

# AURORA FORUM AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

## **Real Work with Real People: Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom**

**Art + Invention Speaker Series**

**Presented by Stanford Lively Arts  
and  
The Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts**

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**Mark Gonnerman:** Good evening, and welcome to the Aurora Forum at Stanford University. Tonight we have the pleasure of talking to Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom in a conversation entitled “Real Work with Real People.” This is part of our Art + Invention Series sponsored by Stanford Lively Arts, Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, Stanford’s Office of Public Affairs, and the Office of the President and Provost. We appreciate all of you who are here tonight. If you would like to move into the center, we’re going to be screening work. Many of you are very comfortably positioned, but those in the back may want to move down.

Ann Carlson and Mary Ellen Strom are also part of a series of Aurora Forum conversations that we have been having with creative couples. They work together in a variety of artistic media including choreography, social sculpture, and performance video. Their work grows out of multiple curiosities concerning the relation of humans and other animals, the landscape of the American West, labor’s inscription on the body, consumerism, the woman’s body, evolution, and technology. Their work has been presented in a wide array of contexts including museums, galleries, passenger trains, large-scale video projections onto industrial sites and mountain rock faces, empty retail stores, and horse arenas.

Ann Carlson is perhaps best known for her *Real People* series of dances, works made with and performed by people gathered together by a common profession, activity, or shared relationship. Investigating the impact of labor, class, action, and desire on the body, these works have included lawyers, day laborers, fly-fishermen, doctors, garment workers, basketball players, ballet dancers, nuns, and the custodial staff of an Ivy League college. She is also famous for inter-species dances, where she performs with cows, horses, dogs, cats, fish, and goats. We’ll see some of these dances and talk about them later.

Mary Ellen Strom is a video artist who utilizes media technologies in the service of social critique. Her installations and site-specific projects unearth submerged narratives within

art, history, and cultural discourse. Since 1998, she has been on the faculty in the graduate program at the school of the Museum of Fine Arts, Tufts University, in Boston.

Both Mary Ellen and Ann have received numerous honors, awards, and invitations to residencies. They live in Boston with their three children, and we are so pleased that they have crossed the continent yet again to be in residence here at Stanford this spring where they are teaching a course in the Department of Dance entitled “Camera and Body.” Welcome. Thank you for being here at the Aurora Forum.

Our format tonight will be to have some brief discussion here at the beginning. Then we’ll be projecting works and talking about them. Then we’ll invite you to comment on the work and raise questions and perhaps contribute to brainstorming about work that our guests are creating while they are in residence here at Stanford this spring.

I see that we have some audience members arriving, and they’re capturing the attention, and, I suppose, the imaginations, of our audience members. Ann, since you’ve spent, I think, your entire career as a choreographer and dancer challenging conventional notions of dance, I have to ask you: Are these people dancing?

**Ann Carlson:** What do you think?

It’s a pleasure to be here, I just want to reiterate. And I want to thank Janice Ross, who is the head of the dance program here, as well as people from Lively Arts and Diane Frank and everyone who’s had us – Mark, right now - and for this opportunity for us to talk about the work and talk about our work together, which is a little bit unusual ... unusual to come as a couple. We talk about the work all the time, but that part of it is also interesting.

I come from the position that dance is all conscious movement. So particularly if we can turn our attention to these fabulous young performers coming in to take their seats, four-fifths of them share the position of students here at Stanford (two graduate students and three undergraduate students). The simple act of changing the time of their movement changes, of course, the whole room. It changes what we see, changes how we see them or, perhaps, how I see them. It slows down my view to be able to see what are the signs and signifiers of their clothing. How does it change the way you’re feeling about your own body sitting in the seat right now?

**[Comment from the audience]:** It makes you want to run.

**Carlson:** It makes you want to run. Excellent. I’m sure they want to run, too! Anything else?

**[Inaudible comment from the audience]**

**Carlson:** Well, it was more purposeful, perhaps, or deliberate.

**[Inaudible comment from the audience]**

**Carlson:** I do notice my breath, too, when I watch them.

[Inaudible comment from the audience]

**Carlson:** A sculpture of the human body. The kind of beauty of the absolute minimal, simple gesture. All those things, I think, are called to the fore in this strategy of simply working with time, really, and this basic functional action.

