

Simone Forti

Senza fretta



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curated by
Luca Lo Pinto and Elena Magini

Senza fretta, the first major exhibition by Simone Forti in an Italian museum, has been conceived as a large landscape with a special installation designed in collaboration with the artist, illustrating the natural evolution of her practice and research on movement, involving dance, film, drawing, sound and writing through a political and at the same time personal perspective.

An artist, choreographer, dancer and writer, internationally renowned as a key figure in the development of performance from the late 1950s to the present, Simone Forti explores reality through her body. She was born in Florence in 1935 to a family of textile entrepreneurs from Prato, who moved to Los Angeles in 1938 following the rise of Fascism and Nazism in Europe.

The exhibition at Centro Pecci in Prato is a sort of homecoming, a return made “without haste,” as the title of the show indicates. This title emerged from an encounter between Luca Lo Pinto, curator of the exhibition, with the artist at her home in Los Angeles, when Forti pointed without looking at two words in a book by William Carlos Williams, one of her favorite poets.

The improvised, nonchalant character of this gesture reveals the freedom and spontaneity of Forti’s practice, in which she always lets herself be guided by the world around her, granting it a voice in space through her body in movement, sound, light and language. The focus is on experience, interpreted over the years in a vast range of different media, from painting to drawing, video to sound. Nevertheless, the fundamental key of her oeuvre is physical expression through dance, and especially improvisation with the body.

Sound Collage (2021) is a soundtrack specifically created for the exhibition, which accompanies visitors through all the spaces of the museum, in an audio commentary that blends with the other works, illustrating the porous intermedia character of the artist's approach. The piece an original collage of various audio tracks, combining sections in which Forti reads from her book *The Bear in the Mirror* (2018) – a collection of stories, prose, poems, drawings, photographs, letters, notes and memoirs related to her Italian roots – with others in which she sings folk songs or interacts with handmade instruments. The multiple sonic situations in the composition bear traces of the experimentation and collaboration over the years with musicians and composers such as Charlemagne Palestine, Peter Van Riper, La Monte Young and others, demonstrating the importance of sound as a fundamental component of Forti's work. The exhibition crosses two rooms of the museum: the large quadrangular room and the curve.

Quadrangular Room

In the quadrangular room two large-format videos present two versions of the performance *Huddle* (1961), one of the artist's best-known and most iconic works, first invented and organized for the evening of *Five Dance Constructions and Some Other Things* held in Yoko Ono's loft on Chambers Street in New York City, and part of the *Dance Constructions*, a body of performances composed by dances and human sculptures, devel-

oped through improvisation and chance, that were acquired by MoMA New York in 2015.

Huddle is a dance in which six or seven performers, without props, form a group in a circle facing each other, a sort of temporary sculpture. The dance begins when one person breaks off from the group and starts to freely climb its structure, using the bodies of the other participants as supports. During the performance, the audience moves around this living sculpture to see the changes taking place in the mass of bodies. The distinction between real and performative space is blurred, and the audience is actively included in the performance by means of their own movement. The sculpture of bodies is simultaneously a minimalist composition and a sort of "shelter" for the artists involved, who create a structural unit that is reassembled each time into a single cluster. *Huddle* sets out to reflect on the social dynamics that exist between individuality and community: each single entity has to join with and blend into a dynamic unit, while each participant has to understand his or her essential role, both in supporting the collective huddle from below and in taking turns at climbing on and over the group. The body is the central focus and the same action is isolated and repeated in a cooperative, sustaining attitude of mutual physical listening. The piece is based on intuition, negotiation, trust, care, balance, physical proximity and support. It is a metaphor of group relations and civic space.

Huddle is the only performance among those belonging to the series of *Dance Constructions* to have "a life of its own," due to its intrinsic possibility of being conveyed

during the performative act itself, thus somehow belonging to everyone. Transmission of the performative experience and hence teaching, through workshops, represents a fundamental factor in Simone Forti's practice. The artist sees the restaging of her pieces as a form of "body-to-body transmission."

Two installations at the sides of the exhibition space display props, videos and drawings connected with two performances created in different moments of the artist's practice, but equally linked to the interaction between movement and sound: *Cloths* (1967) and *Song of the Vowels* (2012).

Song of the Vowels is made up of graphite drawings that depict the cavities and folds of the vocal apparatus and a video in which Simone Forti, standing in front of the garage door of her house in Los Angeles, translates these images into sounds, using them as a sort of score. The drawings provide an interpretation of the Cubist sculpture of a harp by Jacques Lipchitz (*Song of The Vowels*, 1931–32), which the artist saw in the Sculpture Garden of UCLA in Los Angeles. Fascinated by the back of the sculpture, whose form is like a tree trunk, but also by the internal part of the oral cavity, Forti was inspired to make the series of drawings shown here, which in turn become the score for a transposition of language through sound – the singing of short and long vowels – and movement. Forti herself becomes an instrument capable of translating speech from abstract form to a dance in space. *Song of the Vowels* will be restaged for the first time during the exhibition.

