

Simone Forti

Interviewed by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

— Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer: I thought we could focus mainly on the **News Animations**, but that we could begin by talking about your history a bit, and your approach to improvisation. You were introduced to improvisation through Anna Halprin in the late-1950s, and then, soon after, to conceptual practice and a Cagean approach to chance through Robert Dunn in New York. I wonder how, over the years, you refined your particular approach, which is maybe different from those two main formative sources?

— Simone Forti: I think that in a sense I reverted to being more influenced by Anna in the **News Animations**, in that I'm really improvising. Anna always had us improvise in relation to something. So the improvisations were always an exploration of something. Especially in the, I'll use the word 'exercises,' where she would say, we're going to focus on weight, we're going to focus on negative space, we're going to focus on speaking nonsense. So it's not so different when I focus now on my thoughts, and especially my unformed thoughts about the world, and when I improvise from that.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: I wonder, with improvisation more generally and with the **News Animations** in particular, is there a rule structure you start with? Or what are the parameters you give yourself?

— Forti: I would say more generally with improvisation there's always an area of research, let's say, that's already clearly marked, that shows the limits of the improvisation. Structure is something else. When I get a chance, I work with Lisa Nelson and her image lab structure. We'll start an improvisation and someone who's sitting out may say: zoom in, or back up, or run it backwards, or repeat.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: Can you explain what the image lab is?

— Forti: Yes, Lisa Nelson is a dancer and is also co-editor of **Contact Quarterly**, a journal of moving ideas, or of dance and improvisation. She's been working with this structure for a long time with many people as she travels and gives workshops. It's a very structured way of

improvising in short bursts, and then you step out and watch.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: So you're improvising as a group and individuals can step out and watch the rest of the group, and then come back in?

— Forti: Yes, but she works with different structures, so that a person might go in, and then being in the space they might control the image of what the space is doing with them and the environment. And then someone else goes in and adds to that. And then they both come out. So it's a way of putting the improvisation under a microscope. I don't tend to work like that, but I really liked it when I've worked with her, when I'm into some idea and then suddenly: zoom in, or zoom out, or repeat, or jump to another idea.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: Being given direction?

— Forti: Being given directions but basically being interrupted. Having my flow of movement ideas and verbal ideas interrupted, and then having to jump to something else, or having to do it again. Rather than distancing me from what I had been doing, it makes me more conscious of what I'm doing and it stimulates the flow of ideas by having these interruptions.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: Well that makes me want to ask about conscious and unconscious modes of improvisation. But first, you homed in on the term structure. Does that mean something specific in dance, or in your practice? I wonder if you could describe what that term, structure, refers to, versus the problem or the idea flow or the research?

— Forti: I worked for many years with a musician, Peter Van Riper. Our way of working was that he would bring to the situation musical things that he had been working with. I might almost say riffs, or even melodies.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: Prerecorded?

— Forti: No no, he played saxophone and a lot of small instruments, like thumb piano and some wind instruments. But basically he played saxophone. So he would bring his materials in, and I would bring my materials in, and then we

would see how they worked together. When we were going to do a concert, we would say, and here's what I would call structure, we would say, okay, why don't you start with this and solo it for a while, and then I'll bring in this material. The material had names. And I was working a lot at the time with animal movement, a movement vocabulary I was developing from watching animals in the zoo, and when possible, going to see a collection of Egyptian art, because the Egyptians used animals a lot. Their deities were often half-animal, half-human. I might have a run and jump that would end up, suddenly, still, in the position of this little statue I'd seen at the Louvre of the god that had the head of a bird. So I might say, I'm going to do that, and he'd say, okay, we haven't tried it yet with the stuff I've been doing with the recorder flute — let's try putting those together. So those were structures. And the vocabularies in sound and in movement were, for me, explorations.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: You've referred to this as research. Do you think about your long-term practice as private research or cultural research? Or maybe those aren't very different?

— Forti: Yeah, I don't see them as such different things. I think often that if I'm wondering about something it's because a lot of us are wondering about it.

— Lehrer-Graiwer: Okay, to go back for a moment to when you were talking about working with Lisa Nelson and being interrupted, and enjoying that for making you more present or conscious, I was wondering about the relationship between improvisation and the unconscious. Is that a major subject of thinking or exploration for you?