**Gonnerman:** I'm starting to imagine a "Slow Movement Day" on campus. [Laughter]

**[Inaudible comment from the audience]**

**Carlson:** He feels that people who work at the sandwich shop are like that.

**Gonnerman:** But they taste so much better when they're made slowly.

**Carlson:** These individuals will be performing at an event on May 27 here on campus, so come back and see them. I won't say everybody's name now, but they are five amazing and dedicated performers that we can just give a little bit of a hand to right now. [Applause]

**Carlson:** [To dancers]: Thank you.

**Gonnerman:** This is *live* performance, and you've created a lot of performance videos. I think before we show some of your work it would be interesting to talk about what that is and what the experience is of performance video, contrasting it with, say, cinema, for example – going to the theater.

**Mary Ellen Strom:** Right. Well, here we're having an experience that would be a very cinematic experience. We're gathered together witnessing what could be a film or a video projection. Everybody's comfortable and somewhat passive in their seats. The lights will go off and this is not normally how our work is displayed. It's normally displayed in galleries or museums or outdoors in sites or indoors within architecture, and the videos are positioned or placed within the architecture or, for instance, on a building or on a mountain or within a gallery, and it's spatialized as well as the sound, which is spatialized. So this is a very different viewing experience than video installation is. Also, when it's in a more conventional space like a gallery or a museum, one of the things that we're really kind of asking the viewer to do is to be conscious of their gaze, that they're conscious of the way that they're seeing, that they're conscious of the way they're looking and, perhaps, in the best of worlds, they even become a part of the work or they complete the work. But it's much more experiential than what we'll be experiencing right now in this more traditional cinematic way of looking, which is more ocular. And one thing that we're more interested in is having a more body-based

experience of viewing and not just one that's about our eyes and our ears, but is really about our bodies.

**Gonnerman:** So in the installations, it works for people to be moving around and looking from different positions.

**Carlson:** Right. The viewer's body is choreographed through space as well as they are there to make choices about where they want to go. They're not held hostage like you're held hostage right now. I mean, of course you can leave, but in other situations you can decide how much time you want to spend with something or not.

**Gonnerman:** We're very privileged to be able to see five of your pieces tonight – excerpts from them. Let's get into the first one, which is called *Geysers Land*. I believe you grew up in geysers land.

**Strom:** I did. I'm a girl from the geysers land. It takes place on a stretch of land between Livingston and Bozeman, Montana, and this is the Bozeman Pass. In the late nineteenth century, white settlers were not getting through the Bozeman Pass, and the non-treaty Northern Plains Indians were keeping them out, which was a good thing, until the train came by and barreled through that pass. In this, we put the viewer on the train or, you could say, in the position of the colonists or, maybe now, in the position of a tourist. They witness video projections out of windows onto the mountain rock faces. As well, there are performances going on inside the train and outside.

**Carlson:** We rented a train and had a huge projector. You'll see it in the little piece that you're going to see of "Geysers Land" tonight. It happened two times. We also lived and worked over a period of four years with members of the Crow Nation, who also helped us to author the work, which was a very powerful experience. We worked with young members of the Crow Tribe. At the beginning, they were occupying the train before the people who bought tickets came on to the train, so they were in their seats. There were those kinds of physicalized interventions – symbolic interventions. And the people who came were from both coasts. Some people were coming to an art event and some people were coming to ride the tourist train, so it was a wonderfully mixed spectatorship, too. We redid another work, or took another form, of restaging archival photos in the tradition of tableau vivant where the photos were originally taken. So as a rider on the train, you had a program that had all these archival photos from that area, and then you would look out the window when we were passing through on the train and you saw that very photo restaged in stillness with live performance, all dressed in costume in grey-scale. So there was a kind of wonderful living history kind of thing going on, too. Then there were a number of people on the train who were performing, not unlike the students who came in, but with all different kinds of strategies: people who had played poker for twenty years in a town that we passed by on the train played on the train and would stop their movements. So there were very subtle and not-so-subtle performances by real people, regular people, who lived and worked in that area.

**Gonnerman:** It sounds very elaborate, so I think we should see it.

**Strom:** I'm tired thinking about it.

**Carlson:** Tired remembering it!

**Gonnerman:** Renting a train – that, in itself....  
It's a ten-minute film we'll be seeing, so let's settle in.

**Strom:** This is documentation of a one-hour performance.

**Gonnerman:** Let's roll it.

[*Geysers Land* video is shown.] [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** There are so many dimensions to what we've just seen, we could spend the rest of the evening discussing that. I found the ghost bison deeply, deeply moving. I'm wondering what the Crow and Cheyenne collaborators had to say in reaction to this project.

