



### **Bodies, landscapes**

International Landscape Study Days 2021

Thursdays and Fridays 18-19<sup>th</sup>, 25-26<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021

### **Breath made visible. Revolution in dance**

a film by Ruedi Gerber (USA, 2010, 80')

online screening

Directed by: Ruedi Gerber, Producer: Ruedi Gerber, Mike King; Cinematography: Adam Teichman; Editing: Françoise Dumoulin, C. Peters; Sound Editing: Margaret Crimmins; Rerecording Sound Mix: Tony Volante; Music: Mario Grigorov; Distribution: ZAS Film AG, Zürich.  
Festivals and Awards:

Locarno Filmfestival Semaine de la Critique 2009;

Mill Valley Filmfestival 2009 Audience Award "Certificate of Excellence";

International Cinema Release 2010.

### **Ruedi Gerber**

Director and producer born in Switzerland, he trained in Zurich and New York and he founded ZAS Film AG based in Zurich and New York; he directed and produced a number of documentary films, fiction and TV movies. Since 2018 he is member of the European Film Academy EFA.

He has dedicated a trilogy to Anna Halprin's work consisting of *Breath made visible* (2009), *Seniors Rocking* (2010) and *Journey in Sensuality* (2016).

### **The film – Synopsis**

Over the past seventy years, Anna Halprin, born on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1920, has redefined our notions of modern dance. *Breath Made Visible* is the first feature documentary about the life and career of this pioneer of 20th-century American dance. The film ranges from Halprin's initial explorations of dance during her childhood and her experimental performances on a stage under Californian redwoods to her spectacular European tours, her withdrawal owing to illness and her triumphant comeback at the age of 80. Previously unreleased archival footage expands the scope of this portrait of an artist to get at the core of socially and politically engaged modern dance in North America.

At the heart of the film, however, is Anna's relationship to her husband, world-renowned architect Lawrence Halprin (Roosevelt Memorial). Like Anna's work itself, the film transcends the medium of dance to become a universal story about survival and artistic expression.

### **The making of the three films**

a text by Ruedi Gerber

When Anna Halprin and I met at a workshop in 1982, she no longer performed in public. She was engaged in the development of dance as therapy and a means of healing that would provide decisive impulses to the world of art and dance therapy. At that time, I was an actor at the German State Theatre and was interested in Anna Halprin as a performance artist who explored the intersections of theatre and dance with lived life, through movement. My personal interest was in how to deal with real-time and authentic improvisation on stage. I was fascinated by Anna, by how she expanded the boundaries of theatre and by her ability to unleash the creativity of others. Years later, her attitude would greatly influence my decision to become a filmmaker and experiment with fiction and reality.

Over the next twenty years, Anna and I had only loose contact. We didn't meet again until February 2002, on the occasion of her show at the Joyce Theater. There she was again, in all her glory. It was incredible, at over eighty she had returned to the stage and thus back to her



p. 2

beginnings! For her opening performance she presented a play in Butoh style with Iko and Komo. This was followed by a 15-minute solo in which she danced and narrated her life story. Some of the audience had tears in their eyes. I was also deeply moved by this woman. In a world of poses and competing stylizations I experienced the presence of someone who I felt was completely authentic and whose message was universal - it was a relief! The audience felt her immediacy too, her direct art based on her everyday life.

Her show awakened in me the urge to make a film that would touch the audience the same way Anna's performances touched her audience. When I learned from Anna that no one had recorded her performance, I picked up a camera myself on the last evening of the show. Unfortunately it was already too late to get permission to shoot close-up angles at stage level, but at least we were allowed to film from a corner of the theater behind the audience.

Anna then invited me to participate in her next summer workshop. I hesitated, as my first feature film, "Heartbreak Hospital", had just been completed and I did not feel in shape to dance and perform with professional dancers from Japan, Australia, France and the USA.

Eventually though I accepted her invitation and took my film camera to Anna in California. Unfortunately this first attempt to film Anna failed due to the fact that some of the participants did not want to be filmed. Although Anna tried to change their minds, I wasn't able to film in the end. But my desire to follow Anna Halprin's life and art was aroused, and already my first Anna workshop in the early 80s was an important experience for me. And twenty years later, I realized the unique way she had developed her vision in dealing with movement and performance to convey authentic personal experiences with art in a universal way. In 2004, at the end of the second workshop, I asked Anna if she would be willing to make a film with me about her life. "Okay", she said immediately, "but you have to hurry, I'm already 83!" A few months later I sent her a formal agreement and was surprised when she didn't want to sign. A French journalist was already working on a similar project for a theatre and dance festival at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. I was disappointed and gave up the idea.

