

40+ Years of dance, intermedia, and empowerment

The magic of *Hidden Forest* and *The Improvisational Dance Score Book*

by Thomas Körtvélyessy

The initiative for this article comes from my trip to New York City in 2007, where I was a grant-supported artist-in-residence at the Kinetic Awareness® Center and participated in *Hidden Forest*, the latest work of American intermedia artist, choreographer, filmmaker, and body-work originator Elaine Summers, performed at the Lincoln Center Out-of-Doors Festival.¹ At the end of this residence I graduated as a Certified Teacher of her movement technique Kinetic Awareness®.

My involvement with Elaine Summers started in 1993 when I wrote a paper as part of my study at Codarts (then Rotterdamse Dansacademie), Rotterdam, finished in 1994. The subject was dance history and I had decided to write about Summers as one of the lesser known members of the original workshop that later would be called Judson Dance Theater. In 1995 I became chief-editor for *The Elaine Summers Improvisational Dance Score Book For Fun & Performance*, a long-term project towards a retrospective book of her career of over 40 years, to be published in the near future, in accompaniment of establishing of her archives at the Jerome Robbins Dance Foundation at Lincoln Center Public Library. The book is planned to consist of a collection of several of her dance scores for renewed reproduction as well as archival material of the original performances, including a Who is Who of dancers, composers, and visual artists, as well as other collaborators who have worked with Summers for over the last 40+ years of her career.

By writing this article I would like to raise more awareness of the work of Summers in the Netherlands. I would also like to discuss where I see the stimulating potential of this oeuvre for the development of contemporary dance, within and outside of the traditional theatre, after a brief overview of her career, an example of a dance score and my account of *Hidden Forest*.

Elaine Summers: intermedia and Kinetic Awareness®

Summers originally studied to be a fine arts teacher in Boston, before she decided to fully pursue a career in dance and moved to New York City in the 1950s. She created a central preparative body of her main work during her involvement as an original member of the by now legendary Judson Dance Theater in New York City in the period of 1962-1964. This group met weekly after a seminal workshop by Cunningham pianist Robert Ellis Dunn and his wife Judith Dunn in 1960-61, continuing as an ongoing group until 1964 before a new generation of dancers joined in 1965 and the members of the original group gradually left, pursuing individual careers.

¹ Grateful acknowledgements for making this trip possible financially go to: the Kinetic Awareness® Center, Lincoln Center-Out-of-Doors. and fellow artist Arturo Vidich and his family, especially Linda Stein and Paul Vidich.

Daily movements in dance performance ('pedestrian') and chance-created choreographic structures were widely researched interests of many choreographers in this group, which also included composers, filmmakers, and visual artists. Next to this reductionist, minimal direction, there were also the burlesque and theatrical works of e.g. musical composer John Herbert McDowell, or choreographers Aileen Passloff and Fred Herko, or the happening-like dances created by a.o. Al Hansen and Carolee Schneeman. However these latter directions were usually less noticed over the years.²

Summers' interests at Judson were in exploring the 'chance method' as taught by the Dunns, following composer John Cage, and combining dance with other disciplines, especially film-projection in live-performance.³ She also initiated four of the sixteen original Judson concerts⁴, a single concert in Woodstock, NY and a series of three concerts held at the Gramercy Arts Theater, where her own piece, *Country Houses*, used the entire theatre space for the performance and included speaking and drama-references. During these concerts she already invited and presented music and independent film works by other artists as concert items themselves.

Parallel to working as a choreographer with the Judson group, Summers developed her specific movement discipline Kinetic Awareness®. This approach lets the practitioner explore their unique movement possibilities through sensory-based understanding of and experimentation with their individual anatomy and personal choices of movement, objectified through the presence of a guiding teacher as well as scientific understanding of general human anatomy, physiology, and kinesiology. The study is structured along five basic phases: articulation, coordination/total body systems, speed levels, tension levels, and finally performance/outward communication with another mover. Especially during the first two phases, hollow rubber balls of different sizes, placed underneath joints and body-parts, enable slow, gentle, and multidirectional articulation of each body part by itself (first phase), or in combination with each other (second phase). Early use of this method was made in Summers' piece *Dance for Carola* in 1963 in which she moved from standing to squatting and back in fifteen minutes of slow, even motion.⁵

² The ones to get famous have been the 'reductionists': Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs.