**Strom:** Well, we worked with them for about four years, so they were very much a part of deciding what went in it and what was not in it and also of making sure that this was a narrative that was from multiple perspectives, but that their perspective was the way they wanted it to be. They scripted their parts or made decisions. They wanted to occupy the train or they wanted to be on the train and do a drumming circle on the train and also to kind of do pow-wow dancing before people got on the train. They had many decisions along the way that they wanted to be part of the project. What we do ... we call it a social practice, so it's really engaging with people to be able to tell stories. Their authorship is a very central part of it.

**Carlson:** It's a wonderful, humbling experience coming from a modern-dance choreographic background to have someone on the same night as the whole thing is going to happen say, "We've got an idea. We're going to dance outside." You know, you've been plotting something for four years and then.... But it was really important to make that space – to shift one's own thinking about, "Well, I planned this all out. Well, I'm not going to say anything about that because it's really important to this person. We're going to just do this now." So, it was just, of course, life changing. But it was really artistic practice changing, too, to be more and more open.

**Gonnerman:** We'll have a chance for everybody to ask questions and comment. I want to talk more about the social practice, but also, at this point, mention that you have a very elaborate Web site on this project, [www.geyserland.org](http://www.geyserland.org), where you can explore in many different ways so much that's been revealed by the art you've created.

Let's talk about the social practice. This is a skill – a way of working – that you've developed over time. We're going to shift now to a law firm and an urban setting. Where did this idea come from to work with a law firm and create dance out of it?

**Carlson:** Well, the work you're going to see tonight is a video called *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore*. It existed as a performance work many years ago but we had the idea to redo it, really, as a video work. It began a long time ago with what you mentioned: a kind of idea about who dances, what dance is, who gets to do it ... really interrogating everyday movement and looking at and working with people (in this instance, the iconic man in the power suit). But it has a lot of meanings other than that, too. It's really making work with people together about their day, about the way that labor and their class situation is inscribed on the body. It's more than that, too.

**Strom:** I think that this work has had multiple lives. The men in this video perform it at bar mitzvahs and weddings and graduations, and it has almost become a folk dance for them. But it also lives in museums. Right now, it's up at the Museum of Fine Art in Boston. So when you look at this, know that it's life-size, and that perhaps your body enters into it. Usually when it's up in a museum for a long time, the guards all learn it and do it in front of it. It's the kind of thing that I think is a little easy to mimic. I know my students have many YouTube riffs on it. [Laughter]

**Gonnerman:** How did you find Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore and say, "We want to create a dance and we want you to do it"?

**Carlson:** You don't say all that at once. [Laughter] It starts with, "Can you try this?" "Would you mind trying this again?" "Do you mind trying this just a little bit over here?" "Would you come over for dinner and try that?" "Would you bring a friend?"

**Gonnerman:** Ah-ha. One by one they were recruited in.

**Carlson:** Somewhat like that. Not in a sneaky way.

**Strom:** But I would say that they loved to do it. When we redid it a couple of years ago, they wanted to rehearse it Sunday morning at 6:00 a.m. and then they added Tuesday. We were like, "Guys, you look great." "Well, let's add Tuesday and Thursday night." So I think that there's a sense of play inside of it...

**Carlson:** ... and ownership.

**Strom:** And ownership, yes.

**Gonnerman:** Because it was six years between the first performance and when you made the video, is that right?

**Carlson:** I'm not sure exactly, but yeah.

**Gonnerman:** Let's see it.

[*Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore* video is shown.] [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** Would you like to offer any interpretation of some of the movement, especially at the very start?

**Carlson:** Well, you know, it's not literal. So interpretation of one gesture is... But I could say how I think of that (of course, it's open to any interpretation) ... is that it's self-affirming: I'm here.

**Gonnerman:** Part of the project is to talk about how work is inscribed on the body of the worker.

**Carlson:** All the movement comes from them – from observing their day. All the gesture comes from that. And somewhat, maybe, an illustration of things they have said – not a literal illustration, but it's from watching them and then re-sequencing. Then, Mary Ellen's camera work changes the way you see the gesture, too, so there's that layer as well.

**Strom:** It opens with a lot of symmetry showing the authority of the law firm, and then it's really shot with very traditional 45-degree and 90-degree angles of continuity editing just to kind of reaffirm what you know – your literacy in film, television – to have it be very simplistic but authoritative.

