



The Limits of Animality

Simone Forti at ISCP
(L.A. in N.Y.)

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Simone Forti is in the midst of an august ascent. These past few years, the octogenarian L.A.-based dancer, choreographer, and writer has seen her stock soar, with the likes of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) formally acquiring, this past December, seven of Forti's Minimalist *Dance Constructions* (1960-61). These task-based dance repertoires evidence Forti's choreographic range that is every bit quotidian yet idiosyncratic, with ordinary gestures made notable, maybe even romantic, via entanglements with circumstance and chance. In making work that involves all this, Forti has fostered a sincere approach to dance that foregrounds the potential of the body as a laboring material always at odds with evolution. Animate one moment, inanimate the next, Forti highlights how bodies take on movements and manners that occupy an indeterminate space, between subject and object, human and animal.

Elucidating these embodied links—how animality and humanity, in more ways than one, operate on a systematic continuum—was paramount to Forti's early dance works. In the late '60s during a sojourn in Rome, Forti spent days on end at the Giardino Zoologico di Roma caressing lion cubs, sketching

the breath of oxen, or noting how flamingos slept upright. These day-trips to the zoo became movement research into non-normative bodies—animals here—executing dance of a captive sort. Forti was held captive by captivity, sharing her afternoons with fenced-in bears, chimps, and giraffes—fellow “captive spirits”—negotiating an already fragile existence.¹ These outings shaped *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* (1968), a sequence of repetitive animal “dance behaviors” Forti abstracted for her sensate body.² On the occasion of *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* approaching its 50th anniversary, Forti re-performed the animal-inspired piece at International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP) as part of the exhibition *The Animal Mirror*.

In a narrow hallway abutting the main gallery, Forti began upright, stuttered to her left and right, and then slowly leaned back, eyes closed. She appeared in stupor, sleeping perhaps. Her right hand shook—tremors, the signs of an aging body—as the weight of slumber rocked her backwards. Eyes still sealed, Forti's hands came up, flapping initially by her sides, but finally settling into a series of crossed-arm gestures that cradled her face. After some time, she balanced on one foot, her head resting on her folded arms. Crane-like, Forti quickly found her feet—bipedal again. In the next motion, the doyenne strode across the room, dipped at the waist, hanging in a like-for-like posture to Shimabuku's image, *Gift*:

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Exhibition for the Monkeys (1992), that hung across from her. No sooner had Forti bent over than she was swinging her white tresses in a sweeping arc. Every so often, Forti hung in the air for a second or two, taking in her surrounds, but not necessarily engaging the audience that encircled her. After swinging about, Forti returned to the spot where she began the performance. Laid out on the floor, she slowly rolled across the room and back. Other movements in *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* caught Forti in a plank, balanced on hands and toes, hopping on all fours intermittently. The piece ended with Forti shuffling three or six steps forwards and backwards, kicking out at the end of each traverse to begin again. Her right hand swung as she shimmied across the floor, pacing as though entranced, nervous, driven by ritual.

A talk with curator Kari Conte and Forti followed the performance. During the tête-à-tête, Forti delved into the specific spirits that captivated the movements: the sleeping flamingo suspended on one-foot; the polar bear exercising his torso; the seaweed swept up in the surf; the water strider running atop a pond; and the elephant navigating monotony. *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* situates dance as captivity. But the constrained—and contained—movements vacillate to other latitudes: dance acts an emollient, a “functional ritual”³ to quell those unfettered moments of angst. Read this way, dance becomes this container for the ennui found in the margins.

Age is one such margin. But despite entering her early 80s, Forti still commanded her body with poise, stopping and starting with equal parts gaiety and gravitas. Even with slight tremors in her right hand and head, Forti glided about ISCP, assuming postures that might challenge

the strength and coordination of her peers. To borrow dance historian Sally Banes’ term, the “democratic body” was on view here, its jitters and stutters undoing the modernist appeal to sublime form and technique. Forti injected litheness to the dancing body held captive, now, by the degenerative forces of ageing. Rather than a salve to self-soothe, dance movement, for Forti, becomes a way to enchant, defy the odds, and, more importantly, immerse oneself in a shared kinesthetic sensibility with, say, the sea lion—a knowledge commons fostering radical relations with others and with the world.⁴

