

# Curator's Key

Curators talk about a work they  
keep coming back to

## Luca Lo Pinto

on Simone Forti's  
*Huddle* (1961)

I first came across Simone Forti many years ago – she was on a small poster promoting a festival of dance and music organized by L'Attico gallery in Rome in 1969. It was like a Champions League of the avant-garde, with figures such as Terry Riley, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, La Monte Young, and, indeed, Simone. I had just enrolled at university to study art history and was thirsty to discover new things, to create a history which was not being taught to me. What fascinated me most were the outsiders and pioneers who had opened up seminal paths without being recognized by history. As if in untilled land with tall grass in which to get lost, Simone had opened up so many routes within the fields of dance, sound, and writing that people with the most diverse interests could find a direction.

When I met Simone in the early 2010s, I was in Los Angeles in the company of her old friend Luigi Ontani, and we all went to visit the grave of Simone's father, Mario, in Westwood Cemetery. It was a bizarre, unique way of entering her life. Only later did I discover how important *papà* Mario was to Simone – the *News Animations* (1985–) series, in which she improvises in response to arrangements of newspapers on the floor, was influenced by her father's daily ritual of reading the news.

I saw her again in Paris a few years later before her performance with Charlemagne Palestine at the Louvre. Simone's body was trembling because of Parkinson's disease, but that

fragility had been introjected, imparting a vibrant energy to her movements. Forty years had passed since their first performance together in 1972 – it was somehow cathartic. It seemed as if the artworks around them had fallen silent, hypnotized by the two's movement and singing. Watching Simone and Charlemagne improvise, generated an effect in me similar to the ecstasy I suppose Simone felt while observing the movements of the animals at the Rome zoo in the 60s, an experience that inspired many of her performances.

When, in the early 60s, the dance scene began to question the foundations of movement, a similar process of self-interrogation took place in the world of visual art, particularly amongst sculptors trying to achieve a degree zero of language (Carl Andre, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Richard Serra). In 1961, at the invitation of La Monte Young, Simone presented a series of performances in Yoko Ono's loft entitled *Dance Constructions*. Most of them involved the use of objects by the performers (a bench, a rope, an inclined board, two wooden boxes), with the exception of *Huddle*, which can still be defined as a statement of intent. Anticipating many of the outcomes of Minimalist and Conceptual art, with *Huddle*, Simone created something hybrid – a performance sculpture – which still retains its radical power today. Six or seven participants form a huddle by bending forward with their heads down and their



Simone Forti, *Huddle*, 1961. Performance view, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 16 May, 1982

limbs entangled. At a given moment, one or two performers sense the right time to climb over the others, cautiously using their arms, necks, and bound shoulders as leverage. The climbers lower themselves to the ground and rejoin the group.

It is an ephemeral piece without a proper score, rather based on basic instructions to develop an awareness of one's body and space. In performing *Huddle*, it is essential to understand its spirit, no technical training is required. "If the enemy concentrates, he loses ground; if he disperses, he loses strength," was the motto of the Vietnamese commander Giáp. The work is a structure perpetually in motion, it is like a sketch of a painting in constant preparation. A multitude that forges a dynamic unity enriched and nourished by the differences of its components. It is an apparently fragile and vulnerable yet resilient community. It subverts the principle of *deus ex machina*, privileging the value of collectivity – if one participant does not help the other, the mountain crumbles.

The bodies are neither naked nor costumed; they are just normal. Rejecting the affirmative and machist power of Minimalist language, *Huddle* counteracts the principle of individualism and resists its possible commodification as a replicable non-object, even without a certificate. Like all of Simone's works, it is in no way demonstrative; it exhales an animist and spiritual ascendancy that is less cerebral than many of her

peers. Potentially, *Huddle* is an open-source file capable of becoming a collective exercise outside the realm of art. The transmissibility of the performance experience and thus teaching, through workshops and seminars, is a crucial element of Simone's practice, who understands the re-staging of her pieces as a "transmission of knowledge between bodies." It would be nice to imagine a huge flash mob where people would simultaneously perform *Huddle* in every city in the world.

The more familiar one becomes with Simone's work and her persona, the easier it is to be convinced of the impossibility and futility of trying to confine her within any interpretative or disciplinary framework – she has an anarchic approach to art, dance, and her own work. Everything can be modified, revised, not in the name of a programmatic manifesto, but as a consequence of the urgency of the present moment, along with an idea of history as a stream of consciousness.

The possibility of continually rewriting her own story, of relating to her work not so much as an object but as an attitude or idea that could always be thought and rethought was an epiphany for me. It encouraged me to approach the status of the work of art, its presentation and circulation, in a way that can deconstruct the structures we think we should abide by.

*LUCA LO PINTO is the artistic director of MACRO – Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome.*