

Elaine Summers Iowa Blizzard ' 73 - Beyond the single Frame

Contextualization and reflection
by Thomas Körtvélyessy

The work of Elaine Summers invites us to go beyond established categories, or styles. It invites us to go beyond “secure” frames of perception. In fact the very frame is deregulated, no longer holding a “safe”, guided experience, but going beyond. As a result, when first encountering her work, it is often very easy to feel lost, or assume that, because there is no fulfillment of already-learned and expected patterns of perception, that seemingly “nothing is happening”. But this is just a beginning phase. With ongoing open engagement, it quickly becomes clear that in fact a whole lot is happening, even if it is not possible to notice everything at the same time or to always consciously make sense of it. Perception is liberated to flow where it will, guiding the way in the moment.

This strategy is already manifested itself in what became the opening of the very first Judson Dance Theater Concert #1, *Ouverture* (1962) a collaboration with Summers' film-making mentor Gene Friedman and fellow-Judson member, composer and choreographer John Herbert McDowell. The three got together on Elaine's initiative to create a chance-movie, using randomly picked telephone numbers from the local telephone book to combine film-footage that had been sorted according to their length, not their content. As the doors to the concert space opened, the audience were made to enter the performance space through the film projection, creating what Elaine Summers called intermedia, which was a central exploration all her life: the intentional merging of various media that result in a “third”, new entity. In the performance of *Ouverture*, the entering audience became dancers, and what would otherwise have remained a conventional film-projection of a non-conventional film, merged with the entering bodies, and created an experience of movement beyond either “just” dance or “just” film. Unnoticed by anyone, at some point Elaine Summers also got up and danced in this projection¹. Not even acclaimed Judson-historian Sally Banes mentioned this detail. Apparently, it was too new, there was too much else going on. And, for most people there was no expectation of anyone dancing within a film-projection, and so it couldn't be “seen”. It is hard to notice something for which there is no pre-conceived pattern of expectation, no precedent.

Dance for Carola (1963) reversed the entire situation: the performance consisted of a solo, danced by Elaine Summers, and consisted of one single movement, from standing to squatting and back, taking ca. 10 minutes, at that time an unheard of and unseen experience of extremely slow movement. No special lights, no music, no specific costume. The dance coincided with Butoh performances² and manifested the the somatic practice Kinetic Awareness®, a training originated by Elaine Summers from working with somatic movement teachers Carola Speads and Charlotte Selver, who had both been students of Elsa Gindler in Berlin and had escaped Nazi-Germany to the USA. As a dance technique Kinetic Awareness® defies both imitation and pre-set exercise but also expectations of time and timing, and instead invites the practitioner to take what can become long periods of time to openly listen and engage with one's own body and perception, entering a state in the beginning between resting and incrementally minimal movements. This sensorially and exploratory perception of the moving self remains the guideline throughout the practice, eventually leading to re-examining the most complex coordination of articulation, dynamics, and interaction that the dancer can possibly do at any moment. Any single style is -again- bypassed and becomes optional: It is the kinetic expression of the dancer in the moment that counts. In *Dance for Carola*, time and representation are replaced with kinesthetics.

1 Personal conversations with Elaine Summers, 2007

2 Related artists Eiko and Koma, as well as Min Tanaka were in ongoing contact with Elaine Summers, with Min Tanaka performing in a version of her intermedia evening *Solitary Geography* in 1983 at the Performance Garage.

A third preceding piece was *Dance for Lots of People*, also presented at Judson Church, in 1963. Inspired by a Japanese anti-war film, *Ugetsu Monogatari* by Kenji Mizoguchi (1953), Elaine Summers worked with 15 dancers of various kinds of training and backgrounds. As a further expansion of then-existing conventions, it is not unimportant to note that this group -as was the case throughout Elaine Summers' artistic career and collaborations- was visibly white-centered but multi-racial, a marked difference from the general segregation that was still prevalent at Judson Dance Theater and the resulting dance-scene at the time. The movements included walking, jumping, lifts, falling, freezing/stillness, 'snaking out'.

Fantastic Gardens became the epochal and pioneering production with which Elaine Summers summed up her work at Judson Dance Theater in 1964, after having initiated 5 of the 16 recognized Concerts of Dance produced by the original group between 1962-1964. This evening mixed live-performance of dance, theater, music, sculpture, and finally a cascade of multiple film-projections which were partly captured by the audience with hand-held mirrors, and redirected to splash and merge with any of the dancers, as well as connecting the entire performance space into one related environment. An important intention of Summers for *Fantastic Gardens* had been to create an event where clearly more happened than what a single individual could consciously see or take in at any one moment. One had to make a choice what to focus on, and when. If one came back another night, one could get an entirely different experience from the same setup.