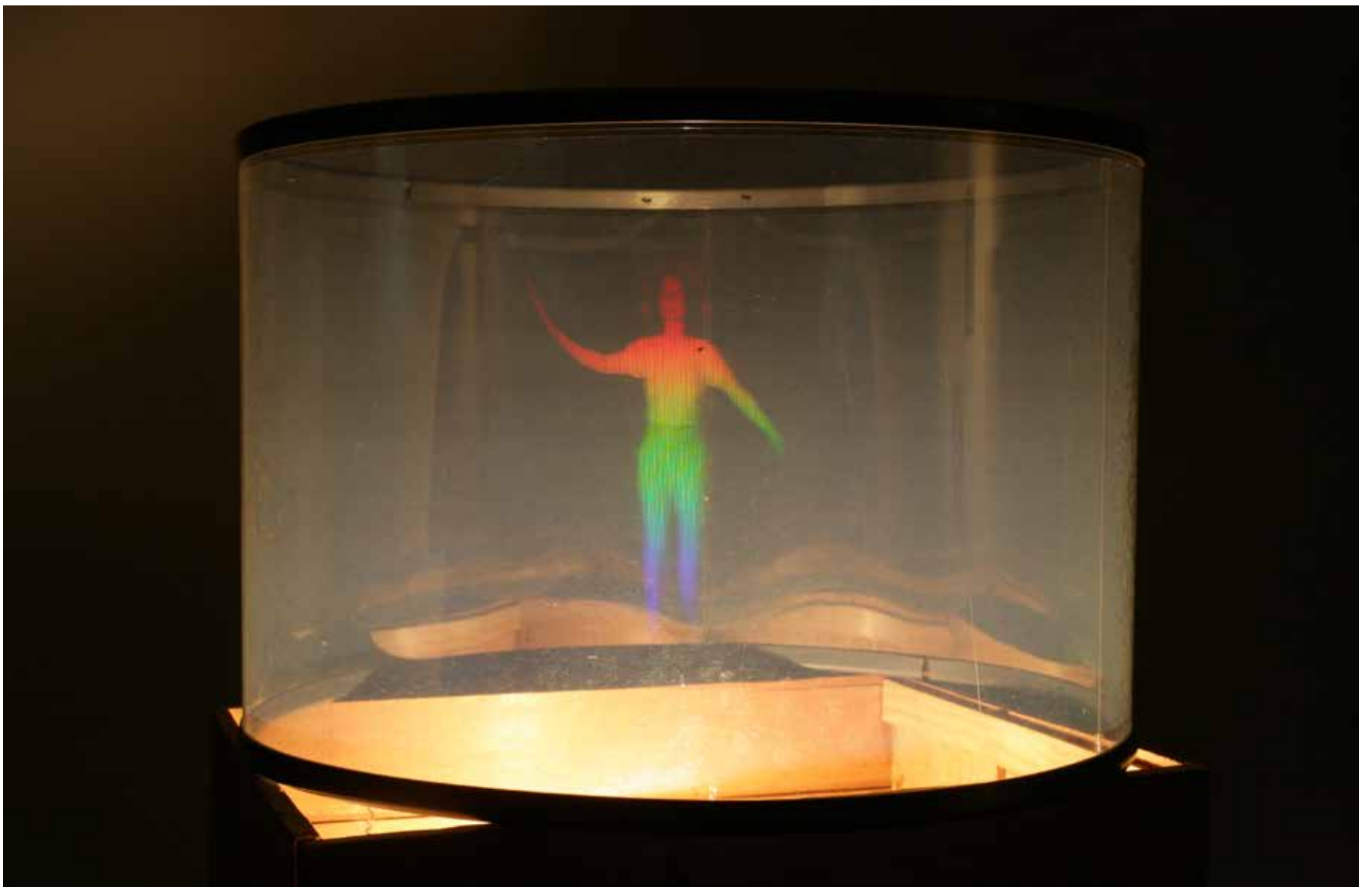
— Forti: I'm happy to think about it. It's not something I've specifically thought about, but it is interesting. What it brings to mind is the difference between when an improvisation is really happening, is really working, and when you have to work very hard and really pull out your skills and tell yourself, okay Simone, stop. Just stand for a moment. Take in the space. Take in the sounds in the





