heritage in the past.

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