All of these concerns can be seen back in *Iowa Blizzard '73*. The filmdance was created right at the beginning of Elaine Summers' visit to Iowa University on invitation by Professor Hans Breder (born 1935 in Herford, Germany) to be artist-in-residence at the newly created department, which later was named Department of Intermedia in 1976. The two artist-friends had met a year earlier in New York and discovered their mutual interest in each other's work. Elaine Summers had recently established the Experimental Intermedia Foundation in 1968, and a year later, in 1969 had explored her love of walking and multiple-film projection in *Walking Dance for Any Number*, going back to what she considered the basic step of dance, walking, and the basics of film, black-and-white image, no sound. The performance combined a simultaneous 4-channel film projection of four different edits of the same footage, together with a generative score that instructed the dancers in how they were allowed to walk, change their walk, and interact with each other. White workman-overalls worn by the dancers made them into moving canvases for the film-projections, while their dance was an exploration of the myriads of ways in which one can walk, made into dance.

In the spring of 1973 Elaine Summers was successfully working with her company towards what would become another hallmark-event of her career, the intermedia performance of *Energy Changes*, a dance summing up the Five Phases of Kinetic Awareness®, at the Sculpture Garden of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Upon her arrival in Iowa, the airport had to be closed right afterwards, due to what became the worst blizzard in twenty years. Everything, everywhere was covered in snow. The next day, when Hans Breder asked her what she would like to do, she told him that she had always wanted to create a dance with a large group of people dressed in black, on a large field of snow. With two Arriflex cameras, a camera-crew, and a group of art/intermedia students as dancers, such a field was found.

There was no time to rehearse: Elaine Summers improvised with giving instructions to the dancers as well as to the film-crew, headed by then-student Bill Rowley. The recorded black-and-white film-footage (again no sound) was later assembled by Rowley using super-imposition at the University Lab, which resulted in an especially complex visual experience: for example, the the same footage appears on the upper side of the frame in the original, and in the lower part of the frame a bit smaller and upside down. Or, at times creating a Muybridge-like visual delay effect of dancers leaping and landing with a trail of their in-between image in mid-jump, comparable to Cubist or Futurist techniques, showing movement on the painted canvas simultaneously. The overall white-background of the snow-field and the black/grey clothing of the dancers created endless possibilities.

It is also noteworthy that not only did the resulting filmdance overlay the recorded footage to various effects, but also that the speeds of both movement and film are varying at different times. The rhythms created by the dancers, are sometimes more slow than they were recorded, sometimes faster.

What finally strikes is the kinetic exuberance towards the end: while most of the dancers did not have any specific dance training other than what can be referred to as “pedestrian” i.e. everyday movements, they by no means remain confined to that vocabulary. Instead, in agreement with the goals of Kinetic Awareness® to explore all possibilities of the individual mover from minimum to maximum, *Iowa Blizzard '73* has lots of large jumps and leaps as well as falls, including the close-up of a young male-presenting performer smiling with wide open eyes into the camera, as they happily spin diagonally before letting themselves fall into the snow.

There is clearly no concern to give the audience time to digest, it has to happen on the spot. The sheer amount of visual information can be overwhelming and more than traditionally customary. At the same time it is not impossible to find a way, partly because of repetitions of footage, and because the filmdance is not only black-and-white, excluding color, but also there is no sound to add even more information. There is also a discernible progression from overall-group shots in the beginning to ever more close ups, as well as an ever freer and less confined use of the single camera frame.

To close, a word of caution:

While the outfits and clothing styles of the dancers may evoke European 19th century Romanticism (Summers described the group at one point as “a motley-crew in black”) and while the various kinds of overlays, eventual close-ups and dissections of certain movements may create something resembling cinematic poetry (compare e.g. with *Werckmeister Harmonies* by Hungarian filmmakers Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky, 2000) *Iowa Blizzard '73* eventually has no concern for a single vocabulary, mood, or event. It remains an exploration of what is possible, carefully avoiding poetry in a more traditionally European sense. US-American writer Gertrude Stein maybe found the best expression for the difference, when she stated that in contrast to England, there was no daily life in the United States of America, no continuity, no routine, no (single) custom, but an interest in open space and movement. *Iowa Blizzard '73* was created out of a bold leap forward, improvising along the way and making the best of a situation without too many pre-conceptions, resulting in a wonderful merging of dance and film.

Thomas Körtvélyessy studied and worked with Elaine Summers since 1993 and became an Executor of the Artistic Estate of Elaine Summers in 2015, facilitated by the Kinetic Awareness® Center with thanks to the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York. He has written about her work since 1994, with articles published in the Dutch Journal for Dance Research and a co-written article in *Contact Quarterly*. He is also the artistic director of his own Real Dance Company and a certified Master Teacher of Kinetic Awareness®

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