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The environment as a stage: Anna and Lawrence Halprin's experiments

I usually go running at Stern Grove, a park very popular among San Francisco's music lovers because of its yearly free music festival. Every time I pass by the natural amphitheater, I don't feel I am misusing it. On the contrary, this place is welcoming; it is very enjoyable, and it feels good to run through it.

As Lawrence Halprin, the landscape architect who designed it, [said](#), «when I designed Stern Grove, the intention was to create a mystical place, where one would be inspired to reach into oneself. I wanted to design a living theatre for everyone to use, a place where people can walk their dogs, picnic, meditate. I wanted a place where lovers could meet and children could play.»



Participants in Halprin's "City Dance" at Lawrence Halprin's Fountain in San Francisco. Buck O'Kelly, photographer. 1979.

Reproduced from a 35 mm color mounted slide, Courtesy of the Museum of Performance + Design

Interdisciplinarity; the relations between bodies and space; architecture, city and community. These are the key aspects analyzed in *Experiments in Environment: the Halprin Workshops 1966-1971*, presented by the California Historical Society in San Francisco, CA. The first part of the exhibition shows the massive impact that both Lawrence and Anna had in architecture and

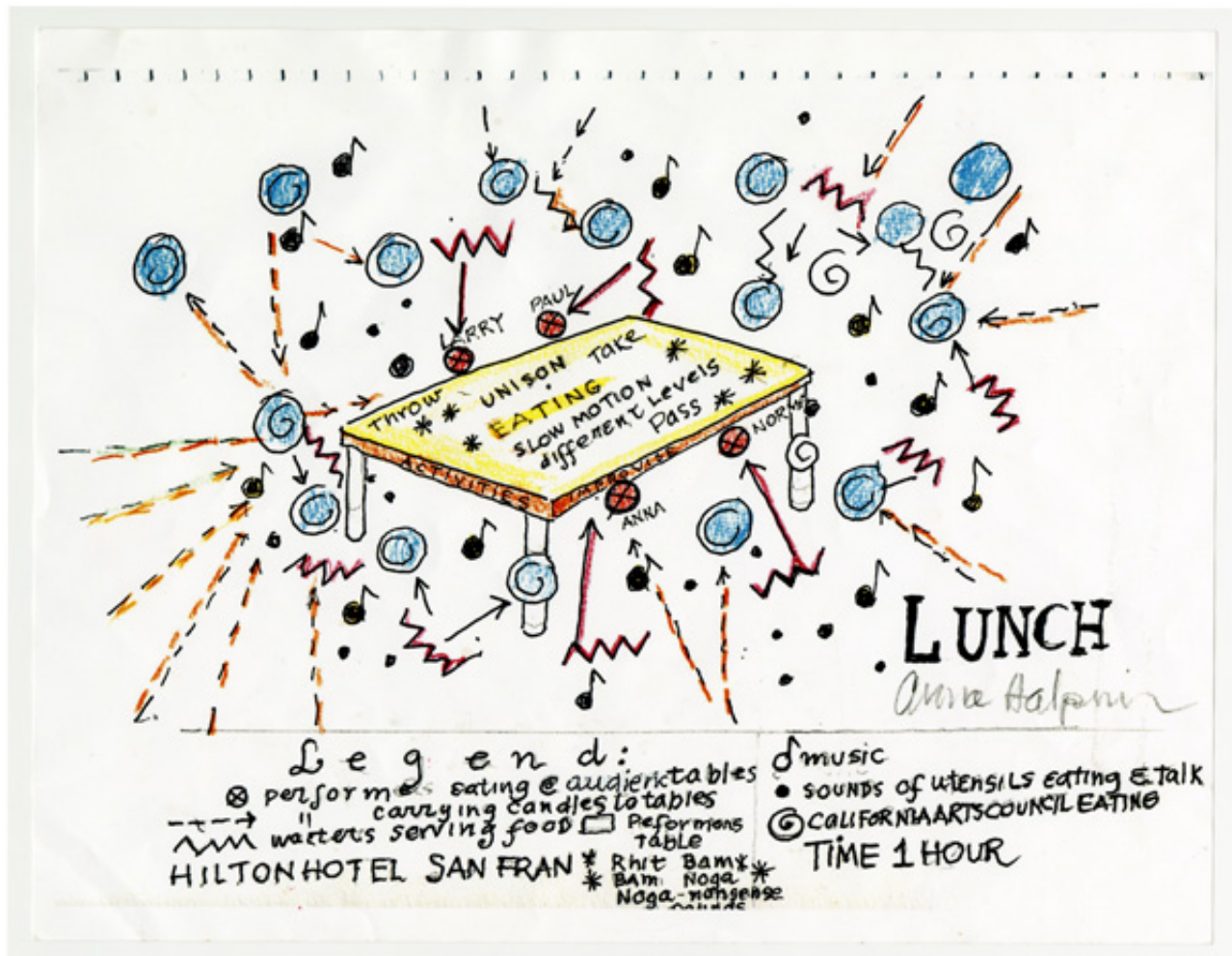
dance, respectively. During the late 1960s their professional relationship intensified so profoundly that they decided to officialize their collaboration using the workshops as a platform for radical experimentation.



