

Choreographing Exhibitions

On 29 July 2026 the postmodern choreographer and movement artist Simone Forti died aged 91. Although Forti's early life was closely connected to artistic activity, dance was a relatively small component of her childhood. It was after relocating to San Francisco in 1955, where she encountered Anna Halprin's influential improvisational movement practice that Forti's focus shifted. That meeting became formative: over the next four years, Forti studied with Halprin, performed in her work, and developed a close creative relationship that helped shape her own approach to movement.

The groundbreaking work of Forti, Halprin and, perhaps most importantly for me, Trisha Brown, became my fascination during the early days of my dance training, and now, many years later hearing of Forti's passing started me thinking about how my dance training has impacted my exhibition-making. Just at that moment, and by extraordinary coincidence, curator-colleagues in Singapore announced an upcoming experimental movement piece choreographed in response to *The Alchemical Interludes*—a group exhibition curated by artist and educator Hazel Lim.

Artists have always been making/curating exhibitions—for themselves, with and for others. However, very intentional artist-curated projects, such as *The Alchemical Interludes*, reflect a shift that has become increasingly apparent over recent years in the contemporary art world—with artists approaching exhibition-making as another form of art-making practice in itself.

When artists curate often the exhibition becomes a medium: a way of thinking through relationships between works, disparate bodies and types of work, histories, architecture and audience. Rather than selecting and arranging artworks around a theme, a provocation or series of questions for example, the artist-curator seems to be creating situations—in which meaning emerges through proximity, sequence, atmosphere and the visitor's lived encounters in the space. As well as the visual artists included in the project Lim collaborated with former opera singer turned songwriter and music producer JJ KEAT and independent dance artist Steph Lee, working across site-specific, durational performances and interdisciplinary installation.

Although I didn't get to see the live performances, video documentation of Lee struck me as reminiscent of the work of Forti, Halprin and Brown. While *The Alchemical Interludes* project was daring in many ways, in its engagement with movement it builds on decades of visual art-movement-dance experimentation and collaboration.

When I began my formal dance training at Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in London in the late 1980s, I never imagined that decades later I would be curating exhibitions in museums. At the time, choreography for me meant physical bodies, movement, rhythm, duration and the relationship between performers and audiences. Curating seemed to belong to a completely different world: objects, interpretation, display and architecture. Only much later did I realise that these practices share more than I had initially understood. It was this realisation that led me to art school and then on to curatorial practice.

The recent interest in “the exhibition as choreography” suggests that exhibitions are no longer thought of as static arrangements of objects, but as experiences unfolding through time. Visitors move. They position themselves in relation to artworks, and other bodies in space.

Yet I wonder whether the comparison sometimes risks becoming too metaphorical. A choreographer does not simply arrange bodies in space; they compose relationships across time. Movement is only one element. Equally important are stillness, rhythm, sequencing, absence and transition. I have often found myself instinctively ‘reading’ a curatorial hang from the perspective of rhythm (or maybe some sort of visual rhythm). What is the beat or pulse of the way my eyes are drawn around the space from this artwork to the next? I even encourage the early career curator in my teams to test out the rhythm of their proposed hang, and whether it feels natural, or comfortable... or do they *want* it to feel awkward for a reason?

... painting, painting... pause... photo/photo/photo/photo... obbbbject—pause... etc

These are precisely the qualities that I have found myself thinking about when developing various exhibitions over the past twenty-five years—not because I consciously borrowed from dance, but because dance had already shaped how I understood space, experience it and create experiences in it.

Perhaps this is why I have often approached exhibitions less as collections of objects but more like a journey. The placement of a single work can change the emotional register of the room that follows. A narrow corridor can function like a pause between movements. A dramatic reveal only works because something has been deliberately withheld. Visitors rarely experience exhibitions in the order we imagine, yet good exhibition design creates conditions in which multiple pathways still produce coherent experiences. I’ve written before on how lighting can affect the emotional experience and pacing of a visitor journey.

Unlike theatre exhibitions refuse complete control. Every visitor becomes their own performer, composing an individual choreography through the space. The simple fact that when entering, or occupying a gallery, museum or artspace, whether aware, or unaware, everyone is taking on the role of “viewer” while simultaneously navigating the space, objects and other people. So no matter how carefully curators establish a movement score; audiences perform it differently all the time.

This is where I think museums still have much to learn from dance. Not because exhibitions should imitate performance, but because thinking choreographically encourages us to consider exhibitions as temporal, embodied and relational experiences rather than simply visual ones.

Looking back, I realise that my years as a dancer influenced my curatorial practice far more than I recognise. The vocabulary may have changed—from movement phrases to exhibition narratives—but the underlying questions remain remarkably similar. How do we guide attention? How do we create dynamic experiences and rhythm? When should

we surprise, when should we allow for a pause or rest, and how do we leave space for audiences to complete the work themselves?

Perhaps exhibitions have always been choreographies. We are only just finding the language, or perhaps appropriating the language needed to describe them.



Clockwise from top left:

The Alchemical Interludes 2026 installation
shot at SupperHouse, Singapore

Artist-curator Hazel Lim

Music Producer JJ KEAT

Steph Lee performance documentation from
Resonance, a response to *in:morse – Titanium White* by JJ KEAT

Photos: Ajamsali



Orchestral Manoeuvres:
See Sound. Be Sound. Feel Sound

ArtScience Museum
28 Aug 202—12 Jan 2022

A graphical representation
of visitor journey as
choreography