**Gonnerman:** So you watched their movements and then you said, "How about more of that?" You shadowed them, is that right?

**Carlson:** I did.

**Gonnerman:** For how long?

**Carlson:** It was a three-month period.

**Gonnerman:** It must have been a lot of fun.

**Carlson:** Yeah – fun and odd, to me. It was another world. That's the great thing about it.

**Gonnerman:** And this is the whole *Real People* series: moving into other worlds over and over again.

**Carlson:** Exactly.

**Gonnerman:** And how did it affect the way *you* moved when you left the law firm?

**Carlson:** I don't know.

**Gonnerman:** You don't know. But did it?

**Strom:** Well, I always felt like I'm really free. That's a great question. I hadn't really thought about that before. I felt grateful and free when I left there.

**Gonnerman:** There's a companion piece you have called *Four Parallel Lines*.

**Strom:** I think we should just go ahead and watch it.

[*Four Parallel Lines* video is shown.]

**Gonnerman:** So I find this to be a very beautiful meditation on impermanence. Where did it come from? What's the story?

**Strom:** I think it's best to leave it at that. It works in the convention of a loop, so it keeps going and going and going. I always resist overdetermining the meaning of this work. We could tell the back story of how it got produced, but I think sometimes that shuts down the meaning.

**Gonnerman:** I know that in creating that you were quoting from a Walter De Maria piece. And the next piece we'll be looking at takes some cues from Joseph Beuys. And this piece is called *Madame 710*. I wonder if you can talk a bit about Beuys, social sculpture, and the kind of work you're doing.

**Strom:** And we can just say one thing about De Maria too, whom I love. He was going to make this sculpture that was two mile-long lines in the Mohave Desert and they were twelve feet wide and one foot deep. And then he was going to build walls out of pre-stressed concrete that would be twenty feet high. And many people talked him out of it because it would be too invasive for the environment, which many of the earthworks were when we look back at them now. So it was a conversation with that.

**Gonnerman:** But he did end up drawing two parallel chalk lines, for two miles. So there's a very beautiful echo in this piece.

**Strom:** It's definitely a conversation with him. And the work that you're talking about, *Madame 710*, is less of a quotation and more a fantasy collaboration with Joseph Beuys, and I think most visual artists at some point in their practice have a fantasy going on with Mr. Beuys.

**Carlson:** I think a lot of artists have fantasy collaborations with Joseph Beuys. When I first learned of the work, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, where Beuys spent four days in a New York-based gallery with a coyote. They lived there together and he was wrapped in a felt coat, holding a big staff. He also played with the coyote. It was a wild animal in there. There were multiple signifiers and symbols in that work. The coyote urinated on the *Wall Street Journal* and Beuys would cover himself up and the coyote, representing the spirit of the native West, would pull at the felt coat. We were playing with more of a feminist intervention with that work. And there are signifiers in it, but

this next work goes in multiple layers away from that too by looking at industrial agriculture and asking whether we can escape our economic system here in the U.S. and questioning our relationship with the animals that we consume.

**Carlson:** The original work took place in Soho in New York City at the Renee Block Gallery inside of the white cube, so this is also shot inside of the white cube, but instead of a coyote, there's a cow, and her tag is 710.

**Gonnerman:** And her name is Gerrie.

**Carlson:** Her name is Gerrie, yeah.

**Strom:** Shall we show it?

[*Madame 710* video is shown.] [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** Why Mozart?

**Strom:** It's a Teutonic signifier. The West.

**Gonnerman:** Not a place where cows are revered as being sacred.

**Strom:** No.

**Gonnerman:** We can't go without commentary. [Laughter]

**Carlson:** I was thinking while watching it: What if we had these – probably they would have to be very short – but these very short, very movement-based things we did before – drinking milk or putting it in our coffee, or any time that... Not to be overly moralistic at all. Just sort of, what if it was inserted in the way we did things? I mean, some people say grace, I guess, but I was just sort of musing on what if we all did something to acknowledge the animal. Again, maybe we already do sometimes, but that's one thing I was thinking of, but it became ... so many things came out after the fact, too, as we were working with Gerrie: Marie-Antoinette, the village (what is it called ... the mud village), donning a nursemaid look, and getting close to a cow for the day.

**Strom:** I think that just in terms of the process, it was an opportunity to spend three days with an industrially produced cow in a gallery and work to develop to really collaborate with this being and to kind of work in an improvisational structure as well as to get some type of real communication going, which was our intention. Whether one ever succeeds in doing something like that is a whole other thing.

