Anna Halprin Papers

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Descriptive Summary

Title: Anna Halprin Papers
Dates: 1920-2018
Collection Number: Halprin-MPD
Creator/Collector: Halprin, AnnaSan Francisco Dancers' WorkshopTamalpa Institute
Extent: 67 Linear feet. 41 cartons; 11 document cases; 6 flat file boxes; 3 oversize boxes; and 6 tubes.
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Abstract: Anna Halprin is a renowned San Francisco Bay Area-based dance teacher and choreographer, who remains active in the dance community through various workshops and presentations. Halprin helped pioneer the experimental art form known as postmodern dance. Over the years, she has collaborated with dancers such as Welland Lathrop, Merce Cunningham and musician John Cage, and taught dance luminaries such as Trisha Brown, Simone Forti, and Yvonne Rainer. In the 1950s, she established the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop to give artists like her a place to practice their art. In 1978, Halprin started the Tamalpa Institute, featuring movement-based arts therapy, which remains active in Marin County as of the publication of this finding aid. The Anna Halprin Papers encompass such traditional paper files as correspondence, reports, news clippings, programs, and flyers, as well as visual and oversize materials in the form of pictorial dance scores, posters, scrapbooks, music scores, videos, photographs, and slides. They also include a large collection of audio cassettes. The papers cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from the life of Anna Halprin to her innovations in dance teaching, performance, and choreography. Halprin's experimentation with dance as a healing art can be traced through articles, audio cassettes, and reports documenting her work with cancer and AIDS patients. The histories of the two groups she has been associated with in the Bay Area, the Halprin-Lathrop Studio and the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, are also well-documented in news clippings, correspondence, audio cassettes, dance scores, and reports. The papers are arranged into the following series: I. Biographical; II. Family; III. Writings; IV. Correspondence; V. Interviews; VI. Performances; VII. Healing Arts; VIII. Architecture and Dance; IX. Nature and Dance: Sea Ranch; X. Philosophy/Theory of Teaching; XI. Early Teachings, 1940s-1950s; XII. San Francisco Dancers' Workshop / Tamalpa Institute (This has been split into 5 separate subseries (1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s)); XIII. External Workshops; XIV. Training Program; XVI. Reach-Out Program; XVII. Dance Compositions and Scoring; XVIII. Music Scores; XIX. Student Papers – Theses and Dissertations; and XX. Colleagues.

Language of Material: English

Access
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Preferred Citation
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Acquisition Information
These papers were donated to the library by Anna Halprin between October 1994 and November 2013. Additional accessions were made between 2014-2018.