In *Cloths* three black cloths on wooden frames conceal three performers, who every so often flip colored fab-

rics over the frames and the black cloths, singing freely and at times leaving pauses of silence, as well as singing along with recorded music. The draped fabrics alternate, creating a chromatic dance of voices and colors. The private and public dimensions overlap, through a compositional game in which the body vanishes, leaving the stage for the movement of the cloths and the music. The semi-abstract images of this piece reflect the influence of Robert Whitman, to whom the artist was married for several years. The piece, first enacted in 1967 at the School of Visual Arts in New York, is presented in the exhibition as an installation with video by Hollis Frampton, and will be restaged on a weekly basis.

During the exhibition, three other performances by Simone Forti will be reactivated: *Scramble*, *Sleepwalkers* and *Rollers*. Created by the artist in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these works respond to her interest in basic movements, kinesthetic awareness and improvisation, and the relationship between movement of the body and the forms of the surrounding environment.

Sleepwalkers / Zoo Mantras (1968) is one of her best-known works, and is connected to her experience in Italy. After the divorce from Robert Whitman, Simone Forti accompanied her parents on a trip to Italy in 1968, during which she decided to move to Rome, where she began working with the art dealer Fabio Sargentini of Galleria L'Attico. It was in this gallery that Forti first presented the performance *Sleepwalkers / Zoo Mantras*, developed by observing animals in the local zoo. By studying the swinging movements of the heads of animals

held in captivity and the repetitive rhythms of polar bears and elephants inside their enclosures, the artist made repeating segments and passages of animal movements, creating a musical score for the body with rests, intervals and definite times, reflecting on and investigating the balance between restriction and freedom.

Having formulated four blocks of movements, like grammatical units or phonemes alternating in space, Forti re-interpreted and combined several blocks as performances in their own right: this was the case for *Rollers*, staged in this show for the first time as a single work. The action carried out in *Rollers*, namely slow rolling from one part of the stage space to the other, “like seaweed caught in a surf,” offers further development of Forti’s interest in the experience of simple movements that connect the body with the surrounding space and foster awareness.

Scramble (1970) involves a group of people moving rapidly in the space in a random way, whose trajectories never meet. Sometimes they are scattered, other times they regroup, after which they run and finally slow down to the point of stopping. The whole cycle is repeated a number of times. Again in *Scramble*, improvisation and repetition become the characteristic elements of a performance that investigates the ties between the individual and the group, through movement and relation: the bond between the space “inhabited” by the performer and negative space becomes fundamental, with the speed of action derived from the rapid ability of the body to make decisions.

The compositional taste of *A Sculpture* (1961–2015), the work placed at the center of the room, translates the dialogue between positive and negative space experienced by the body in the artist’s performances into plastic form. The supple structure brings out the interaction between the different materials (wood and metal), and the forms and forces that cross the piece, just as Forti’s dance concentrates on the movement of the body and its essential compositional elements.

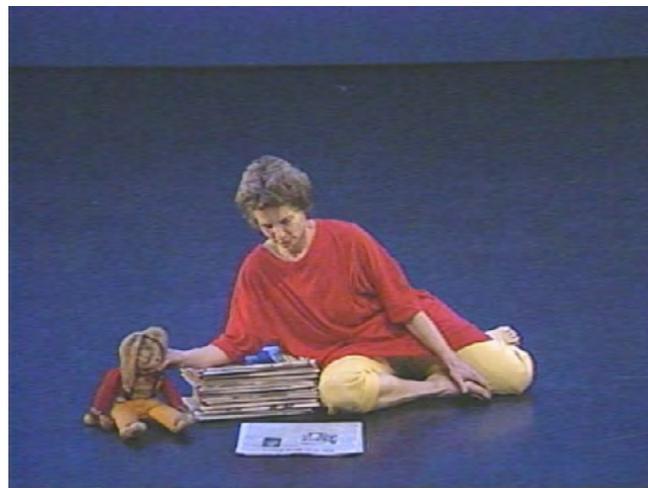
To conclude this pathway of the exhibition, the *Bag Drawings* represent an original body of works made by Simone Forti during lockdown in the spring of 2020, using shopping bags found in her home. These drawings offer a snapshot of the artist’s immediate response to the events that stood out in our society over the last year – especially the health emergency caused by Covid-19 and the killing of George Floyd. One of the drawings shows a body slithering on the ground, suggesting the sense of fatigue and disorientation felt on an individual and collective level. For Forti the gesture, the perception through the body, remains a fundamental factor to grant expression and energy to the drawing; the use of domestic items becomes a direct manifestation of an emotional condition linked to the familiar everyday existence.



Simone Forti, *Sleep Walkers / Zoo Mantics*, 1968/2010
Performance, Los Angeles, 2010
Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles,
Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan; Photo Jason Underhill



Simone Forti, *News Animation: Mad Brook Farm*, 1986, video still
Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles.
Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



Simone Forti, *News Animation with Manny the Rabbit*, 1988, video still
Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles.
Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



Simone Forti, *Zuma News*, 2014, video still
Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles.
Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



Simone Forti, *A Free Consultation*, 2016, video still
Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles.
Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan



Simone Forti, *Figure Bag Drawings*, 2020
 Courtesy the artist, The Box, Los Angeles,
 Galleria Raffaella Cortese, Milan

Curve Room

The curve room of the exhibition focuses on the *News Animations*, a practice Forti has worked on since the middle of the 1980s, in which she explores the potential of language in a total dimension that combines movement, words, images and music, starting from stories found in newspapers.