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space and what's happening. What ideas do you have that you can get started with again? Okay, I can look around for shapes and forms and qualities in the space, and try them on in my body to see if that turns me on. There's that kind of very conscious use of skills. Or you think, oh my god, *this*. And then the path opens, followed by *that*, and then this, and then there's a sound in the space, and then you roll on the ground. Sometimes I say it's as if an angel were to drop the improvisation in your lap and it just happens. People talk about being a vessel, about flow, and I think a part of the consciousness, let's say, that we refer to as the subconscious or unconscious, I think there's another part of the consciousness that comes in and maybe takes a lot of things into consideration. It's a more open mind than the structure of logic, and when the two interact, that's when things are really happening.

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: Continuing from that, I wonder how the feeling, the sensation and pleasure of improvisation has changed over many decades of working? Is there a palpable sense of an accumulation of muscle memory and body knowledge that starts to happen on its own? Or maybe the idea of automatic

movement is relevant, and if so, is that something to resist or to explore with interest? If this is a form of the unconscious in dance and movement, then how is it different now compared to thirty years ago?

—— Forti: I don't think it's that different now, although it keeps changing. My body has changed. My body keeps changing. I accumulate certain riffs and forget others, so the vocabulary does change. And there is a vocabulary. But then there are always some new responses to the moment. And of course even if I do have some riffs, they can't be the same because they're not in the same context, they didn't lead up in the same way, it doesn't work. Sometimes it's hard, if I do two improvisation performances on following nights and the first night is really hot and works and I think, oh, I'm going to try that again. Well, you don't remember how it evolved, what the lead up was, where it was coming from. You can't do that. But there could be something in it that you can do again. So I know I'm moving differently over the years, but my process is pretty much the same.

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: This is related to another question I have, which is maybe more conceptual, but how does improvisation intersect with a personal voice in movement,

or a personal style? I'm thinking also about how much Judson Dance Theater, or your peers in Judson, like Yvonne Rainer, were so concerned at a crucial point with evacuating a kind of virtuosity or style that could be associated with persona or personality. I wonder if that's something you resist or are interested in, that is, how your own personal style of movement emerges organically through improvisation.

—— Forti: I don't think much about it. However, I know that there are two things that have very much influenced my movement vocabulary, or my style — watching animals, and tai chi. I've done a lot of tai chi. I think you can see me dancing for thirty seconds, and even in just how I use my knees, there's a lot of tai chi in there. That's my safety structure. I think that's what keeps me dancing, too. It's a postural attitude that works for me, and that you can see. But also the animals. I spent a lot of time going from striding to crawling, without missing a beat of the contralateral movement, and then all the way down to the ground with my limbs splayed out like a crocodile or a lizard. Okay, now I'm walking. Good. Now I'm walking and I'm bending over. And now my hands are touching the ground. Now I'm crawling.



Okay I'm crawling. So I'm not really wondering about style.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Because that will happen on its own, anyway? Because it's your body and you'll move in the way that only you move?

Forti: Well I don't know. I mean Pooh Kaye moves a lot like me. We move a lot like each other. The minute we saw each other we kind of lit up, and then started dancing together, because we have such similar spirits in some ways.

Lehrer-Graiwer: It came up a moment ago, I was wondering if you wanted to say more about the body aging? Is that consciously directing movement research, or is it a matter of different limits and reframed possibilities?

Forti: I'm working with what I've got. And it's always been that. I kind of enjoy my awkwardness. I stylistically enjoy my awkwardness. There seems something sassy about — what the fuck, here it is, let's keep doing it, this is interesting, and if it's interesting it doesn't matter what I look like. But still, I was amazed when I performed recently with Charlemagne Palestine and he was playing the grand piano and putting enormous sound into the space — we had a big space to work in, under the pyramid at the Louvre — and I really took off. I had my big black shoes and if I sent my foot forward the momentum really took them. I was really going in circles and tilting this way and that way and changing trajectory. I still love to get my momentum going. Sometimes I say I feel like an old Buick going around a corner.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Can you tell me about how the **News Animations** came about?

