

## Discovering a Dance Legend in your Home Town

### Anna Halprin's art filled life on view at YBCA

By Emily Hite

Anna Halprin parked her white Volvo at the receiving dock of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and unloaded twelve trash bags full of leaves. The task-oriented performance artist, mother of postmodern dance, had a booked agenda a week and a half before the opening of the exhibition chronicling over fifty years of her work. Five dancers filed in behind Halprin. The group found the pocket atrium, the site of their opening night performance. They blocked through the space where the leaves would be dropped from above, gently transplanting the dancers' natural environment into the foreign space of the museum.

The multi-media exhibition, "Anna Halprin: At the Origin of Performance," notably recognizes a dance artist's work as a worthy subject for display—an unusual honor even for a major cultural force such as Halprin. "I think that opens up a new possibility for dancers from here on in," Halprin says, "that we can be looked at as artists who can exhibit in a museum." She cites technology as an important aid to this opportunity; documentary film, performance footage and choreographic scores abound in her exhibit, woven together with interviews of key collaborators and telling photographs of dozens of Halprin's works from the 1940s through the present day.

Upon entering the second floor exhibition viewers are invited to engage with a rainbow of sounds and moving images. The healthy volume of work accounts for only half the exhibition's original size, though. "At the Origin of Performance" was first presented at the *Musée d'ART Contemporain* in Lyon, France in 2006—occupying the entire museum—and brought to life by French curator Jacqueline Caux. Halprin recalls that eight thousand people attended the opening in Lyon. In 2004 Halprin took Paris by storm dancing in the Autumn Festival to great acclaim. The French audience is crazy about their newly "discovered" iconoclastic American choreographer, sharing Caux's enthusiasm and intrigue. Previous manias include Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown and Carol Armitage. Halprin's West Coast situation, lacking the press and density of working artists found in New York, placed her later on the list even though her work predates or parallels the others'.

Caux had been studying the work of New York's Judson Church group and related artists of the 1960s when she repeatedly came across Halprin's name as an influential teacher, sparking further research. So many dancers, musicians, sculptors and other artists, Caux found, had spent time improvising with Halprin on her outdoor dance deck at her Marin home, working together with her to formulate ideas they later brought to New York. Video interviews with musicians La Monte Young and Terry Riley and dancer Simone Forti detail the nature of their experimental work with Halprin. Caux says the Judson Church "is recognized as being the place where postmodern dance was born, which is not true. Postmodern dance was born in California, with Anna Halprin."

The YBCA exhibition illuminates Halprin's trailblazing spirit; decades ago, she bulldozed barriers to open space that dance makers can now move across with ease. Determined to connect her art with real life experience, in 1957 she introduced ordinary gesture to the concert dance stage in the form of task-driven movement. By 1965 Halprin and her collaborators were cooking pancakes and reading newspapers onstage, as photos of "Apartment 6" with accompanying wall text describe. In her work "Parades and Changes," also from 1965, Halprin choreographed two group segments involving the nonsense actions of undressing and dressing, and tearing paper while unclothed—a first use for nudity in contemporary dance. The nudity was not always easily received, even though it came across as neither erotic nor spectacular. Caux emphasizes that Halprin was blacklisted from working in theaters for years because of it; dance presenters were in constant fear she would get onstage and take her clothes off.

Caux's exhibition design centers on Halprin's work in the 1960s because she is interested in "the moment when something changed." After World War II artists could not make-work in the same way they had before the war. Creators in all disciplines turned far away from previous definitions of "beauty" and the glorification of the individual. The grandeur of the Nazi-lauded, late Richard Wagner was challenged by the likes of John Cage, who introduced listeners to a new definition of music to be found in the noise of everyday life. And Anna Halprin rejected the Western classical and modern dance traditions of making "beautiful" movement for a limited type of body that was predetermined as being great and strong. In the decades to come Halprin would work with ailing bodies, aging bodies and able bodies. In her form she quickly moved away from the stylized movement of Martha Graham and Charles Weidman in search of movement that was authentically ordinary and fit for any body. Improvisation was the tool for Halprin and her collaborators to experience their own points of view and to open channels of communication to create work that had many authors.

Valuation of the group over the individual and the creative process over the performance product are themes common to Halprin's work in all periods represented in the exhibition. "At the Origin of Performance" picks up an additional frame as part of YBCA's Making Peace series, which features people who have made major contributions to their cultural, political or social landscapes. Downstairs from Halprin's work is an installation of multiple artists' renderings of the Dalai Lama. For Halprin, it is an honorable and appropriate pairing. She names four ways of making peace that thread through her work, each centered on periods of her life-art, all represented in the exhibit.

Coming to peace within oneself and one's own body is the focus of works such as "Intensive Care: Reflections on Death and Dying" (2000), which encounters in art the psychological anxiety and physical limitation brought upon by serious illness. Halprin's personal battle with cancer (she was diagnosed in 1972) led her to work with others facing life-threatening illnesses including HIV and AIDS. In these works, Halprin empowered participants to speak to the uninvented bodily presence that sought to destroy them. The film "Circle the Earth: Dancing with Life on the Line" from 1989 documents a group exorcism of suffering and celebratory repossession of the body. Halprin says on the video, "It took me twelve years to understand what it meant to commit myself to live,"

underscoring how her life experience informs her art, and how her work with people informs her life.