³ This led to a very first manifestation during the very first Concert of Dance in 1961 at the Judson Memorial Church. The Concert started with the chance-made film *Overture* by Summers, in collaboration with Eugene Freedman, and Stan Vanderbeek. According to Summers own verbal account she jumped out into the projection unrehearsed and danced in it. Nobody seemed to notice it and I have found no further mention of this incident in other literature. However historian Sally Banes mentions in her book *Democracy's Body* that as the film blended out, the next two simultaneous dances of the concert – *Narrative* and *Timepiece*, both by choreographer Ruth Emerson - already had started while the film ended, so that there was a temporary blend of film-projection and live performance. Other than that, choreographer Beverly Schmidt performed a piece mixing film-projection and live-dance in collaboration with Robert Blossom which she also showed at Judson Concert No. 10 presented at the Gramercy Arts Theater-series and organized by Summers. It is to be noted that for this piece Robert Blossom had intended his 'filmstage' in which Schmidt would dance to live-music, to separate vision and sound for the audience.

⁴ As counted by Banes.

⁵ Other students of Kinetic Awareness® were Trisha Brown, Merian Soto, Dana Reitz, and members of The Wooster Group.

After a successful all-evening presentation of her pioneering mixed-media piece *Fantastic Gardens* in 1964 Summers eventually left Judson and continued to show her work in New York City, nationally and internationally through the Elaine Summers Dance and Film Company, backed by the not-for-profit organisation Experimental Intermedia Foundation which she founded in 1968. This career was made possible by grants from a.o. the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts and collaboration by numerous artists and professionals from many fields.

Summers' body of work was often performed in galleries and public spaces, combining film and later also video-projection to create an overall-environment in which the witnessing public could participate in the choreography, by simply changing their position from which to experience the dance. *Energy Changes*, the quintessential dance resulting from Kinetic Awareness®, was performed in an intermedia-version in 1973 at the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (MOMA), with the dancers and musicians arranged in several areas of the garden, partly connected for the audience through live-video installed by Davidson Gigliotti.⁶ *Illuminated Workingman* (1975) combined corporate sponsorship, construction work, dance workshops open to the public, and large-scale projections in public space, but also included the outdoors participatory dance *Invitation to Secret Dancers*.⁷ In 1980 Summers presented *Crow's Nest at the* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, with dancers appearing and disappearing in a four-sided installation of film showing ocean, birch-forest, desert, and desert-flowers, to the original music of composer Pauline Oliveros.⁸ 1984 saw the presentation of *Skydance/Skytime*, again at the Guggenheim Museum, with large-scale air sculptures by Otto Piene.

Summers refers to this kind of work as 'intermedia' where such different elements as dance, music, film, and other media blend together to create a new medium, instead of remaining separate layers that only form coincidental congruences (as referred to in the term 'multi-media').

Additionally, in 1983 she organized the festival *Filmdance 1890's-1983* with choreographer and cinematographer Amy Greenfield as co-curator. In 1987 the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) held a One-Woman retrospective of her work. In 1995 Summers also started a global project using the internet <http://www.skytime.org>. Today Elaine Summers continues to work as a freelance-choreographer, intermedia-artist, body-work researcher and teacher of Kinetic Awareness® in New York City and the USA.

