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43

# DANSE DANS LA NEIGE

FRANÇOISE SULLIVAN  
PHOTO: MAURICE PERRON

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# DANSE DANS LA NEIGE

FRANÇOISE SULLIVAN  
PHOTO: MAURICE PERRON

1977

One portfolio containing six leaves of text, seventeen leaves of plates, and one silkscreen print; 41 × 41 cm; black and white; limited edition, National Gallery of Canada Library and Archives copy number 34/50

**On that day, all the countryside seemed to whisper as Jean Paul [Riopelle] and Maurice [Perron] remained silent, at their task. The brisk air reddened our cheeks. The ground was rough and sturdy under our feet. The snow looked like age-old glaciers. Some winter birds passed by and dry weeds crackled under our feet. I let the movements come, vigorous in the cold, their physical source, as they grew, accentuated themselves in their own emotive logic. Charged with the affinities of the space, swelled with dreams, movements followed in a passionate action.**

**I danced with light feet on the rough slopes of winter. I turned round in the cold wind and ran under the sun. The sun became overcast at afternoon's end and the gestures became evocative of northern melancholy. I let rhythms flow. I perceived the space of the day – cut it and shaped it.**

*Françoise Sullivan*

Sixty-five years ago in the late afternoon on a cold February day, Françoise Sullivan (b. 1925) danced

to the season of winter on a snow-covered slope near Mont Saint-Hilaire, Quebec. Maurice Perron (1924–1999) photographed her performance, while Jean Paul Riopelle (1923–2002) filmed it. Riopelle's film was lost but Perron's photographs survived, and Sullivan published them thirty years later in a limited edition portfolio titled *Danse dans la neige* (Dance in the Snow).

The three friends were members of Les Automatistes, a group of Montreal-based artists in the 1940s and early 1950s. Inspired by the Surrealists, they believed in creating art without having preconceived ideas, and used spontaneous and subconscious forms in their art making. Sullivan, Perron and Riopelle were among the sixteen signatories to the group's renowned 1948 manifesto, *Refus Global* (Total Refusal). Perron founded the publishing house Éditions Mithra-Mythe to publish the manifesto and Sullivan contributed an essay titled "La Danse et l'espoir" (Dance and Hope) to the publication.

Françoise Sullivan studied painting at Montreal's École des beaux-arts

and dance at the Boas School of Dance in New York City. Adhering to the automatiste philosophy, she saw improvised dance as a way to free the unconscious, to encourage the possibility of chance, and to celebrate the role of intuition. Robert Enright has called *Dance in the Snow* "one of the singularly most important pieces of performance in the history of Canadian art"<sup>1</sup> and David Moos describes the work as "dancing the history of landscape painting in Canada," alluding to the Nordic subjects painted by Lawren Harris and Paul-Émile Borduas.<sup>2</sup> Sullivan is a dancer, a sculptor, and a painter who uses snow as a canvas upon which she creates her art. Her footsteps in the hard-packed snow are tachist, staccato, confrontational – like palette-knife paintings – giving evidence of the artist's gesture and physical presence in the work. Sullivan's choreography and Perron's photographs anticipated the work of the American Action Painters, who also used improvisation in executing their work and deemed process as important as the end result.

Maurice Perron not only published the group's manifesto; he also photographed their activities. As he photographed Sullivan dancing, he unobtrusively collaborated with the artist in the creation of a work of art, capturing the only remaining trace of that historic moment.<sup>3</sup> In 1998 the Musée du Québec [now the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec] mounted an exhibition of Perron's photographs, marking the 50th anniversary of the *Refus Global* publication and celebrating his work as an integral part of the Automatiste legacy.

In 1977 Jean Paul Riopelle, in an effort to recapture the lost moment, created a silkscreen print to be included in Sullivan's portfolio. His gestural image echoes Sullivan's

figure swirling in loops of snow. Drawn on a blank musical score sheet, it is modelled after the twelfth photograph in the suite, which had first been reproduced in the *Refus Global* manifesto. In our imagination's ear, Riopelle captures the sound of the dancer's feet on the snow.

The portfolio also comprises a statement by Françoise Sullivan; essays by François-Marc Gagnon and Fernande Saint-Martin; and several short tokens of esteem submitted by friends, some of whom were members of Les Automatistes. The work was originally conceived as a four-part series, one for each season. In 2007 each of the seasons was reinterpreted by other dancers in various locations; Mario Côté filmed these performances as Marion Landry photographed and published them in *The Seasons of Sullivan*. A limited edition portfolio was published by the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal to mark the re-enactment of *Danse dans la neige* and to underscore the brilliance of Sullivan's choreography, which pays homage to Canada's four seasons.

**Peter Trepanier**  
*Head, Reader Services*

<sup>1</sup> Robert Enright, "A Woman for All Seasons: An Interview with Françoise Sullivan," *Border Crossings* 27: 2 (May 2008), p. 49.

<sup>2</sup> David Moos, *Françoise Sullivan: Inner Force, February 10 – May 30*, exhib. brochure (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, in 1950 Hans Namuth filmed Jackson Pollock in the process of making his work *No. 29, 1950*, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada (acc. No. 15462), on view in Gallery C214. An excerpt from Namuth's film is also on view.