Biography/Administrative History
Avant-garde dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin was born on July 13, 1920 in Wilmette, Illinois as Anna Schuman. She attended New Trier High School and then the University of Wisconsin from 1940-1944 and studied dance with Margaret H'Doubler. After her graduation, Halprin and her husband moved to New York City, where she studied modern dance with Hanya Holm and Martha Graham. As a member of the Doris Humphrey/Charles Weidman Dance Co., she appeared in many New York performances. She also auditioned for and was selected to dance in the Broadway musical Sing Out Sweet Land. In the late forties, Anna and Lawrence Halprin moved to San Francisco. Anna immediately joined the local dance scene and in 1948, she opened an experimental dance studio with Welland Lathrop. This dance center offered a wide range of movement education programs and trained dancers to go out and teach in the suburbs. Halprin broke away from Lathrop in 1955 after attending an American Season of Dance at the ANTA Theater in New York. Her participation in this event brought her to the realization that she no longer felt connected with the modern dance movement. She realized that she longed to...
push beyond the conception of dance as a theatrical event or as a pattern of movements based upon music or a specific program. Retiring to the outdoor dance deck her husband had designed for her near their home in Kentfield, Halprin began an experimental dance group known as the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop. Her intent was to create a pure, abstract form of dance focusing upon movement. Among her early students at this workshop numbered Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer. Through integration of primitive and modern dance, as well as the use of improvisation, Halprin and her students began to develop a new conception of dance that allowed for individual, spontaneous movement as opposed to following pre-determined choreography. In step with John Cage and Allan Kaprow, Halprin began incorporating a variety of chance-generated techniques to determine the pattern of her works. She also experimented with juxtaposing movements with dialogue in the Dada theater tradition. The workshop gave its first professional performance at the San Francisco Dancers’ Theater in 1959 and was applauded by Bay Area dancers for its innovative approach to dance in the pieces Birds of America and Flowerburger. Rather than trying to create a repertory of dance pieces, the Dancers’ Workshop continued to focus upon challenging traditional notions of what constituted dance. Pieces presented by the group for public performance reflected a wide range of concerns and experimentation. Halprin invited individuals from many different artistic disciplines to join her workshops in an effort to incorporate dance with other art forms. She collaborated with musicians John Cage, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young; painter Jo Landor; actor John Graham; and her husband and other architects. Initially, Halprin focused upon self-awareness through movement. She developed the concept of task movement, in which dancers repeated a simple task over and over again in order to focus upon kinesthetic responses. One of her early works, Five-legged Stool (1961), consisted entirely of dancers performing various tasks in a spontaneous, arbitrary manner. From this concept, Halprin moved on to develop the idea of using pictorial dance scores in place of choreography. A score provided a set of general instructions and graphics for the process by which participants would become involved in a performance. Scores illustrated the time, place, and physical activity for a performance. This allowed for far greater flexibility and spontaneity and much variation from performance to performance. Parades and Changes (1963), the first Halprin piece to utilize scoring, created a great deal of controversy. Audience members stormed about the theater, hurled insults, and threw objects on the stage. This prompted Halprin to think more about the interaction between audience and performers. She realized that each performance should be a transformative experience for both dancers and viewers and began experimenting with incorporating audience participation into her pieces. This in turn led to her interest in using dance to help people to face real life issues. Halprin began integrating therapeutic concepts and techniques into her pieces in the late sixties and seventies. She worked with Gestalt therapists Fritz Perls and John Rinn to develop dances which would serve as a healing process. In addition, she incorporated ideas from noted polarity therapist Randolph Stone, along with elements of Thomas Gordon’s Active Listening technique. Ceremony of Us, commissioned in 1969, was developed to address racial inequality through dance. For a period of one year, Halprin conducted workshops with Afro-Americans in the Watts ghetto and with a group of Caucasians in San Francisco. At the close of the year, these two workshops came together to perform and to work through feelings of hostility and prejudice. In 1970, Halprin created the Reach-Out program with assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts’ Expansion Arts program. It was designed to provide members of minority and Third World communities with opportunities to participate in the dance experience. The workshops offered participants a chance to explore personal and cultural themes through dance and to learn movement skills. In affiliation with International College, the program offered students the opportunity to pursue teaching degrees and to assist at teaching sites. The Reach-Out facility served as a performance venue for Third World and minority artists, as well. Halprin also worked with her husband to develop methods for guiding the collective creativity of her workshops. Based upon Lawrence Halprin’s method of using RSVP Cycles to direct the creative process, she designed workshop experiences which would allow participants to understand the individual emotions and values they experienced and expressed through performances. Her piece, Initiations and Transformations (1971), utilized a multi-racial group to act out basic animal rituals and to explore aspects of the human condition. These experiments enabled Halprin to begin seeing dance as a heightened experience of life rather than something to be isolated on a stage. Her performances moved out of the theater and into the city streets and the wilderness as she explored the idea of using dance rituals to bring communities together and to help people deal with social and emotional tensions. Along with creating city dances for the people of San Francisco, Halprin devised workshops and rituals to help cancer and AIDS patients. She directed Moving Towards Life for people challenging cancer, Positive Motion for men challenging AIDS/HIV, and Women with Wings for women challenging AIDS/HIV. Her interest in dance as a healing art also prompted her to create dance rituals to help citizens face crises in their communities. Circle the Mountain originated in 1981 as a dance ritual to heal the Marin community of fears provoked by an outbreak of trailside killings on Mt. Tamalpais. Performed as a ritual healing ceremony for the mountain, this work was later transformed into Circle the Earth and was performed in Switzerland and Australia between 1986 and 1987. It underwent another transformation in 1989 to become a healing ritual for AIDS and HIV positive patients. In order to teach others and conduct further research about body therapy and the creative process, Halprin founded the Tamalpa Institute in 1978. This served as an educational and research arm of the Dancers’ Workshop and enabled Halprin to codify her explorations into a method called the Life/Art Process. Approved by the California Department of Education, the institute provides training in
movement ritual and various therapeutic techniques using dance and theater. Halprin’s contributions to dance and to psychology have been recognized by many different organizations. She has received numerous Choreographer Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, an American Dance Guild Award (1980), the Bay Area Dance Coalition Isadora Duncan Hall of Fame Award (1985), the Professional Women’s Association Women of Wisdom Award (1987), an Honorary Doctorate degree in Human Services from Sierra University (1987), the West Coast Outstanding Teacher of the Year Award (1988), the Goldie Award for lifetime achievement from the San Francisco Bay Guardian (1990), and the 1991 award from WAVE, Women of Achievement and Excellence. Throughout many years of experimentation, Halprin has served as a catalyst for breaking down the boundaries between life and art. These papers document the forty-year evolution of her concept of and approach to dance as an integral part of the life process.