Making peace within a race focused setting is explored in photographs and film footage of “Ceremony of Us” from 1969. Her performing group at the time, the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop, and dancers from Studio Watts School of the Arts in South Central Los Angeles, engaged in workshops of trust and explored intimate movement experiences with each other, not ignoring race but addressing it. This work was fueled by the violent Watts riot four years earlier and took place within the continuing struggles of the Civil Rights Era. These African American dancers from Watts and Halprin’s all-white troupe noticed and responded to issues that delivered exploding emotional tension and confrontation as well as peaceful communication.

Halprin makes peace within the community in “Planetary Dance,” now in its twenty-eighth year of annual performance around the world. The dance’s roots hold strong locally. In 1981 Halprin created a two-day ritual event called “In and On the Mountain,” focusing the Marin community’s energy on healing their collective loss of seven female members since 1979 that had been murdered on the trails of Mount Tamalpais. Coincidentally or not, several days later the killer was caught. Variations of the ritual continued in Marin, spread to other locations and took on broader meanings and intentions for the peace in the world. The large and ever-growing group dance becomes not just a symbol of solidarity, but also a call to action to confront the problems facing a community.

The fourth stage is making peace with the earth. Photos of Halprin from Eeo Stubblefield’s “Still Dance” series, 1998-2000, depict humans’ inseparable relation to their natural environment in vivid, emotionally charged frames. A mature Halprin seems to be crawling back into womb-like dirt, mud and water, mulch and leaves, her nude body covered in paint and caked with the stuff of the earth. At the same time she seems to be the very earth in which she sits—Mother Nature herself. Another possible interpretation is that there is no separation from and return to this environment, but only a constant living stillness in it. Becoming absorbed in the “Still Dance” photos, there’s a comforting realization that’s present, which might imply that in the final return to the ground, no interruption will take place.

Though Caux felt no need to curate the Yerba Buena installation differently other than to reduce the number of visuals in each theme to conserve space, Halprin insisted that her AIDS work be included and visible, just like the people who live with it. Her work with seniors has been added, and members of her “Seniors Rocking” group were spotted dancing and performing on the exhibition’s opening night. Not included in the exhibition is her Marin Children’s Dance Cooperative, with which she taught improvisation-based movement classes with a constant group of children and their parents for twenty-two years. Also unseen are early student works Halprin made as a member of the Hillel Dance Group at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in the late 1930s and early 1940s, expressing her Jewish identity and concern for Jews in Nazi Germany.

To present an artist's body of work in the much reduced YBCA space could not have been an easy task. The question of how a dancer's history and work is perceived in a museum setting has just begun to be explored. Yet, Caux believes the plastic nature of Halprin's work—its sculptural quality of form and effectiveness through gradual and thoughtful variation—lends itself beautifully to this type of representation, and it does. Still photos hold Halprin's concepts in a more interesting manner than a series of photos of a dancer caught in pretty movement. The dance score, written and drawn in elaborate ways, is another Halprin original that is now more commonly practiced. These scores provide a roadmap for understanding the development of a work in a way that a still photo cannot capture and video cannot fully recreate. The genius of Halprin's work is that it crosses many disciplines, allowing the work to be understood in unconventional ways.

Within a museum setting one of the best ways to represent live performance is to perform, which is what took place at the Opening Night Party. Dancers Iu-Hui Chua, Joy Cosculluela, Christian Nagler, Terre Parker and GH Soto performed "Awaken," a dance responding to Rodin's erotic sculptures. Live music performed by Barbara Borden and Lucia Comens, accompanied by participatory "wild dancing" just as Halprin envisioned, provided a perfect welcome for the local legend's retrospective. The music also created an informal atmosphere in which visitors could talk and dance with one another, sharing and enriching their experience of the work.

It is a rare and wonderful occasion to see a Halprin dance reconstructed. Rather than use her time on earth to repeat dances as a way of constructing her own posterity, Halprin makes work and then moves on. Leading workshops and working collaboratively keeps the lineage of her ideas growing and changing. Caux and Professor Janice Ross, dance critic and historian at Stanford University and author of the intellectual biography "Anna Halprin: Experience as Dance," both point to this attitude as the reason it is not Halprin but her successors who are well known and documented in dance history. Re-creating the exhibition in San Francisco is significant for the reason that Ross states, "It's going to put Bay Area dance into the conversation about re-defining American culture in the '60s, because it still is consistently written out of the big narratives about the birth of postmodern dance and the shaping of American culture."

Halprin's legacy is no doubt thriving. The landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, her husband of 67 years, their two daughters, Daria and Rana, and four grandchildren have been partners in every step of her life-art process. It's a matter of course that Anna Halprin was most proud on opening night to present her grandson, the spoken-word artist Jahan Khalighi, who read his dazzling "Soliloquy for the Stars" poem and a work composed specially for the exhibition, beautifully paraphrasing a mover's message to the world: "We should *dance...more often.*"

**Anna Halprin's exhibition at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts continues through April 5, 2008. [www.ybca.org](http://www.ybca.org)**

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