Returning to animality, however, complicates these utopian latitudes. Lest we forget not all bodies—black ones, for example—get the luxury to negotiate confinement through movement.⁵ The power of locomotion was often a right stripped from black bodies during America’s Reconstruction Era. And today the rise and fall of black death and dissent is often coterminous with #chimpout (a Twitter hashtag that aligns blackness with the chimpanzee), as well as the baseness of animalistic impulses. In a similar gesture, language lumps worms with the feral cat. The resultant “animal” as a category flattens any difference, establishing human as somehow separate from animal. While Forti likens her movements to states of mysticism and enchantment, in a way, these systems-of-spectacle—language, the zoo—contour the body, govern the kinesthetic commons, and deny any predisposition to animality in the human.

In a treatise on animality, Derrida gives this thought: “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there.”⁶ It is tempting—and perhaps anthropomorphic—to suggest an about-face in that we, the audience

1. Forti uses this phrase “captive spirits” as a way to identify with the confined animals in the zoo. This sense of *simpatía* can be tied to a host of autobiographical referents, from Forti fleeing Florence, Italy prior to the anti-Semitic laws in 1938 that annulled Italian Jews of citizenship to the loneliness Forti felt in Rome following a failed relationship.

2. “Dance behavior” is what Forti ascribes to the everyday acts—playful, nervy or unremarkable—shown by animals at the zoo. See Simone Forti, “Animate Dancing: A Practice in Dance Improvisation,” *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003): 56.

at ISCP, became animals. The truth is, though, this reckoning mirrors that of *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* in various ways. For one, Forti, herself, admitted to “anthropomorphizing”⁷ back in Rome, passively identifying with the animals, their loneliness. Forti, however, eventually opted out of observing animals in the zoo. The image of captivity, how it dims the animate into inanimate forms of repetition, proved troubling to Forti—saddening is how she put it. By turning away, one risks forgetting, no longer seeing the animal see you.⁸ Yet these admissions from Forti endeared her performance at ISCP.

Re-performing *Sleepwalkers/Zoo Mantras* reflects an embodied sympathy: we see Forti naked, forward-facing—vulnerabilities and all. But in *looking* at Forti plank here, and saunter there, we see her exercise a willful remembering, a straining of ligatures, a spontaneity given over to movement. Animality, Derrida noted, locates itself in these gestures of spontaneity, “marking, tracing, and affecting itself with traces of its self.”⁹ Forti’s re-performance took on these freeing marks and traces, showing animality—this seemingly senseless impulse—is in many ways human, as well a limit unto itself. And as I *think* back to these limits, Forti’s body—ageing, riddled with whim—bravely takes up other limits: where human and “animals” meet; where language favors speciecism over similitude; and where dance archly opens up animality as existing in step with the history of humanity.

3. Forti noted that confinement in zoos brought about “functional ritual[s]” in animals as way “to provide a modicum of relief.” Forti, “Animate Dancing,” 56.

1

Simone Forti, *Animal Study: Ox (Breathing)* (1968). Ink on Paper, 9 × 12 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box, LA. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

2

Simone Forti, *Animal Study: Turkey (Cooling Off)* (1968). Ink on Paper, 9 × 12 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box, LA. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen.

3–6

Simone Forti, *Sleep Walkers* (1968/2010). Performance at Artist’s Residence, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of the artist and The Box, LA. Photo: Jason Underhill.

4. “*Sleepwalkers* is a return to the sensibility that I harvested when I was studying with Ann Halprin; that is, the immersion in the kinesthetic sense. A return to movement as a means of enchantment.” Simone Forti, “Danze Costruzioni,” *Simone Forti, Galleria L’Attico* (Rome: L’Attico, 1968), n.p. Translated by the artist.

5. Che Gossett notes how for all his radical theorization on human/animal divide, the likes of Derrida and Agamben fail to consider how anti-blackness is constituted through animalization. See Che Gossett, “Blackness, Animality, and the Unsovereign,” *Verso Books Blog*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2228-che-gossett-blackness-animality-and-the-unsovereign>.

6. Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002): 397

7. Simone Forti, *Handbook in Motion* (Halifax, Canada: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1974): 91.

8. Derrida, “The Animal,” 381.

9. *Ibid.*, 417.