**Scope and Content of Collection**

The Anna Halprin Papers encompass such traditional paper files as correspondence, reports, news clippings, programs, and flyers, as well as visual and oversize materials in the form of pictorial dance scores, posters, scrapbooks, music scores, videos, photographs, and slides. They also include a large collection of audio cassettes. The papers cover a wide variety of topics, ranging from the life of Anna Halprin to her innovations in dance teaching, performance, and choreography.

Halprin’s experimentation with dance as a healing art can be traced through articles, audio cassettes, and reports documenting her work with cancer and AIDS patients. The histories of the two groups she has been associated with in the Bay Area, the Halprin-Lathrop Studio and the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop, are also well-documented in news clippings, correspondence, audio cassettes, dance scores, and reports. Her participation in the humanistic psychology movement in California is also revealed in articles, reports, and speeches documenting her work with Gestalt psychologists Fritz Perls and John Rinn and her contributions to Esalen workshops. In addition, the papers also provide insight into Halprin’s collaboration with musicians John Cage, Terry Riley, and La Monte Young, and with artist Allan Kaprow.

Researchers interested in studying the theory behind Halprin’s dance techniques and experimental workshops can find a great deal of information about such topics as her use of pictorial scores as an alternative to choreography and her development of the Life/Art Process and RSVP cycles to analyze the creative process. These are discussed in theses and articles about Halprin’s work and illustrated through pictorial scores, journals, and audio recordings of workshops and elements of performances. The papers also include documentation about many of Halprin’s choreographic works. Original dance scores for such works as Circle the Earth and Ceremony of Us are present in the collection, along with reviews and reports revealing how these dance performances impacted the community and accomplished Halprin’s aim to use dance to help people confront social issues. Extensive documentation is also available on the Reach-Out program of the San Francisco Dancers’ Workshop in the form of annual reports and articles. The papers also document Halprin’s creation of city dances for the people of San Francisco and of a series of ritual healing dances, Circle the Mountain, Run to the Mountain, and Circle the Earth. These papers focus primarily upon Halprin’s activities within the Bay Area and thus document her life from 1949 to present day. They do not provide a great deal of information about her dance education at the University of Wisconsin or about the years she spent dancing in New York City in the late forties. All of the series contain significant information and together provide an excellent overview of Halprin’s teaching methods, theory, performances, and creative works. Some of the materials, such as the pictorial dance scores, posters, and audio cassettes, contain unique and irreplaceable information. The articles, theses, and programs are probably duplicated elsewhere, but provide a necessary intellectual foundation for understanding such items as the pictorial scores. The content and quality of the audio cassettes varies considerably. Some of the tapes consist of very informative interviews or lectures; others are rather muffled recordings of performances. A few of the tapes are composed entirely of music used at different workshops or events. A few items were weeded from these papers which contained routine or repetitive information. These included duplicates of articles, reports, letters and photographs, as well as informal notes and routing slips which did not convey any significant information. A visual accompaniment to the paper records is available in the form of slides, photographs, videos, and films. These document choreographic works and educational workshops from the 1950s to 1994. Some of the videos, which were compiled as retrospectives, offer excerpts from performances throughout Anna Halprin’s career. The video collection also includes documentaries created by local television stations on Anna Halprin’s development of large-scale community rituals and on her work with cancer and AIDS patients. Collaborative relationships between Anna and various family members and colleagues are also explored in these videos, slides, and photos. Twelve boxes of master videos taped during Circle the Earth performances provide extensive documentation on the evolution of this community work. Photo-graphic documentation of educational workshops offers insight into the development of Anna’s teaching methods, as well. A separate inventory of the video collection is available upon request.

**Indexing Terms**

Dance.
Modern Dance.
Dancers--United States--Biography.