

Body-Mind-World, or, I Feel Like Moving Right Away!: Simone Forti in conversation with Victoria Gray

Artist, choreographer, dancer and writer, Simone Forti, has dedicated over six decades to improvisation and experimentation. One of the foremost figures of postmodern dance and Minimalist sculpture, Forti's work spans multiple forms, including dance, sculpture, drawing, sound, video, and, holograms. Early in her career, Forti worked with pioneering dance artists such as Anna Halprin, Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer, and, avant-garde musicians and composers such as La Monte Young and Charlemagne Palestine. Forti's lifelong dialogue between movement and poetic language is manifested in her books of experimental writings, *Handbook In Motion* (1974), and, *Oh Tongue* (2003), which includes a postscript by the poet Jackson Mac Low.

In recent years, Forti has shown performance and choreographic work at Guggenheim Museum, LACE, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Recent exhibitions of sculpture, drawing, and ephemera have been shown at *MOVE:Choreographing You* at The Hayward Gallery and South Bank Center, London, and the traveling exhibition, *Re.act.feminism: A Performing Archive*. Forti's recent retrospective, *Thinking With the Body: A Retrospective in Motion* (2014), at Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria, examines the artists pioneering contributions to art. The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue titled, *Thinking with the Body*, edited by curator Sabine Breitwieser.

In 2011, alongside artists Yvonne Rainer, Jean-Jacques Lebel, and, Meredith Monk, Forti

was a recipient of a Yoko Ono Lennon Courage Award for the Arts.

This interview, conducted on February 4th, 2015 at Forti's home in Westwood, Los Angeles, facilitates a dialogue on the relationship between body, mind and world. The term “Body, Mind, World” appears in Forti’s book of writings ‘*Oh, Tongue*’ (2003), and was originally written as a text in Spring 1989, in New York. According to Forti, at that time, the pairing, body-mind was well established within somatic practices, such as Body-Mind Centering. However, Forti recognised a critical element absent from that terminology, declaring, “Body-mind, world. Every time I hear “body-mind” I think “No, no – body, mind, world!”

Moving from an historical context, this dialogue seeks to contextualise Forti’s “body-mind world” in relation to the present political and ecological climate, asking, to what extent might today’s generation of dance artists embody the principle ‘body-mind world,’ as a means of facing these challenges, in the present.

I feel heavily the trouble I read about.

(Forti, 2003, p.111)

This interview was conducted on February 4th, 2015 at Forti's home in Westwood, Los Angeles, by UK based movement artist, researcher and writer Victoria Gray.

On a sunny afternoon, Forti and Gray sat across a wooden kitchen table and shared a bounty of home-grown tangerines, a bowl of dark chocolate, and, a dialogue on the relationship between body, mind and world.



My hand, in 2017, holding one of the home-grown tangerine's, given to me by Forti after our interview in 2015. Deciding to keep the fruit, I've observed the slow process of decay, now, over two-years on.

Simone Forti: Tangerine? Would you like a Tangerine? [Simone gestures to a bowl of tangerines on the kitchen table]

Victoria Gray: Yes! I have this theory, about Oranges and Tangerines. That whenever I feel low, they make me feel ... um ... [Victoria hesitates]

SF: They pick you up!

VG: Yes. They pick me up!

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VG: *Simone, I'd like to orient our conversation around your notion of "Body, Mind, World." The term appears in your book of writings 'Oh, Tongue' (2003), but was originally written as a text in Spring 1989, in New York.*

The pairing, body-mind, is already well established within somatic practices such as Body-Mind Centering. However, quite passionately, you declare, "Body-mind, world. Every time I hear "body-mind" I think "No, no – body, mind, world!" [1]

A clear example of this would be your News Animations works, where you embody world news through improvisational, simultaneous movement and talking. You've likened this to dancing the news to understand it, saying, "I even see the news as pressures, wedges, and balance shifts [...]. But most of all I started to accumulate kinesthetic impressions of pressures, wedges and currents, balance shifts and impending collapses." [2]

Could you begin by expanding on the kinesthetic relationship between body, mind and

world, in the context of your improvisation work, and perhaps in relation to world events more broadly.

SF: And of course, I feel like moving, right away!

I'm thinking of Chechnya now, and I feel like taking the cutting edge of my flat hand and pressing it against the palm of the other one [*Simone physicalizes this gesture*]. I feel NATO coming right up against Russia, and I feel Russia is pushing back. Then, I'm trying to get a sense of where Russia stands with Syria, and where Iran stands with Syria, and then Saudi Arabia, I'm just kind of locating a territory.

For example, I used to think of politics very much in terms of economics, and oil and territory, but my friend in Israel told me, "no, it's religion." I'm starting to understand that religion plays a very big part in holding groups together, and pitting groups against one another. Even as I'm saying that, my two hands are in two units and pushing against each other.