Dance: a dialogue

Many dances of Elaine Summers are tools of continuous and ongoing dialogue between choreographer, interpreter and audience, be they verbal, on the kinetic, or at times at the vocal level of perception. As she expanded her view of dance from the traditionally given frame of the dance studio and the theater-stage to include every possible kind of scene, Summers also expanded her options as a choreographer.⁹ Partly by following her fine-arts training before fully committing herself to dance and as part of working at Judson, she capitalized on making

⁶ Pioneer of early uses of video-art starting at the end of the 1960s.

⁷ Most recently performed at Solar House 1, New York City, May 2005. This dance was included in my own series *con.sens.us* in the Netherlands in 2004.

⁸ Performed again as a duet at the 2005 Cyberarts Festival in Boston.

⁹ Interview with Susan K. Berman, Ms. Magazine 1975.

dance scores for realizing her choreography. She describes a dance score as 'a structure for improvisation, a non-competitive game plan designed for performers of varying skill, always with the intention that it will be a challenge and exciting to perform and watch.' (Summers, 1995)

Although she insists on the freedom of the artist to do 'anything' and has done this extensively in her work, many of her dances are created from generative, very often verbal instructions, sometimes written on paper and communicated to the dancer by the choreographer. The dancers then research their own interpretations and options, under the direction of the choreographer during the rehearsal. In some dances this individual process is the live-event, this time witnessed by the audience instead of only the choreographer.¹⁰

Rather than prescribing a pre-designed sequence of specific body-shapes that define movement, set in a certain rhythm in space, Summers specifies rules for possible actions and gives options to successfully perform the resulting dance. In this way she uses the underlying layer of movement that creates possible shapes in space and time.

Some dances explore physically challenging themes like falling and therefore require professionally experienced interpreters for a satisfying realisation which will keep the interpreter from overtaxing their own abilities, but some are specially choreographed to be danced successfully by anyone who would like to give it a try.

Kinetic variations: *Walking Dance for Any Number* (1968)¹¹

As an example of Summers' work I'd like to discuss her *Walking Dance for Any Number* from 1968, which can be performed with a complementary installation of four-film projectors where each projector casts a different edit of 16mm walking-footage shot by Summers as one of the first projects of her then revolutionary Experimental Intermedia Foundation.¹² With permission I've taught and performed this dance, lastly during a realisation of my own project *con.sens.us* in 2004.¹³

When Summers made this dance in 1968 she was interested in the basic elements of dance and film which she found to be black and white film, no sound, and walking as the basic step of any dance. The resulting score can make the interpreter very aware of how one can walk, and because of the simplicity of the structure, challenge them to invent all sorts of interesting variations by themselves.

The dance consists of a single instruction to enter/move through the space in any kind of walk repeated exactly from the hip down, for as long as the individual two to ten performers are interested in maintaining it. Once a certain kind of walk is done, it must be maintained as exactly as possible in all of its aspects: rhythm, length of steps, shift of weight etc. When the dancer wishes to change into another kind of walk s/he must stop the ongoing walk in mid-step, extend this position until losing balance, and then let the re-capturing of their balance determine the new kind of walking. Jumps, leaps, turns, and especially

¹⁰ Elaine Summers, during a workshop at Peekamoose Retreat, NY, 1997.

¹¹ The evaluation brought forth in this part is backed from teaching this score a.o. at the HAVO voor muziek en dans Rotterdam (1997) Inclusion into 'con.sens.us / Invitation to Secret Dancers' a performance series conducted in (2004) in Arnhem and Rotterdam, and most recently teaching a workshop of the Dance Score Book at ARCHITEXTURE by Meredith Nadler and Steve Strasser, produced by Dance Palace, Luxemburg Cultural Capital (2007).

¹² continued today by composer Phill Nibblock as a music-oriented not-for-profit organisation.

¹³ for more references see also <http://con-sens-us.net> and *Invitation to Secret Dancers*.

falls will fail the dance. However any kind of movements from the hip up are allowed, as well as interacting with other dancers, from copying movements to hindering others on their path, pile-ups, etc., all as long as one doesn't fall and/or causes anyone else to fall.

