

Anna Halprin hits the main stage of the art world

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This year Anna Halprin, now aged 97 and still actively teaching, featured at both *documenta 14* in Kassel, Germany, and the *Venice Biennale*, two of the most prestigious art shows in the world. Anna has been renowned for many decades as an innovator in the field of the therapeutic application of movement-based expressive therapies. However, she has always clearly stated that she was never trained as a therapist, and sees herself primarily as an artist. It is therefore gratifying to see her honoured by the art world. As a performance artist and teacher she has radically reshaped dance, playing a major role in reclaiming it from the exclusive ranks of choreographed stage performances, and restoring it to the universal context of participatory dance as a healing art (Tamalpa Institute, 2017). Let me tell you the story of my journey with Anna, and how it was to see her work holding a vital place in the curated Arsenale exhibition at this year's *Biennale*.

I first studied with Anna in 1982–83, while on my big overseas experience as a young and disillusioned psychology honours graduate. After studying yoga in India, and while in Germany, I was invited to some 'movement' classes. The facilitator had studied with Anna at the Tamalpa Institute, the internationally recognised centre for movement, dance, and expressive arts therapy and education that Anna had founded with her daughter Daria. The experience of these classes helped pinpoint the intersection of what I had been seeking in both my psychology training and the yoga studies. I applied to train at the Tamalpa Institute, without consciously realising that this training would shape the journey of the rest of my life.

At one point in the Tamalpa program, some visiting teachers asked us what the training had given us, and I immediately replied: "It has given me back my body". This apparently simple statement carries a profound message about

the nature of learning and ways of knowing. This valuing of the integration of my body, my emotions and my imagination with my cognition has profoundly shaped my ongoing experience and my relationship with myself, with others, and with my personal and professional work. Anna's model of the life/art process – that our life experiences are the material of our creativity, and that our creative process is what shapes our life – has been a guiding principle for me (Halprin, 1995).

I travelled to Melbourne to work with Anna again in 1987, when she came to facilitate the workshop creation of a performance called *Circle the Earth*. This dance ritual grew out of a response to a series of murders in the late 1970s and early 1980s on Mt Tamalpais, near her home in California. At the time, Anna and her husband Lawrence were leading a community workshop called 'A Search for Living Myths and Rituals'. The participants collaborated to enact a reclaiming of the mountain. That ritual, called *In and On the Mountain*, was performed over several days, and included a walk along the trails where the killings occurred. A few days after the performance of the ritual, the killer was caught (Earth Alive, 2010).

Inspired by the coincidental capture of the killer, and mindful of a shaman's counsel that the mountain needed to be healed, the dance on the mountain was developed and enacted each year for five years. In 1985 Anna started travelling to offer other groups the chance to experience the resulting expanded dance ritual, *Circle the Earth*. The aim of the work was for it to act as an expression of intention for each participant, and for the group as a whole to encourage health and peace across the world (Earth Alive, 2010).

Circle the Earth consisted of a series of 'scores' that each participating group could develop in its own way. The term 'score' in the Halprin model of the creative process is borrowed from

musical notation, and refers to the stage in the creative process that is the plan for creative action (Halprin, 1995, pp.46–51). A score is often expressed graphically, and can range from ‘closed’ (for example a ballet), to ‘open’ (a complete improvisation), to anywhere in between.

The Melbourne workshop of *Circle the Earth* took place over five days, with more than 100 participants, and culminated in a performance at the Melbourne Town Hall to a packed audience. During the five days of workshops leading up to the final performance, we ‘performed’ each score over and over. Gradually, as the total ritual developed and took shape, each individual score moved along the range from open towards closed.

The culminating score of *Circle the Earth*, the *Earth Run*, asked the participants to run in a series of concentric circles, creating a moving mandala. Before joining this dance, each individual called out a declaration dedicating their performance to it. During many other scores within the greater piece there were many opportunities for individual expression, but Anna drummed into us that the *Earth Run* was an opportunity to be very simple and natural in our participation: “How many times in your life do you get to do the exactly same thing as everyone else, to feel yourself move as part of a larger organism?” I felt the group relax, and surrender the need to stand out and be noticed, able to experience the power of the collective. I distinctly remember the feeling of running in those concentric circles with such a large group. It was as though there was a forcefield created so that my feet did not touch the ground – I felt as though I was flying.