**Carlson:** Well, she didn't run away.

**Strom:** Right. No, she did definitely get comfortable. And it's a three-channel installation, so you're seeing a single channel right now.

**Gonnerman:** Before we open up to audience questions and comments, perhaps you could talk a bit about the history of your inter-species dances.

**Carlson:** When I was in graduate school, I saw a slide of Joseph Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me*, and really that started ... for me, it was a platform for beginning to consider working with animals in live performance as collaborators, and also just really looking into the position animals play in contemporary culture and primarily in kind of domestic life, so I made a work that was a stage-based, concert-based piece called *Animals*.

**Gonnerman:** That Beuys piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me*, was in 1974.

**Strom:** Oh, that was in '74, but I would have seen the slide of it more like in the late '80s, and then began that work. So this work with animals has been going on for me for a long time. I was also looking at animals as pets and also playing with the notion of how animals see each other and what that response is, and can we have the same response when we see a person. So, kind of playing with the human animal always in the context with another animal.

**Gonnerman:** But the challenge of being on-stage with a cat...

**Strom:** You know, I'm very pointedly going at that kind of never-share-a-stage-with-an-animal kind of idea, so I was really kind of playing with that. But in that instance with the cat, it was a kitten, so ...

**Gonnerman:** Relatively easy.

**Strom:** It was easy.

**Gonnerman:** There's one more piece you want to show us.

**Carlson:** Yeah. I thought we would show the single-channel version of the work called *Meadowlark* that we did a year ago with the artist Bently Spang, who is often one of our collaborators. You saw him earlier. He's Northern Cheyenne, and we had the privilege of shooting this on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation with him and his family. It is a six-channel installation, so it is in the round and it moves in the round, so you're seeing a bit of a static version of it.

**Gonnerman:** Let's see it.

[*Meadowlark* video is shown.] [Applause]

**Gonnerman:** I see a reference in this to a Frederic Remington painting of the Cheyenne imitating bison.

**Carlson:** Right. *Indians Simulating Buffalo* is the title of the painting.

**Strom:** It was a launching point, as well as the devastation of the Rocky Mountain forests by pine beetles. Really, it's also kind of in line with *Four Parallel Lines* in a kind of contemplative, meditative work, although even when it's in surround, I would say, and a consideration of the impact of climate change.

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**Question from the Audience:** Playing or improvisation on the body or actual gesture drawing in the fine-art sense play a role in your process. There's a certain rawness and vulnerability and a kind of extreme sensitivity to seeing form in a very graphical, almost edge-detected way. I just wondered if you think about Cunningham dance notation or Cage drawing or any of that kind of thing or Merce's drawings as you go about your work.

**Carlson:** That's a great question. Even though it's video, and somehow that locks it down, I think we're both very committed to the spontaneity that occurs in performance art and attempting to not make a hierarchy between live-action work and work that becomes an object, and these works become objects, but to really attempt to always have that spontaneity of not knowing exactly what's going to happen in the work. I think one of our only rules is that things are never allowed to be scripted. And then something of interest, or that is of interest to us, occurs.

**Strom:** It's an interesting question about archiving and documenting process, too. I love gesture drawing, but I don't do it personally as part of the process of making work, but it might be a good idea. Really, it's held in the bodies of myself and the people who perform it, and it's temporally temporal in that way, but now not, too.

**Question from the Audience:** Have you done anything with recording the experiences of people who view your art? When I watching these, I was very moved, but it was almost frustrating because I had no outlet for it. I felt, "Oh, that was moving," but there wasn't any interaction with you. Have you had art pieces where you've recorded people's responses to your art?

**Carlson:** Well, I think that's really interesting. We do work sometimes with live cameras where all of the people who are the audience are part of the work – are performers in the work. But I would say that recently there is a viral nature to this. *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore* is up also at the ICA in Philadelphia, and the review is really all about how good the guards are at doing *Sloss, Kerr, Rosenberg, and Moore*. So I think there is a bit of that kind of interactivity with the digital image.

**Strom:** Part of what I think you're saying, too, is the circumstance, because we all are aware of this set-up (we're being videotaped), so in some ways there's not this kind of ease between us and you, and maybe you feel that you can't really go "Wow!" right now.