I can relate this to what I consider to be "body, mind, world." Not that body and mind are separate, but neither is the world, and so there is this discourse back and forth. We think about the world, we talk about the world and we try to convince each other about certain ways of seeing certain aspects of the world.

This brings in the language aspect. We formulate our thoughts in language, but we also *feel* a dynamic model of our picture of what's going on. We might see that as mental images, a more abstract perception of what's going on. But first it's something that we

feel, and then the words inform that.

For example, even when I look at this table, that's part of my world. The way we are sitting at a table is political. So, there's this constant feedback between our perception of the world, our language about it, and our feelings about it. This informs how we see the world, what the world is for us, and, how we act in the world; body, mind, world.

VG: *Would you say then, that this discourse back and forth between body, mind, and world, between movement and language, informs how we physically “position” ourselves, or perhaps, articulate a political “stance” in the wider world?*

SF: Yes, I talk about this in *Oh Tongue*, and in the past I have attended political demonstrations. For example, I live right near the Federal Building, I'm right across the street, and recently there was a demonstration by a family of Native American Indians.

There was an older woman and a younger woman and they looked like a family because they were both holding a baby -- it looked like a mother, a daughter and her child. They had big signs saying no to the pipeline that will probably be coming down from Canada, from the Tar Sands.

I went and stood with them. However, I really refrained from taking positions, because, I feel like things look so different from the position of different cultures, from different religions, and different moments in history.

VG: *Do you feel that as an alternative to demonstration and protest, movement practices and dance are an effective means of taking a political stance – a way in which to bridge*

this distance between different cultures, religions and moments in history?

SF: For me personally, movement has always been a way for me to understand the things that I need to understand. For example, I'm doing a lot of Tai Chi these days, more than before, because, I'm sure you've noticed that I'm shaking a lot and I've been diagnosed with Parkinson's.

It seems that Tai Chi is very good for that, and through the movement practice, it might even be possible to hold back the progression of the disease. In Tai Chi, it's like you take the force coming at you, and you pivot a little to send it away.

Through movement, I can also access a wider scale or perspective on things. I recognize that I am part of the fibre of my civilization. That's what supports me. That's how I function. That's where I have responsibility. That's where I have certain dangers, and, certain rights.

I also feel that as a civilization we're a disaster. I go through different feelings about it. What I've been feeling lately is "Simone, go ahead, be a part of this civilization that you are part of. You are part of the disaster." But then, it makes it hard to know what positions to take.

I almost feel like sitting back and saying, "Simone what are you going to do?" I kind of feel defeated if I start thinking about how to affect the world. What do I know?

VG: *Perhaps on a smaller scale, there are practices that we can adopt in our daily lives, such as attuning to our bodies and our environments for example, that might indeed have*

a wider impact. I'm thinking about this in terms of what Goat Island might describe as "small acts of repair." [3]

Do you think that by cultivating this empathy between humans but also animals and nature, we might initiate "small acts of repair?" And, that these acts have a ripple effect beyond body, and mind, to world?

SF: See that plant that's kind of up high there, that's a tangerine plant. Its fore bearer is in the front yard. It came from a seed from the plant that's in the front yard and it's my little sapling. I'm taking care of it. It just started a new little branch and with scotch tape, I taped back a leaf that was in its way until it got far enough, and then I let that leaf down again.

There can be this connection between just about any species. For three year's I had a little spider, and each year it would be a new little spider. It would start out teeny tiny in the same place in the corner of the windowsill where it could go hide between the frame of the window and the frame of the glass, there's a little space there. Then, it would come out, build a web, and then it would grow to about ten times its original size. In other words, to about a centimetre, and then go away. I'm sure it got used to me and I'm sure it got used to the sounds of dishes washing.

We coexisted. We were sharing our territory. I would look for it in the morning and look for it at night before I went to bed, its companionship. I'm sure there are species that don't respond to such companionship. Some species, they are really loners, and I'm sure that is ancient.

VG: *Your story about the spider is a lovely demonstration of non-anthropocentric relation. By being able to put yourself in the “position” of the spider, it seems to me you cultivate an empathetic relationship to it. In a way, you're able to “become” the spider!*

SF: Yes. I think that we have parts of our brain and bodies that are new, and, some that are a layering of ancient parts. We even retain some reptilian formations that have adapted and still work for us.

However, despite this, I feel that we don't understand animals very well. When we bring an animal into our culture, they adapt to our culture. For example, a dog will find its place, although a cat is still more feral. And yet, whilst it's acknowledged that a wolf in the woods has so much intelligence, given that it must deal with so much, we're somehow surprised when a dog is smart.

Regardless, to have some living thing, some being, whether person, animal or plant that you're considerate towards, it's such a good companionship. A feeling of companionship.