In 1983 Forti's father passed away, and in a sort of catharsis to cope with the pain of her loss, she began to "read" the news in his place, absorbing the stories and processing them in free associations of meaning.

The *News Animations* are performances in which Simone Forti incorporates and embodies reports from newspapers through movement, language and improvisation, drawing on a sort of dizzying combination of images, memories, details and information related to media or stimulated by media.

In the exhibition, videos of the performances (selecting only those conceived to be shot on video) engage a dialogue with a group of drawings from the same series, demonstrating the artist's ability to channel the same reasoning into interdisciplinary methods.

In *News Animation: Mad Brook Farm* (1986), the tensions that emerge from the reading of newspapers appear in the form of fragmented words and physical movements, through which Forti expresses awareness of her condition of privilege with respect to people who live in zones impacted by military and economic warfare, which alters the balances in those territories. The artist overlaps various temporal planes,

making news items converge with biblical narrations of the Old Testament. Cries, onomatopoeic sounds and verses are interspersed in the continuous flow of words, while mental and intuitive associations become an ecological warning regarding the depletion of the earth's energies and resources.

In *News Animation with Manny the Rabbit*, Simone Forti converses with Manny and some members of the audience during a workshop organized in New York in 1988. The themes approached include the worldwide balance between Russia and the United States at the end of the Cold War, the unregulated and globally distributed power of multinational corporations, and the movement of capital abroad. In a sort of stream of consciousness, Forti cites political figures and news items, shifting from one to the next in an agitated way and utilizing the same strategy that is applied by newspapers and media to respond to dramatic events. Faced with the artist's stream of information and thoughts, Manny the Rabbit is blocked, unable to think, in a condition that also happens to readers exposed to the incessant flow of news in the daily papers.

In the dialogue from 2010 (*News Animation with Batyah Schachter, Church in Ocean Park*), Simone Forti and Batyah Schachter trace back through the fragmentary history of the conflict between Israel and Palestine from its origins, narrating it by means of parts of their bodies.

The two speak and move, intertwining the worldview offered by news media with their personal experiences and speculations: Schachter addresses the complexity of life in Jerusalem, between the wealth of cultural and religious

stratification of the city and the violence of conflict, while Forti experiences a gap between her peaceful life in the United States and the great responsibilities of that country on a global level. Through an empathic game of bodies, the artists ask to each other how to take a position with respect to this conflict, and how to create spaces of dialogue and interaction.

In *Zuma News* (2014) and *A Free Consultation* (2016), Forti abandons speech to concentrate on the physical relationship with the elements: on a beach of the Pacific Ocean or the banks of Lake Michigan, the artist lets herself be invaded by natural elements – sand, waves, ice – and the products of civilization, – newspapers and radio. The tensions and sensations regarding events in the world are transposed through minimal symbolic movements. Forti's message becomes increasingly elusive, like an explicit way of urging the audience to “let the body have its own thoughts and ideas.”

The drawings in the *News Animations* series (1985–2012) constitute another level of elaboration and expression with respect to that of the performances. The reflections on language, which in the performances are connected through the use of body and voice, are given form here in a terse inscription made of word games, barely sketched human figures and linguistic alternations. The physical component of dance is transported onto paper through the graphic gesture, as the stream of consciousness becomes concrete in the relationship between objects and words belonging to apparently different semantic fields.

Simone Forti is an internationally acclaimed artist and a key figure for the development of performance, from the late 1950s to the present. Born in Florence in 1935, Forti moved to Los Angeles with her family in 1938. In 1955 she began to dance with Anna Halprin, who was conducting pioneering work on improvisation in dance. After having worked with Halprin for four years in the San Francisco Bay Area, Forti moved to New York where she studied composition at the Merce Cunningham Studio, with Musicologist Robert Dunn. Here she met and began to work with choreographers like Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton. In the Spring of 1961, Forti presented an entire evening of original pieces titled *Dance Constructions*, in Yoko Ono's studio, in New York. The *Dance Constructions* became extremely influential works in the fields of dance and visual arts. The radical character of Simone Forti's oeuvre lies in its conceptual affinities with the practices of Minimal Art in the early 1960s. Though her impact on postmodern dance has been widely acknowledged, her contributions to Minimal and Conceptual Art have often been overlooked. Over the years, Forti returned to improvisation, including important collaborations with musicians like Charlemagne Palestine and Peter Van Riper. Since the early 1980s, she has practiced a form of performance in which movement and language spontaneously intertwine: the *News Animations*.

Simone Forti's work has been shown in venues such as the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, the Louvre Museum in Paris and Danspace in New York. She has held solo shows at the Kunstmuseum in Bonn, as well as her

first retrospective at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg in 2014. Her works are included in the collections of the MoMA and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, among others.

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