Increasingly, the international community who knew about *Circle the Earth* wanted to continue to share in this work, and so the *Planetary Dance* was created, with the *Earth Run* as the common element. Groups were invited to choose their own theme and to add their own preparation

and their own reflections, but everyone shared the common ‘score’ of the *Earth Run*. Soon after the Melbourne performance of *Circle the Earth*, the *Planetary Dance* was to be performed on the same day around the world for the first time. I gathered together a small group to perform the *Earth Run* on top of Mt Victoria in Auckland. Anna later wrote: “[W]hen my phone rang on 17 April 1987 it was midday in California... it was Amanda Levey calling from New Zealand and she sounded very excited... on the other side of the planet it was 18 April... and the dance had already begun” (Halprin, 1995, p.226). The *Planetary Dance* has now been performed in dozens of countries over more than three decades.

I had been told by several people that work by Anna was to be featured at this year’s *Venice Biennale*, and as I was presenting at the ECARTE Conference in Krakow, Poland, I made plans to go to Venice afterwards. I was curious to see how Anna’s work would be represented within a traditional visual art arena.

It was a floor-to-ceiling, graphically arresting ‘score’ of the *Planetary Dance* that greeted me in the Arsenale of the *Venice Biennale*. This was accompanied by photographs of various performances and event collateral, as well as a short video of the dance being performed. I felt enormously moved and affirmed to see work that

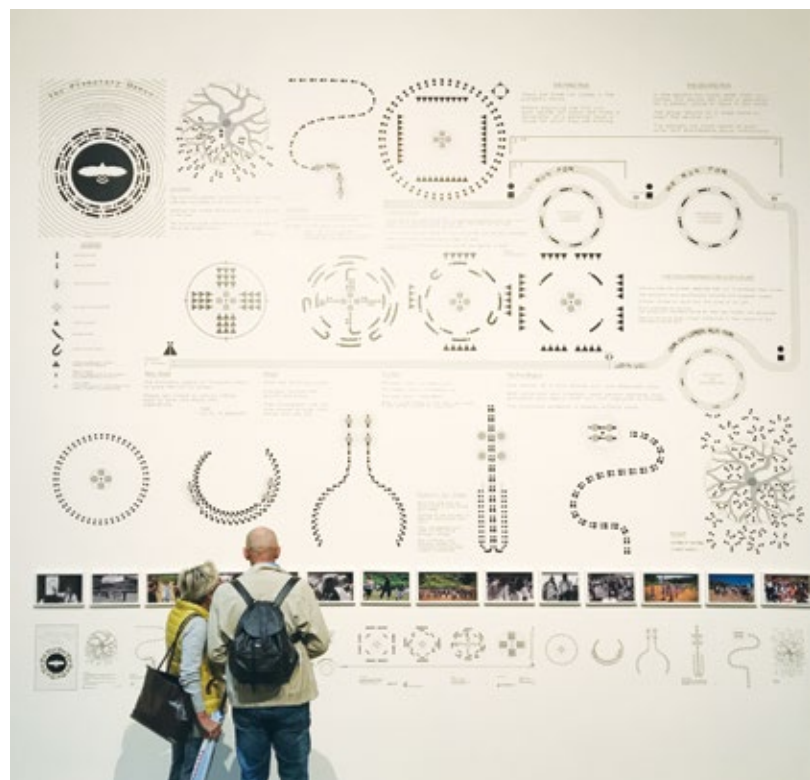


Figure 1. *Planetary Dance* score, 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Amanda Levey.



Figure 2. *Planetary Dance* poster, 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Amanda Levey.

I felt so personally connected to in such a public and highly regarded art biennale, bestowing Anna with the mana that she and the work deserve.

When I read the wall text that introduced the curatorial intention of the Arsenale exhibition, it became clear how Anna’s work could fit so perfectly into the overall thematic schema. It felt to me that finally Anna’s artist identity was recognised on the main stage of the international art world.

This year’s *Venice Biennale* was curated by Christine Macel, who focused on the vital role that artists play “in inventing their own universes and injecting generous vitality” to inspire us during what can be seen as a period of anxiety in the world (Baratta, as cited in Davis, 2017).

The wall text that introduced the Arsenale exhibition began:

Today, faced with a world full of conflicts and shocks, art bears witness to the most precious part of what makes us human, at a time when humanism is precisely jeopardized. Art is the ultimate ground for reflection, individual expression, freedom, and for fundamental questions. The role, the voice and responsibility of the artist are more crucial than ever, within the framework of contemporary debates. (Macel, 2017a)