Depending on the kind of performers, the rules can greatly interfere with the free-flow of the performers' dance, by calling attention to aspects of the specific kind of walk they do, making them more aware of what they are doing and how. Doing the change-rule described above brings this awareness to a very kinetic and kinesthetic level once again, because in order to successfully stop in mid-step it is necessary to realistically anticipate the amount of tension and speed needed to exactly get to stop in this position, without shifting or fudging the feet to retain balance, an express instruction in the dance score. The element of extending a position into losing balance and designing the next kind of walk from regaining it, brings the interpreting performer into a situation where for a moment they lose a certain amount of their control and are not necessarily concerned with pre-conceiving their next walk, but with how to regain balance from the particular extension.

For a professional dancer this dance score offers a myriad of challenges to try out. For the non-professional it is a safe way to try out 'funny walks' and still have a very kinetic experience happen, also finding many ways to improvise in the upper part of their body, in itself again a challenge to body-coordination ability, plus interaction with other dancers.

Summers often repeated when teaching that one ingredient of the overall excitement from watching such a dance score realized is that for the performance it is completely unknown to choreographer, audience and interpreter (!) what they are going to do (next) and how.

This brings the experience of the dance performance to the excitingness of a football-match: there are overall rules on a basic level, known to both performers and public, but the exact moments of what happens, and how, are the focus of interest that keep all participants engaged, open to the ongoing course of chance, following the inventive realization by the performers, who are called to maintain an alertness that sharpens the senses and creates a state of presence that can invite and even support the audience to do the same.¹⁴ Because of the extreme simplicity of the choreographic score, all attention can be further directed to the moment of *how* an interpreter will perform this dance, freeing everybody's attention to more directly sensory experience.

On the level of film, this experience gets an additional dimension, by optionally adding the four different edits of the walking dance recorded on 16mm black and white silent film. By wearing all-white costumes the dancers then become parts of the canvas moving in space with an ongoing investigation of how one can walk.

¹⁴ One could argue that a similar interest fuels people who choose to watch the same classical repertoire time after time, which enables them to comment on how the known forms were done.

Imagery and Presence/Social Solitude: *Hidden Forest* (2007)

In 2007 Summers was commissioned by Lincoln-Center Out-of-Doors in New York City to produce a new intermedia work as part of the performance series *Summer of Love: Celebrating the Spirit of the 1960s*. In her archives Summers had one of only two remaining video-registrations of dance performances that happened in the original fountain-area (North Plaza) of the Lincoln Center complex. This was a result of filming footage from the production of her 1986 piece *Flowing Rock – Still Waters* with video-recordings by Davidson Gigliotti and James Byrne.¹⁵

Hidden Forrest was performed at the South Plaza of Lincoln Center at Damrosch Park, an area of mostly equally placed trees in squares, with a pebble-cemented ground in between and benches arranged along the edges of the area. The performance took place in the evening in near-darkness, with six video-beamers projecting three different video-edits of the original material onto the trees and the ground, with the effect that the dancers from 1986 would float by as ghosts from the past. Apart from these projections there were no other light sources, except that all dancers wore very individual costumes made of white, cream-coloured, pearly, or silver fabrics. The piece was realized by eight dancers about sixteen musicians, three composers, two visual artists, and projectionists and technicians¹⁶.

The theme was narrative-inspired by two literary works, Dante's quote 'in the midst of the journey of life I came upon a dark forest, where the path was lost', and Italo Calvino's text *Invisible Cities*. The score for the dancers explored a very different area of dance than *Walking Dance For Any Number*. We were instructed to move as eight soloists in a flurry, light and quick quality through the space. Each dancer had her/his own beginning and ending points. We were given a mental image of night animals in the forest, each being completely involved in its own existence and not at all concerned about anything else. When meeting each other by chance we could quickly look at each other, freeze, run away, chase each other, etc. all determined live in real-time on the moment of occurrence.