Part of it is this very context, I think, and in the gallery, like we said before, people laugh and run up close to it and run away. There's a lot of movement when the works have been exhibited in a different kind of context. I mean, we're happy to bring them to you in this one, but it is a little bit different because the whole set-up is kind of cinematic. But I feel your ... we'll talk later, or something.

**Carlson:** But in *Geyser Land*, it was setting up a social space. There were eight cars and each car had a very different character. One car was really quiet. In another car, everyone was drunk and really raucous. In another car, if you would say anything, people would go "Shh, shh." Then there were people just kind of running and really becoming participant-performers in the work.

**Comment from the Audience:** I thought when we came in that perhaps your being up there while people came in was part of a piece.

**Carlson:** It was.

**Comment from the Audience (continued):** Whether it was or not, it was fun.

**Carlson:** It was. We were performing artist talk – had the outfit on....

**Strom:** That's really part of the social practice, too. It continues to unveil those kinds of performance actions of any context situation person, and I don't mean that in a cynical way but in a just really interested, almost anthropological way. How do we perform gender, class, observer, performer, voyeur, artist,

**Carlson:** ... spectator ...

**Strom:** ... couple? You know, it goes on and on and on, right?

**Question from the Audience:** How many dollar bills does it take to fill a raincoat, and were you afraid of the cow?

**Strom:** Were you afraid of the cow, honey?

**Carlson:** No, I love the cow. We know the cow so well now. The cow has done many live performances.

**Strom:** It does live performances in the museum and we've done a lot of work with Gerrie at this point. The cow only will live for two years until.... You really don't want to think about it, but we try to do a lot of things to keep it going.

**Carlson:** I was a little afraid to be barefoot with those big hooves for a while with the cow and moving. There were \$1,700 of single dollar bills in there. We thought they would kind of cover me up and then they just all dropped, so we said, Oh, well, that's

what it's going to be. But the cow didn't move quickly or run around. **We taught her, amazingly.** She was patient and ...

**Strom:** ... she was very dear.

**Carlson:** She was really dear. She was quite a young dairy cow, and it was the one and only time she'd be off the farm, except that then we kept inviting her to things.

**Question from the Audience:** Where did she stay in New York?

**Strom:** Oh, no. It wasn't in New York.

**Carlson:** We did it in Boston.

**Strom:** We did it in the Boston area. She comes from a farm out in western Massachusetts, so she was trailered in.

**Question from the Audience:** I loved your pieces. They're just really interesting, even the one that was performed here this evening. As a collaborator and as an installation artist, one question that I'm always curious about is: What are the processes of collaboration? Are there some tensions? What are the ups and downs? And in terms of you as a videographer, filmmaker, and installation artist, too, how do you bring one thing that we missed in video: texture and smell? Do you ever bring some of the elements? For example, when Ann was in the fire with the ashes, I was just thinking, What do those ashes feel like? Do you bring some of those elements? Or, obviously, with the cow, what did it smell like? Or even with the lawyers, did they smell kind of like testosterone?

**Strom:** Never. They never smelled, no. That's one of the challenges of video.

**Carlson:** Well, I think you do sensorially translate with the camera. That thing in the ashes: you know how it feels and how it was to be there. Part of that brilliance is the translating into film language and the slowdown of the dust of the ash so you saw it fly through the air so it becomes this ... not just becomes this other thing, but you hopefully as a viewer see it the way it was felt. That's a great question and I think that **Emmy** is incredibly kinesthetic so it has that ability to translate kinesthesia, don't you think?

**Strom:** I do, but I think that part of your questions is: Do we bring the hay into the gallery? Do we bring the ash into the museum? No. I think that I always do that, like I get it all set up in the studio and I think that it's really going to work and it's going to be really potent, and it's not. In our work, I would say that...

**Carlson:** It might someday.

**Strom:** It might someday, but it's always kind of at that point where you really just want to simplify the language so that people are really kind of having a potent experience, and when we start bringing in the objects, we start decorating, and it's not sculpture. It

almost becomes these kind of decorative ancillary elements that seem unnecessary. I always try to do that and it never works. It's like it's redundant or something. I understand your question sensorially, but I've never achieved it.

**Carlson:** There are people who do.

**Strom:** Right, but I've never achieved it without it looking like we're kind of decorating the gallery or something.

**Question from the Audience:** Please talk about the way in which you two collaborate. How do you resolve tensions that arise?