Anna and Lawrence Halprin. Photographer unknown, circa 1940. Reproduced from a gelatin silver print, Courtesy of Anna Halprin

Through an intimate installation of archive materials, photos, short films, drawings, but also personal letters addressed to the couple by the workshops' participants, we have an overview of their fruitful collaboration, which inaugurated an innovative approach to collaborative practices. In an atmosphere of radical change, which was affecting the whole Bay Area at that time, the

Halprin initiated a series of cross-disciplinary workshops open to architects, dancers, artists, writers and designers trying to define a new method toward environmental awareness. Combining two disciplines apparently so distant such as architecture and dance, and using collective activities as a creative process, allowed them to go deep into their practices and to incorporate one into the other. The result of the experiments was a mutual influence and exchange on Lawrence's landscapes, which always incorporated movement, and Anna's choreographies, which are often focused on how the body relates to the space of the performance.



The Ecology of Form, from The Sketchbooks of Lawrence Halprin. Lawrence Halprin, 1981. Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania

Besides their physical experimentations on movement, they integrated their reflections with theoretical elements, introducing a new lexicon, to emphasize on the design process rather than on a possible final outcome. They elaborated new definitions such as *Scores*, which were graphic instructions given to the participants to develop their actions in space, and *Motation*, which was a method for movement annotation. In 1969, these concepts were included in the book *The RSVP Cycles: Creative Processes in the Human Environment*, where they stated their new system for design process, in which participation and the unexpected were pivotal.

The exhibition is completed by a selection of posters, fanzines, flyers and publications documenting the explosion of countercultural movements in the 60s and the 70s in the Bay Area, such as the Black Panther Party, the Diggers, and the Trip Festival, among others.

Choosing to display countercultural movements in connection with the Halprin's methodology gives an idea of how vibrant, prolific and subversive those years were. Sure enough, the majority of these movements, and the workshops as well, were enacting the same strategies: collaborative approach, communal life, cultural activism in public spaces, and dissolution of the boundaries between participant and spectator. I believe that the legacy of those radical experimentations is still present today.



"Driftwood Village—Community," Sea Ranch, CA. Experiments in Environment Workshop, July 6, 1968. Courtesy Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania

Finally, a reach program of talks and presentations about the Halprin's influence in San Francisco as well as in the Bay Area accompanies the course of the exhibition until July.

Lawrence and Anna Halprin, *Experiments in Environment: the Halprin Workshops 1966-1971*, [California Historical Society](#), San Francisco, through July 3rd, 2016.



"Driftwood City," Sea Ranch, CA. Experiments in Environment Workshop, July 4, 1966. Courtesy Lawrence Halprin Collection, The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania

Tag: activism, architecture, dance, documentation, drawing, performance, urban art

Artist: Anna Halprin, Lawrence Halprin

City: San Francisco

Venue: California Historical Society



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