Every individual dancer had also rehearsed with Summers separately to determine her or his specific qualities for their solo. She used each dancer's individual abilities to determine actions and qualities that she would see as fitting into her vision of what she wanted to happen as a total experience. Some dancers were professionals (a.o. Joshua Bisset and Laura Quattrocchi of SHUA group, New Jersey), others were movement-related professionals (e.g. performance artist Jessica Higgins or dance-therapist Meg Chang ADTR who assisted Elaine Summers, together with Dr. Rebecca M. Loukes, Lecturer in Performance Practice at the University of Exeter, UK) or simply long-time experienced dancers. The diverse and numerous composers and musicians were placed along the edges of the space and were equally given the central score for all of us, which divided the dance into three sections, plus a preceding and an ending part, with the video-projection as a guide-track for all.

¹⁵ Byrne also videographed the legendary recording of Trisha Brown's *Set and Reset Version 1* in 1985.

¹⁶ For a complete list of the cast go to http://www.elainesummersdance.com/hidden_forrest.html.

Here the attention was no longer on how to execute a specific sort of movement, but how eight individual dancers, plus musicians, and performers could realize a specific state together, each in her or his own way and with their own challenges, supervised by the choreographer/artistic director.

Before coming to New York I had carefully prepared imagery and drawings of my own interpretation of the two literary quotes, partly also connected to personal movement sequences and elements. But when rehearsing with Summers she decided that my only directive of attention should be on moving without knowing what I'd do next, to avoid presenting myself to the public in a pre-conceived manner. To help this state I was instructed to move very rapidly, with sudden outbursts and covering as much space as possible.

Having to explore an area outside of my theatrical-presentational comfort-zone turned out to be a task that was equally shared by other dancers of the crew, but not all of them. However, for all of us it demanded a thorough preparation of what one's own body was capable of, in this case also helped by long-term study of Kinetic Awareness®.

During the rehearsals, but especially during performing I did get an exceptional feeling of loneliness and insecurity of existence from performing the score. This animal state was sharpened by the near-darkness, only occasionally seeing my fellow-dancers flurr past by me, hardly seeing the projections in the trees, hearing the several sounds of acoustic music created by the musicians. It also helped me to train an awareness of being open to the notion that there would always be more to sense and realize than what I actually consciously could perceive, and that at any time I could be called upon to let go of what I knew and engage myself with this unknown area.

The reception of this piece was very positive. The New York Times mentioned the performance in a separate article by Jennifer Dunning, covering the evening, which I was told would never happen with one-time performances. Henry Baumgartner wrote in his review at the NY Theater Wire: 'I couldn't help but wonder how many younger choreographers would be able, or would dare, to put on a performance so barely perceptible, yet of such magical subtlety?'

Concluding discussion: relevance to issues of (European derived) (theatre-)dance today

Although the two presented dances may seem almost contradictory to each other in terms of theme and overall structure, the basic premise of providing tools for any interested and able individual to explore her or his individual abilities and desires remains at the heart of both dances, while both contain vigorous elements of challenge as well.

In my conclusion, this focus and concern with the individual dancer of any kind, lastly is an ethical choice: whether one actively believes in the individual ability to develop and live one's life responsibly and sustainably, with the ability of changing mind-sets when challenged by the factual situation and with an interest in ongoing development, or whether the co-functioning of free individuals is put away as merely utopian, never to be realized to a level of satisfactory collaboration and survival.

Generative works like that of Summers, enable us to realise a continuous present at each moment, simply by their intention to never allow us to fall back into already known structures, be that by challenging us through a dance score, or by letting us witness the live-adventure of what a dancer is going to do next independently of what we think will happen.