Forti: I find that often my work has changed when something basic in my life has changed. I had been working with Peter Van Riper and working with a vocabulary of animal movements. We were married, and we broke up. So that collaboration ended. We did a few more concerts after that, but basically that wasn't going to be my main form anymore.

Lehrer-Graiwer: When was that?

Forti: That was in 1981. Then in 1983 my father died. During that period I was depressed. I kept teaching, I kept doing stuff, but I didn't really know what my work was going to be. I knew it was going to be something else, but I didn't know what. So I offered a workshop for people who were transitioning in their work but didn't know what it was going to turn out as. I gathered a group of five or six of us and we met once a week for four hours and we would

share. One week someone would say, next week I'd like a half hour, or next week I need two hours, and then we would try things on each other, or we would read from our journals and someone would say, oh, I've been thinking about this, and then we would try it. One woman had us work with the news, because she had stopped reading the news and she wanted to start again but she wanted to have some approach that could take her emotional response into the whole picture of reading the news. She was not a dancer but she had thought that maybe working with movement would help. I really responded to what she had us do. She had us work with headlines and she had us work with some of the pictures. I mentioned that my father had died and that he read three newspapers a day. I felt that it was because he knew everything that was going on that he got us out of Europe very early, as World War II was breaking. So I also felt I should start reading the news myself, because he's not protecting us now anymore, and I better. But I wasn't very good at it. I couldn't remember the names and I couldn't remember the information. But somehow it clicked, as the familiarity of the newspaper gave me an emotional connection to my father. I could make maps on the floor with the newspapers and start to understand — like okay, Iran has a very long coast; it was the Iran/Iraq war at that moment. So Iran had this long coast down the Gulf and Iraq has just a tiny little finger on the Gulf, and Kuwait is like a console that's in the way. And then I had read somewhere that the whole Arab Peninsula was drifting north and that's what had sent the Alps up. So that made sense, that all that petroleum was getting pressured under there, and that petroleum draws blood to itself. So it just clicked. At the time I happened to be teaching a class at the School of Visual Arts in New York, so when the students did their student show, and they each had made their own piece and all the pieces were different, I showed my first **News Animation** in the student show. That's how it started, long ago.

Lehrer-Graiwer: So that first one was soon after 1983?

Forti: Yes it must have been around '83 or something like that.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Had language been a part of your movement before then?

Forti: Anna [Halprin] used language in her movement.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Speaking while moving?

Forti: Speaking while

moving. And that was much more like Surrealist theater. Who's the playwright who did the Binary Bride? There was an English-speaking one whose name I always forget. But we were working with nonsense. I remember we'd be moving and I'd be having this conscious experience of letting all these unconscious or just slightly less conscious phrases come through my mind, and I'd say, no, that's an association with what I'm doing; no, that's a play on the color of what I'm doing; no, that's a — wow! Where did that one come from? And I'd say that one. We were working as nonsensically as we could. That's how we were using language. We improvised like that a lot, and then Anna started making some pieces with that material. The way we would do that was very interesting. We would improvise. Then Anna would say stop, go back to where John was, over there. A.A. was crawling across the ground, Simone was crying, and I was taking off my clothes. Let's go back and run it again. And I'd go, what, run it again? I can't possibly remember, and I'd start crying. And then I'd see A.A. crawl by and think, oh yeah, when that happened I fell over. Okay. And then when I fell over I looked up and saw John over there and I rose. So we were able to rerun the improvisation, and then we could rerun it again and make any changes that we thought would be interesting. So we'd layer it and layer it until it got set.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Was video being used at all at Anna's?

Forti: No.

Lehrer-Graiwer: I also wanted to ask about language. You had mentioned to me before that you have a practice of writing earlier in the day every time you perform a **News Animation**. How does that relate to the actual performance? Did that start at the beginning of the **News Animation** practice?