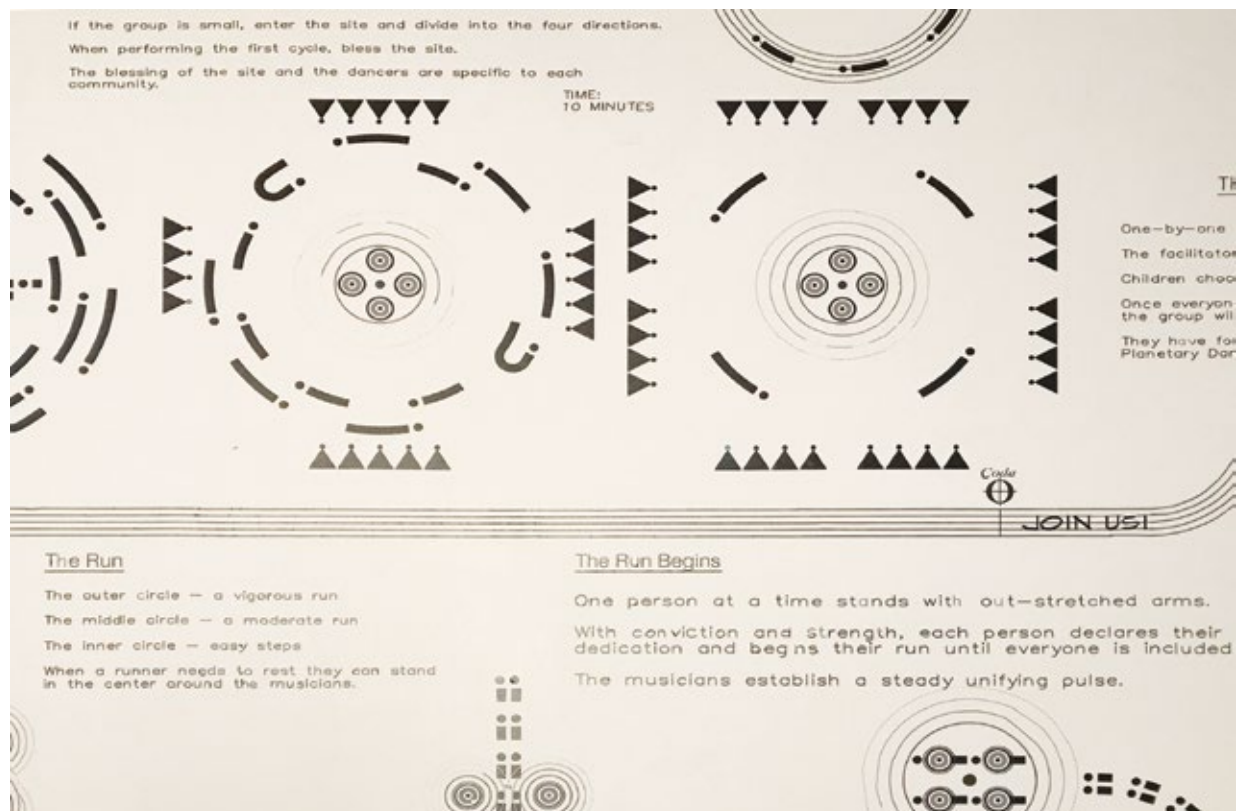


Figure 3. *Planetary Dance* score (detail), 57th Venice Biennale. Photo: Amanda Levey.

The huge warehouse space of the Arsenale was divided into nine sections, “designed to interact and flow together... like the chapters of a book” (Macel, 2017a). Anna’s work was in the first ‘chapter’, the Pavilion of the Common, which grouped together artists exploring “...the notion of the common world and the way to build a community, as a way to counter individualism and self-interests...” (Macel, 2017b). As someone who has studied and worked with Anna over many years and in many contexts, I found this a perfect description of the power of her collaborative creative process and the profound influence her oeuvre has had on countless generations of dancers, artists, therapists and others.

This chapter’s wall text ended with a provocation: “How do you build something in common in a world that has failed to realize all its projects of equality and fraternity, other than by attempting to recreate, here and there, at the micro-political level, conditions for new possibilities?” (Macel, 2017a). I felt that the potential of Anna’s work to address this question was affirmed in the *Venice Biennale* catalogue. The chapter on Anna reflected on her broad and significant contribution to collaborative creativity, to therapy, and to social change (M.B., 2017). I would argue that she, and the countless people and communities that she has influenced, can employ these tools to indeed embody new possibilities. Anna is always adamant that her students should not mindlessly follow her, but, rather, take her methods and practices and mould them into their own expression. This dynamic process ensures that her work continues to grow and adapt to place, time and culture, and to contemporary challenges that individuals and communities face. I come back again and again to feelings of deep gratitude that I have been able to learn from and work with such a great teacher and artist. Her words continue to resonate and inspire me in my life/art process:

Movement has the capacity to take us to the home of the soul, the world within for which we have no name. Movement reaches our deepest nature, and dance creatively expresses it. Through dance, we gain new insights into the mystery of our lives. When brought forth from the inside

and forged by the desire to create personal change, dance has the profound power to heal the body, psyche and soul. (Halprin, 2000, p.196)



Figure 4. Amanda Levey with Anna Halprin, c.1997.

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