**Strom:** Well, I was thinking about that a little today, and I would say that there's rarely, rarely tension between us when we collaborate. The tension is who does the dishes. That's really where that lives. It's not within.... Because we have the privilege of coming together to do this work with these amazing projects with incredible people, and it makes you be your best self. So you are just attempting to be your most openhearted, your most creative, your most intellectual, your most present. So you're not going to get into a kind of smallness in these contexts that we're in. It's more of an opportunity to be elevated, actually, as opposed to being cranky. And then, also about the collaborative thing, I was thinking about it a little today because we had talked about it. We're not like Jeff Koons kind of artists or Olafur Eliasson, who hire a lot of people to do things. We kind of do it ourselves. We do everything ourselves. Part of that is just our shared skill set. We're always having to learn new things to do, like take a class to learn this or go read that or research this.

**Gonnerman:** I know you like the challenge of learning new skills.

**Carlson:** Very much.

**Gonnerman:** I know you like the challenge of learning new skills.

**Carlson:** Very much.

**Gonnerman:** Maybe we can close out with a skill I know you recently acquired, which is ...

**Carlson:** Not that recently, but ...

**Gonnerman:** ... the auction chant.

**Carlson:** I went to auctioneer's school.

**Gonnerman:** Maybe we can auction off....

**Carlson:** Anyone can go to auctioneer's school. It's in Kansas City, Missouri. You can learn to auction cows, which was before the cow piece. But I made a ballet ... auctioned ballet dancers off.

**Gonnerman:** Maybe we can auction off the opportunity to ask one more question.

**Carlson:** Okay. All right. If you want to ask one more question.

**Strom:** He's trouble. I can tell. He's trouble.

**Gonnerman:** First bid.

**Carlson:** And will you give me .... [Auction chant].... All in, all done, I'll give it to you.  
[Applause, laughter]

**Question from the Audience:** I have no connection to the creative world, and I hope this question can be forgiven.

**Carlson:** That's a bad start! [Laughter]

**Question from the Audience (continued):** But I'm curious about finances of the development and presentation of these works.

**Strom:** That's a good question. Who finances the development and presentation of the work? It varies by the work. Sometimes it's commissioned by a museum that has gotten private donations as well as other foundations – not-for-profit foundations often that give money to the museums specifically for artists commissioned. We also raise a lot of money on our own through places like the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the different state councils in the states we've lived in, and a number of other foundations that we have relationships with that know we will do what we say we're going to do. We teach and work and we also most recently sell our work, and that contributes and pays for the next work, which is, in some ways, the best because it's not tied to a grant. But those are the ways. We've done other things, too. We try not to put work on credit cards. That's been our only rule: not to use credit cards to make work.

**Gonnerman:** And for tonight, we can thank Stanford Lively Arts, the Stanford Institute for Creativity in the Arts, Stanford Office of Public Affairs, the office of the President and Provost, and thanks to you, Mary Ellen Strom and Ann Carlson, for being so present and open with us tonight.

[Applause]

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**Ann Carlson** is a dancer, choreographer, and performance artist. She creates dances that reflect and investigate the metaphor of the everyday that are coauthored by the performers, who have included non-dancers such as lawyers, doctors, and nuns (the *Real People* series). With a background in visual and performance art, Carlson often shows her work in unconventional dance sites, including museums, trains, and barnyards. She lives in Boston with Mary Ellen Strom and their three children.

**Mary Ellen Strom** is a video artist who utilizes media technologies in service of social critique. Her installations and site-specific projects unearth submerged narratives within art, history and cultural discourse. Her work has been exhibited in a wide range of contexts including museums, galleries, passenger trains, large-scale video projections onto industrial sites and mountain rock faces, in empty retail stores and horse arenas. She has received recent awards including the Artadia Award, Fund for Art and Dialogue, 2007 and the Augustus Saint-Gaudens memorial Fellowship Prize 2006. Recent project grants include LEF Foundation, Art Matters, Arts Partners, Rockefeller MAP and Creative Capital among others. She teaches at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

**Mark Gonnerman** is founding director of the Aurora Forum.

Performance videos referenced in this transcript are available for viewing via a link on the Aurora Forum archive page for this public conversation or via the SiCa Gallery at <http://arts.stanford.edu/sai.php?section=gallery&page=gallery&action=73> .

### Comments?

We welcome your comments and suggestions via email to [auroraforum@stanford.edu](mailto:auroraforum@stanford.edu) or via the feedback form on our website: [auroraforum.org](http://auroraforum.org).

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