Forti: I don't exactly remember, but it has something to do with Fred Dewey. Fred at the time was director of Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in L.A. We were friends and I was showing him some of my writing. I had a little cassette recorder and I was recording some of my improvisations in rehearsal and transcribing them. And now, when I read — I was going to say when I typed up a few of them, because I write longhand — when I read one of my transcripts, I can't quite tell if it's a transcript or if it's a twenty minute writing from before a performance. But somewhere along the way I was showing Fred some of my writings. He was encouraging me,

and a book came out, which he published. Somewhere in there, I think from seeing the transcripts, I got interested in — *oh*, very important too was that I came across a book by Natalie Goldberg, who was a writer and teaches a lot of writing workshops. This was a book with a lot of the exercises from her writing workshops, I think it's called *Wild Mind*. There are a few rules. One, you know for how long you're going to write, whether it's going to be three minutes or sixty minutes. You decide ahead of time. You also keep your hand moving the whole time. And then there's advice like, don't mind if it's interesting, you can't tell anyway. You can start with an idea, or a word, or I remember, or you can open up a dictionary and point to a word and start there. What's interesting with that is that it's stream of consciousness, but around a point. I think of it as flying a kite, where the stream of consciousness is the wind, but the string is what you've decided your realm is going to be, if it's going to be the world and news. If it's going to be news it can get into history, family, politics, it can get into whatever, but it comes around. Its purpose is understanding your unconscious thoughts about world news, and your conscious thoughts, too. That's when the kite can stay up, when you have both those things. I started doing some of her writing exercises and I found them very useful as a warm up for my verbal mind.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Your sense of language is refined and beautiful and poetic, and in the **News Animations** it clearly relates to the news but also elevates it to a level where it almost verges on prophecy or memory. It's very literary, your sense of language, more so than journalistic in relation to the news. Do the **News Animations** always include newspapers?

Forti: No, but I like to have something. I often have something I call an arbitrary object. It kind of interrupts me. It will be out there in space and I'll suddenly pick it up. For instance, I did a **News Animation** at a very small poetry center in San Diego and the only thing I could find as an arbitrary object there was a little chair. But it was a very beautiful little chair, very delicate. One thing that came to me to talk about was this radio program and the voice of this Japanese guy who was at the outskirts of the Fukushima disaster, where they weren't evacuated but they were supposed to keep their windows shut. In his talking you would find out that he's an art teacher

at a high school. He said: keeping the windows shut is for the children. I'm opening my window and I'm spending all these days when we're not supposed to go out, painting, painting, painting, because I have a show coming up. And then he was also talking about the disaster. You get a sense of the disorientation and pain, but it's so fine, like a fine line, because of his voice. And I'm talking about how intimate it was to hear his voice. I find myself just following the lines of the chair, which were really quite beautiful, and saying, look at the curve here, and how wide it is, and I was getting tangled in it too, and *it* was bringing me ideas, because it invited me to tangle myself into it, which maybe gave me some sense of the twistedness of the nuclear plant. So I like to have some object that will bring me some things that I would not have come to otherwise.

Lehrer-Graiwer: And when that object is not a stack of recent newspapers, when it is a chair, or pieces of canvas, what keeps it within the category of **News Animation**? What is the parameter of that body of work? Is it you focusing on your thoughts about the world and current events?

Forti: Yeah. I often work with a woman, Batyah Schachter, who's Israeli and lives in a Palestinian village at the outskirts of Jerusalem. She's coming to meet me in Stockholm now and we're going to do a **News Animation** together. We often use ten pounds of potatoes. We'll map them, or maybe they're just something to be manipulating while we're thinking and talking and maybe threatening to throw a potato at each other. We've often worked with potatoes.

Lehrer-Graiwer: But newspapers are the most common object in the **News Animations**?

Forti: They used to be more than they are now.

Lehrer-Graiwer: I was wondering how that's changed from the '80s to now, and how that span of time, with the internet and the supplanting of print media...

Forti: Maybe that's part of it, that it's gotten more difficult to get your stuff from newspapers. They don't have to be current, because it's more the material than reading them. Or even reading them, they'd be just as good from ten years ago. That would be interesting. They can be anything. They can be advertisements. But yeah, that's true, maybe it's because of the media. I mean I read the news more online now. I don't have a TV.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Yeah, it's something I've thought of when seeing your **News Animations**. I mean I think about **Zuma News** (2014), where you're on the beach and the newspapers are getting wet and starting to disintegrate and being pulled out to sea, and how poignant that feels now when print media is in a rear-guard position. We hear that newspapers are closing all the time. It's a fading form, in a way. Working with newspapers means something different now than it would have in the '80s.