The challenge for the performer is to always be ready to expand already known patterns (including personal movement vocabulary) into an area that is still unknown and interesting. Simply performing within one's own 'repertoire', repeats the setup of the 'through-composed'¹⁷ steady-state performance, simply done in a different style and with a different vocabulary, completely fails this intention. No single form can therefore guarantee this openness in itself, it has to be understood in its specific qualities to be brought to life according to its own design.¹⁸

This challenge is helped by a body-oriented approach like Kinetic Awareness® where the possibilities of what a body is technically desired to do for perceived mastery, solely depend on the decisions and abilities of the individual practitioner, not a pre-defined style or vocabulary. A healthy bodymind that is awakened to explore, will be unlikely to stop for too long at a single way of doing anything, and have a stronger base for trying out new options.

By providing a framework and especially tools with which we can investigate into our real-time options, in this case as movers/dancers, these dance-scores belong to a tradition that emphasizes response-ability to highest degrees of sophistication. Just like in Kinetic Awareness® this is a long-term process, but endlessly rewarding. On top of all, through experiencing our options it becomes a lot easier to be able to respond to whatever is called-upon, simply because of a vaster amount of very diverse experiences stored in our bodymind-memory.

Currently, many contemporary 'conceptual'-style works often suggest to leave a more traditional kind of dance altogether, presenting 'pedestrian movements', drama, music, and pop-culture movements on stage, talking, actions etc. They are often criticized negatively by a.o. the Dutch national press in not always qualified terms of evaluation.¹⁹ Admittedly, the movement experience presented in these pieces is often very far removed from the mainstream experience of dance, rather creating dances of the spectator's mind moving as the performance is experienced. From a more historically established perspective and esthetic, these pieces indeed do not directly address the issue of the body movement itself and make their relevance questionable. This is certainly true for spectators who have chosen not to investigate more broadly into the developments in dance in the last four decades.

¹⁷ "Durchkomponiert" a German musical terminology meaning all events of a composition have been narrowly pre-designed as to how they are to happen, in order to adequately perform it.

¹⁸ As I concluded in my own Mater Thesis in Open Form Composition, the degree of open or closed parameters is actually irrelevant, as there always remains an area that evades pre-specification.

¹⁹ 'Navel-staring' and '70s stuff [implying: no longer interesting for today]' have often been labels in Dutch quality newspapers, a.o. for work shown during the Springdance Festival, but also for works coming from the tradition instigated by Dutch new dance choreographer Pauline de Groot and the School for New Dance Development.

By concentrating on these seemingly marginal aspects of movement, I see the danger that the general rule of historically established classical ballet and its modernist versions are left untouched and in the worst case are merely replaced by yet another form called 'non-dance', seemingly in a similar way as has been done back in 1961 - and with very similar kind of criticism as happened back then. The big difference is that this time it's done by more mainstream choreographers to greater critical acclaim, if not in the Netherlands, then for sure and maybe somewhat more successfully in continental parts of Europe such as France, Germany, or Belgium.

Elaine Summers operates from a level of understanding dance as a way of using one's own physiological and psychological tension, in a dynamic way that can become very small and subtle, all the way to large and spatial, accessing all possible movement traditions as viable ways to express oneself in movement. Any kind of movement is understood as an energetic happening, where it greatly matters how much impulse is brought into the movement, what thoughts accompany it, etc. The step towards deeper understanding of a specific kind of dance-vocabulary is easily made. From this understanding it becomes easier to follow even more abstract pieces as presented by conceptual dance.

Open-ended works like those of Summers bring us back to the sensory-based sources of theatrical formulae, to more fundamental, rather than fundamentalist insights for successful dealings with dance, be they professional theatre dance or any social event and community celebration. They can also intensify the experience of forms of dance which currently may appear as more remote, building a bridge from any body's own experience of movement to the most abstracted.

It is my sincere hope that the heritage from the work of Summers, through the publication and distribution of the *Elaine Summers Improvizational Dance Score Book* and continued performance of her pieces will continue to influence the younger generation of dance professionals, towards a broader, more general and inclusive understanding of what dance can be, one way of the human being to manifest itself in endless possibilities.

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