VG: *Bringing the conversation back to dance and artistic practices, do you feel that art, and perhaps especially movement practices, have the capacity to cultivate such a critical companionship, one that initiates a broader discourse on the world?*

SF: I think that the big discourse goes on amongst people. It goes on amongst family. It goes on at the dinner table. It goes on amongst friends. It goes on in schools. However, it also goes on in art.

I think that's what art is. It's a way of exploring our frame of mind, our frame of

consciousness, and a means of understanding how that is changing. It helps us to recognize those changes, to develop upon them, and, to have a discourse about how our frame of being is changing.

This is true of dance also.

VG: And, with specific reference to dance, your notion of “body-mind-world” seems to encapsulate this notion. That it is in and through movement that bodies engage in this discourse. It is through our bodies that we sense how our world is changing. Moreover, it is through our bodies that we might sense how the world might need to change ...

That said, it seems important to put your notion of ‘body-mind-world’ in the context of its time. It was in the seventies and eighties, with the proliferation of somatic practices, that your provocation ‘body-mind-world’ originally came to fruition. You reflected that, the focus on inner kinesthetic sensing lacked an important element, the world. Of this movement outwards, towards the world, you remarked, “It’s a direction I’d like to see, though I don’t know what the work would look like.”

And so, in the context of now, given that we inhabit a different world, this phrase might need to be practiced by bodies differently. I wonder, in what ways do you see today’s generation of dancers practicing the “body-mind-world” connection in their own work? What are the challenges we face as we endeavour to move in this direction?

SF: I don't know. I was recently with a couple of young dancers after a performance, and we were sitting on the floor talking. They were saying that the tension between digital

and analogue, and the tension between body and technology is something we must deal with now. Although, I'm so much body, I don't know ...

In terms of the challenge, I feel that there are times when as a collective, with collective mind, we just need to keep futzing around. Because, we don't know. We don't know what aspect of what we're doing is going to reveal a new direction for us.

And I don't know the direction. I don't know. Especially now that we know that space and time warps!

VG: Could you expand on this sense of time and space warping, and especially the collective mind? For instance, I'm interested in ways in which the kinesthetic forces that move through dancing bodies in the "now," might be trans-generational, transpersonal, and transspecies.

For that matter, the impetus to move is driven not by a singular, bounded body but to an affective, largely immaterial ecology of forces - a collective consciousness or even unconscious?

SF: I've never considered this so much in the dancing situation. However, my dreams are very obviously, a sub-conscious way of moving through time and space. A way to work out recent experiences in some other way.

For example, I feel that my dreams come from many different times and places. This is

clear especially in the landscapes that I find myself in, such as cities, or hillsides. Places that are fully detailed, like subway stations, and train stations. Some of these places I visit only in my dreams, never in my waking life.

Although, I feel I'm not inventing them. Either they exist on some other plane, or, they're from a previous life. Not that I believe in previous lives, but I use that language because they're from somewhere else. Who knows where or what?

Then, every once-in-a-while, I meet a teacher of some kind. Somebody that tells me something important. Even though it's a dream, I'm sure I didn't invent that person. I met that person. I have not read much, if any, Karl Jung, but the idea of a collective unconscious interests me.

As an example, as you're interviewing me now, it's wonderful for me to hear my own past words coming from you today. I realise yes, they mean something to people, across space and time. And then you go ahead and rework them, and bring them into your present. Into your generation.

VG: *Yes, as I've re-cited your words, or perhaps, embodied your words during our conversation, I feel as if I've brought them to consciousness.*

And, so to close, whilst our conversation has been oriented around your past words, I'd like to invite you to say some words about 'body, mind and world,' in the present. As a means of gesturing towards the future ...

Do you still feel, as you did then, that dance and movement-based practices are a means of taking a political position in the world? That, beyond the context of dance and art, such practices are critical to our collective futures, indeed, to a dream of survival?

SF: Regarding movement as a way of taking a political position in the world, I think that there's a time for mobilizing compassion and a time for just crazy violence. I think that together these different movement dynamics have brought us to survive until today.

As I described in the beginning of our conversation, in the examples of world conflicts, I don't believe that a world without war is a possibility. I think that there is a lot of sadness at all the sadness, and all the suffering.

Although, as with the spider and the tangerine plant, I feel that our work as dancers and beings in the world is always to lean towards compassion. To try to create an environment for compassion. So that there's decency between individuals. Whether they're chimps, or us.

I'll leave that there. Compassion.

NOTES

1. Simone Forti, *Oh, Tongue* (Los Angeles, Beyond Baroque Books, edited by Fred Dewey, 2003), 122.
2. *Ibid.*, 5.
3. Stephen Bottoms & Matthew Goulish, eds., *Small Acts of Repair: Performance, Ecology and Goat Island* (Oxon, Routledge, 2007).