Forti: That's right, because back in the '80s everyone had a big stack of newspapers that they planned to recycle, or to take down the stairs.

Lehrer-Graiwer: Less so now. I'm wondering if there's a difference within the **News Animations** of performing live versus performing for a camera, for video, and if that feels different or if it changes the way you're working or moving?

Forti: Hopefully I get so involved in the action that it doesn't matter, but it is different, it is different. Or there's also working in the studio with no camera and no audience. I don't ever work in the studio all by myself. But working with people in the studio, we're each other's audience. I do consider how something will be taken in and I think I have developed that ability partly because I teach a lot. There you're constantly aware of what has actually been delivered and what didn't reach, what wasn't taken in, and then what other approach you can take if there's something important to deliver. When I was coming to Minneapolis and bringing those two half flags, I had this idea of washing the flag in the Mississippi, in the river, and I was kind of concerned that there'd be the camera. Then I thought, you can zoom, you can do it. It's unusual for me to make a video, although there's another one at an oak tree that Pooh was involved with, not with directing or producing, but she got someone to do camera and brought me to this very old oak tree and had me work with it.

Lehrer-Graiwer: And there are some videos of **News Animations** from Vermont?

Forti: That's right, that's right.

Lehrer-Graiwer: So they're in the minority, but videos have happened over the years. I don't know if this is particular to the **News Animations** or not, maybe it's more about moving improvisationally, but how does the environment, the architecture or the geography, factor into

your preparation or the energy, the feeling of the performance?

—— Forti: It factors very much into the performance. I will consciously look at the space, especially at the beginning of a performance, knowing that if I'm looking at the ceiling, you become aware of the ceiling. You see me looking. I do this so that the audience is also aware of the space and then I'm always aware of my placement within the larger space. That's a difficulty with video, because the video tends to follow you, so you're always in the middle of the space. It loses that architectural placement in space.

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: Do you have a preference for performing indoors or outdoors?

—— Forti: I remember I used to like to spend time outdoors, maybe even moving outdoors on my own, and then bringing those experiences into an indoor space. I've done some things outdoors, and some I've really loved, but to bring an audience outdoors, what are you going to do?

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: I was curious, and maybe this is similar to how newspapers mean something different now than they did in the '80s, but seeing you perform at Midway in the library felt very poignant and even loaded, being surrounded by books, and I wonder if that's a scene

or context that you've done **News Animations** in before, in a library, or if that was a new context?

—— Forti: It was a little different, but a little similar. I've done something at the downtown library, in their little theater. The audience came into a library and then into that theater, so I'm sure the experience of a library remained with them. I feel comfortable in a library environment, because it's about study. It's not about display.

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: How much does it feel like it's about communication?

—— Forti: A lot. It's a lot about communication, and there's also humor, like when you say it's literary rather than journalistic. It's certainly not journalistic and I would make the most terrible journalist imagined. But yes, it's a lot about communication and this brings me to what I feel is important about it, that again, it's not journalistic and I can't convey any information, but I do make transparent the interaction between the thoughts that are not completely formed, that maybe you're afraid to completely form, and the thoughts that are formed, and that this goes on in all of us, that it opens up a window for someone watching and responding to it with their own process of conscious and unconscious working together. I think that less is

consciously recognized in one's own self, in one's own body, even gesturally. I think your body feels a lot, like when your hair stands on end.

—— Lehrer-Graiwer: You've just gone through the process of working on a retrospective, and there's a book that goes with it. I wonder what that experience felt like to you, of methodically or systematically going through your life's work thus far. Now that you've done it, has it reoriented your direction moving forward or changed the way you're thinking now?

—— Forti: I've got two thoughts. One, that it was kind of a shock to see it all together, to get a whole picture like that, and of course I think how the picture came out also has a lot to do with how Sabine [Breitwieser] saw me and what she selected. I think she did a very beautiful job with how, for instance, she put the book together, so that photos of **See-Saw** (1960) appeared several times throughout the timeline, so that the pieces referred to each other. It made a very interesting picture. But I like to have dark areas, areas that I haven't thought about. I was really worried when the light got shone around all those corners and everything was seen together. I've always felt that I have to be careful about being a fruitcake.

