



## Dancing to the Historical Record

by Gillian Jakab

**David Gordon: LIVE ARCHIVEOGRAPHY**  
**Lumberyard In The City Festival At The**  
**Kitchen**  
**June 1–3, 2017**

**An Evening with Simone Forti, K.J. Holmes, and Daniel Lepkoff**  
**Cathy Weis Projects' Sundays on Broadway**  
**June 4, 2017**

The function of an archive is curiously enigmatic when it comes to dance. As an embodied practice, existing within time and space, dance is naturally passed on through lineages of dancers. It is the somatic version of an oral tradition. There is a human archive, in a sense, that facilitates the conservation of dance—an idea explored by dance works such as Jennifer Monson's *Live Dancing Archive* (2013). Yet to give an archive life beyond the participants in the flow of the somatic tradition, the accouterments of traditional art exhibitions and catalogues are needed. The artistic movement and moment of postmodern dance and the Judson Dance Theater collective has captured the imaginations of generations of dance scholars; as time goes on, many will surely continue to reach to these historical materials. As art does not happen in a void—especially with a genre of dance committed to breaking down the barriers of art and life—the puzzle pieces of personal history, performance records and reviews, popular culture, and sociopolitical events all contribute to the contextual conservation of a choreographer's work.

How wonderful, then, that on separate evenings during the first weekend of June, two luminaries of postmodern dance—Simone Forti and David Gordon—stepped off the pages of Sally Banes's *Terpsichore in Sneakers* (1980), a book I've recently re-visited, and invited me to hang out. Well, that's what it felt like—first at Gordon's *Live Archivography* at The Kitchen, and then at *An Evening with Simone Forti*, K.J. Holmes, and Daniel Lepkoff at Cathy Weis's Sundays on Broadway series, held in her SoHo loft. The two venerated choreographers brought me back in time and revealed some layers beneath their public personas—all while maintaining a playful rapport with the younger, and not-so-much-younger, dance community that seemed happily to dominate the audiences.

Both performances were held in relation to respective exhibitions at the New York Public Library's performing arts branch: *DAVID GORDON: ARCHIVEOGRAPHY—Under Construction* from December 2016 to April 2017, and *Radical Bodies: Anna Halprin, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer in California and New York, 1955–1972* on view now until September. Both performances included audience Q&As and intergenerational casts. Both performances included video footage and personal anecdotes. And both performances were as inviting as they were compelling.

Just as Forti and Gordon were among the pioneers that questioned the nature of concert dance—broadening the definition of what constitutes dance and where it could be performed—so too do they question the nature of the archive. “Extending the life of the archive into performances is a way of working against the idea of an archive being this stifling, over determining thing,” Gordon said in a conversation recorded by Alex Jovanovich in *Artforum*.<sup>1</sup> Gordon continues in the conversation to reveal that it was, in fact, Forti who initially turned him on to the potential significance of personal and creative documentation when, many decades ago, she one day took a pad out to record notes of a conversation she had at Judson for future reference.

Gordon's *Live Archiveography* is more intentionally autobiographical as a self-directed, and fully-devised, conceptual piece than the *Sundays on Broadway's Evening with Simone Forti*, which along with video and live performances by Forti, presented improvised works by K.J. Holmes and Daniel Lepkoff. In *Live Archiveography*, British-born dancer and actress Valda Setterfield, Gordon's wife and longtime artistic partner, is both a performer within, and a subject of, the piece. She moves on the stage, flamboyant and poised, along with some younger but



Wendy Perron, K.J. Holmes, Simone Forti, and Daniel Lepkoff. (Photo credit: Richard Termine)

veteran dancers from Gordon's Pick Up Performance Co(s), Karen Graham and Scott Cunningham, and dancers from Diana Byer's New York Theatre Ballet Company: Elena Zahlman, Carmella Lauer, Amanda Treiber, and Joshua Andino-Nieto. Through their physical presences—Gordon sitting behind a table facing the stage and Setterfield performing in the work—as well as live storytelling, voice-overs, and projected text and images, the audience is taken through the intimacies of Setterfield and Gordon's marriage as it weaves into their lives' work. A rotating collage of famous couples in dance and theater history is projected on the screens behind the dancers; the imagery brings to the fore the significance of coupledness in showbiz—from Hollywood to postmodern performance. What counts as a couple; who can perform a duet? Dancers manipulate the minimalist metal frames on stage and the material of Gordon's life fills them in. In the spirit of examination, a dancer playfully asks: "Is a stage manager and a frame a duet? Bogart and cigarette?"

Gordon makes use of historic footage from his archive to put dances of the past in conversation with the present. Dancers perform the same work as their filmed counterparts on screens behind, following the same basic steps with small variations. The layering of time and medium illuminate the elements that endure and those that are reinterpreted as the ever-growing distance between the past and present is bridged by the filmed and live dancing bodies.

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The following Sunday Valda Setterfield sits behind me on the cozy couches of the WeisAcres loft as we prepare for an evening with Simone Forti. The loft was once owned and inhabited by Forti and holds in its walls the ghosts of many decades of performance history in the neighborhood's forgotten bohemia. As people walk in, chat, and find a spot to sit, Daniel Lepkoff is performing a warm-up, rolling his back on the floor, and getting into his body. His movements grow and stretch as he performs, making articulate use of the head, and grooving with bemused detachment to short clips of music as if someone is changing the radio station. In dancer K.J. Holmes's improvisation, she shares that one of the first times she saw Simone perform, she had walked in to the room and Simone was running. Everyone, including K.J., thought they were late, but K.J. reminisced: "she was just warming up the space and warming us up." In both the evenings of dance that weekend, the dancers perform staged warm-ups, smudging the boundaries of where dance begins and ends and engaging the audience—warming us up—to be part of the entire process.

Forti performs both live and in film. A video entitled *A Free Consultation* (2016) portrays Forti army-crawling, slithering through icy terrain listening to a hand-held radio, and looking out to the water. The setting feels post-apocalyptic; the commercial ads from the radio—one offering the titular "free consultation" for a dubious medical service—are suddenly absurd against the whistling wind and crunching rocks. When Forti walks to the floor to perform one of her *News Animations*, her presence is more fragile, her tremors visible, but her enduring strength is palpable; she wraps the room in her improvisation of movement and storytelling. She is a sorceress of transfiguration, turning her black jacket into a cave of fish, a snake, an oil pipeline. She muses on shared territory, confidence, and the etymology of the word subpoena, concluding that it must refer to penises from above. The whimsical wit and direct addresses meld into her signature stream-of-consciousness: the verbal elocution of the mind and the kinetic complement in the body.

The evening wrapped up with a conversation between Forti, Holmes, and Lepkoff moderated by Wendy Perron. Perron spent the past three years collaborating with Ninotchka D. Bennahum and Bruce Robertson to curate and research the exhibition *Radical Bodies* and prompted the dancers to fill in and respond to the framework of the exhibition's archival material. Their intersecting lives fleshed out the story of postmodern dance and its legacy; however, Forti's positioning in her work, her penchant for the associative, the undetermined, the natural, challenge conventional linear or logical history. She takes hold of the archival mass built around the figure of Simone Forti and sets it in motion.

## Notes

1. Alex Jovanovich, "David Gordon," *Artforum*, May 30, 2017.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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Karen Graham and Scott Cunningham. (Photo Credit: Paula Court)