Experiments in Environment: The Halprin Workshops, 1966 - 1971

Thursday, January 21, 2016
West Coast Exhibition Premiere
Galleries of the California Historical Society, 678 Mission Street, San Francisco
Time: 5:00 pm

Kick Off to
The 1960s Revisited: A 50th Anniversary Celebration


Experiments in Environment: The Halprin Workshops, 1966–1971 brings the original documentation (photographs, films, drawings, performance scores) from the famed interdisciplinary workshops of landscape architect Lawrence Halprin (1916–2009) and postmodern dancer Anna Halprin's (born 1920) to San Francisco audiences 50 years after the first workshop. The exhibition is organized by the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts and the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania. This San Francisco presentation also includes rarely-seen items from the Halprins’ personal archives and selections
from CHS’s collections. The exhibition is made possible by generous donations from donors who have worked with Lawrence and Anna Halprin, including film director George Lucas, real estate pioneer Gerson Bakar, and Lisa and Douglas Goldman Fund, John and Marcia Goldman, and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.

"I am delighted that Experiments in the Environment will be coming to its home base in San Francisco, the home of radical, humanistic and participatory innovation," says Anna Halprin. "The exhibit excites me as well because it is including a new section describing my collaboration with Larry and our work beyond the Experiments. As Larry inspired me with his sensitivity to the environment, which influenced my experiments, I influenced him in my use of movement audience participation as I pioneered new forms in dance. This combined exhibition shows the impact we had on each other throughout our lives and I hope it helps people understand our work better."

In 1966, the Halprins hosted a series of experimental workshops in Northern California bringing dancers, architects, environmental designers, and artists together in a process facilitating collaboration and group creativity through new approaches to environmental awareness. Notable attendees included psychologist Paul Baum, architect and educator Charles Moore, geographer Richard Reynolds, lighting specialist Patrick Hickey, cinematographer Joe Erceth, graphic designer Barbara Stauffacher, composer Morton Subotnick, and dancer Norma Leistiko.

“We are honored to be the premier West-Coast venue for this ground-breaking exhibition,” said Dr. Anthea Hartig, Executive Director & CEO, California Historical Society. “The Halprin Workshops took place at a powerful time in California history, and Anna and Lawrence exerted a profound influence on how we perceive and live in built and natural environments and public spaces. Understanding this remarkable couple, and their inter-disciplinary work, affords us valuable clues in locating our shared humanity and crafting a better future.”

The workshops served as a testing ground for the development of the Halprins’ RSVP Cycles—a multi-disciplinary method of visualizing and guiding creative group work. The four main components of RSVP Cycles—Resources, Scores, Valuation, and Performance—could be used interchangeably to create an iterative process driven by awareness and assessment of existing resources, planning, participation, and critical feedback. The Halprin workshops were radical and highly innovative, blurring the lines between the participants’ professions and proving that artistic processes can positively influence one’s perception of their own environment.

Held over the course of several weeks, the Halprin workshops were staged on the streets of San Francisco; the dance deck and surrounding wooded areas of the Halprins’ Kentfield home (Lawrence Halprin and William Wurster, 1951–54); and the Halprins’ cabin (Charles Moore, Lawrence Halprin, and William Turnbull, 1965–66) at Sea Ranch, a coastal community for which Lawrence Halprin designed the master plan (1962–67).

Celebrated figures in their own right, Lawrence and Anna Halprin were not only prominent leaders of influential Bay Area movements during the 1960s and 1970s, but at the forefront of how space and movement are interconnected. The cultural icons drew from the seemingly unrelated fields of landscape architecture and dance to create an ingenious and entirely original approach to experience public spaces. The workshops utilized multi-sensory activities such as movement sessions, blindfolded awareness walks, collective building projects, and choreographed urban journeys to break down barriers of preconceived understandings of the physical environment. As a result, the development of many public spaces including parks, plazas, business districts, and communities have benefited from the Halprins’ methods for city planning.

As we commemorate the workshops’ 50th anniversary, we can say that the Halprins’ efforts remain as relevant today as they did in 1966. With the redevelopment of many city landscapes, and reactivation of public spaces, Experiments in Environment allows us to look at the role of art and artists in how we create and ultimately value public spaces.

About Lawrence & Anna Halprin:
A prominent figure in American landscape architecture, urban design, and environmental planning, Lawrence Halprin is renowned for his design of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial (Washington, D.C.), Ghirardelli Square (San Francisco), Sea Ranch (Sonoma County, CA), Stern Grove Amphitheater (San Francisco), Levi’s Plaza (San Francisco), Bunker Hill Steps (Los Angeles), and many others.

Anna Halprin founded the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop in 1955 and the Tamalpa Institute in 1978. Anna has created 150 full-length performance works. She was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts (1970); the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival’s Lifetime Achievement Award (1997); a National Endowment for the Arts “American Masterpieces” award (2008); and the Doris Duke Impact Award (2014), among others. Her work is included in the collections of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Performance + Design.

Selected images from the exhibition are below. For more information regarding The 1960s Revisited: A 50th Anniversary Celebration, and for general exhibition information, please visit: experiments.californiahistoricalsociety.org.
About the California Historical Society

Founded in 1871, the California Historical Society (CHS) is a non-profit organization with a mission to inspire and empower people to make California's richly diverse past a meaningful part of their contemporary lives. In 1979 Governor Jerry Brown designated CHS the official Historical Society of the State of California. Today, CHS enacts its mission with a wide range of library, exhibition, publication, education, and public outreach programs that explore the complex and continuing history of the State and represent the diversity of the California experience, past and present. Our treasured collection—documenting the history of the entire state from the Spanish Era to the present day—is brought to life through these innovative public history projects that expand and diversify our audience and broaden our public impact.

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