In the summer of 2005 I returned to San Francisco to participate in Anna's annual workshop. Now Anna asked me if I would like to work with her on a film about "Seniors Rocking," a dance piece that Anna wanted to use to help older people to overcome their clichés about getting older. Her film concept was to expand the performance with the personal stories of the participants and thus to pursue the question: What is the most important thing in life? She was looking for stories that came from the heart which the participants wanted to leave to their children, grandchildren and friends.

Since I knew Anna well by now and knew how to turn a personal question into a big event, I pointed out that this project also touches her legacy. Again I announced my interest in documenting her life. Anna pondered for a moment, then suddenly invited me to film at her home. Not only did she agree to give me access to her past and to her work, but she also agreed to include her husband, the well-known architect Lawrence Halprin, in the project. Since that afternoon, in her kitchen, she has opened one door of her life after another for me. This allowed me to film and document not only *Seniors Rocking*, but also all her important shows, lectures and workshops, her performances in San Francisco, her work in nature, her various classes, her latest work *Rodin*, as well as her husband's 90th birthday and her doctor visits!

I discovered how intertwined Anna's personal life actually was with her life as an artist. "There is no real separation," one of her daughters ironically pointed out. Anna Halprin cultivates what she calls the "life-art-process" and integrates the ups and downs of her life again and again in her creative work -- including the topics of aging and death. In *Intensive Care* she manages to translate the fear of her husband's death with her own fear of death into a powerful and at the same time universally valid choreography. At the age of 85 she played her own death at the end of the piece. With this she created not only an unforgettable visual highlight of the play but also for the film *Breath Made Visible*.

Anna Halprin is a passionate, obsessive artist who packs her whole life into art and all her art into her life. With her performances she questions the true meaning of life. How can art help us to cope with life? Why do we make art? In a late interview Anna said she hoped she had re-defined dance. This redefinition is not only created by young bodies on stage -- no, it takes place with performers at any age!

The result of our long collaboration are three films that not only unfold Anna's unique story - from her groundbreaking performances in the 1950s and 1960s to her current solo performances before us - but also reveal how her life and work illustrate the true meaning of dance and its power to help us not only manage our lives, but to change them and remain true

to ourselves in the process. The focus is on our values and how we can remain authentic and experience ourselves in the 21st century.

I wanted to let Anna dance through her own life in her unique way. In the films, dance becomes a way of addressing life itself and everything that is really important in life. Dance brings people together, it creates community. As Merce Cunningham said: "Anna is a prophetess, a philosopher".



## One hundred years of Anna Halprin

Kathleen Buehler

"To me, radicalism is key to being a contemporary artist. That involves responding to what's going on in the world. What interests me is an art that is connected to life, where the social, political, spiritual, and aesthetic threads are all interwoven in a real way. What inspires me about dance, specifically, is its power to teach, inspire, heal, and transform. I want to make dances that grow out of lived experience, allowing my art to deepen my life and my life to expand my art."

(Anna Halprin, 2015)

p. 3

Who would have thought that Anna Halprin's life and work would one day span an entire century? Especially since the dancer, artist, teacher and activist fought cancer in the middle of her life and only defeated it after several attempts?

It has been ten years already since Ruedi Gerber brought his great film *Breath Made Visible* to cinemas all around the world, presenting, for many people, the complete works of Anna Halprin for the first time. As an artist, she has not only dedicated her entire life to dance but has integrated all aspects of her life and work into dance. More recently, this has included dance performances that deal with illness, aging and dying, but this goes back to the beginnings of her dance career in the 1930s, when she began to explore her cultural heritage, and began to explore everyday life through dance, involving her family and community in her dance work. Although trained as a modern dancer, Halprin found in dance a method to reflect her relationship to the world and to give her individual experiences a universal form.

From the beginning, however, dance in Anna Halprin's life was not an isolated, introverted or egocentric matter, and proved to be a profound examination of her time, society and political circumstances. Through her encounter with Lawrence Halprin, the famous landscape architect and later her husband, she discovered the principles of the Bauhaus. These encouraged the dance pioneer to work interdisciplinarily and in groups. She was one of the first dancers who consciously incorporated visual material, and together with other pioneers, systematically expanded the idea of dance - on the threshold from modern dance to postmodern dance: away from the stage, from narrative, from predetermined choreography, from symbolism, from silence, and away from separation with the audience. Anna Halprin's path led her to work in urban or landscape spaces, to improvisation, to the inclusion of the emotional experience triggered by each movement, and to ritual -- in the sense of a meaningful experience for an entire group.

On her artistic path she has created more than 150 dance pieces that are performed worldwide, founded dance groups - including the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop in 1955 and the Tamalpa Institute with her daughter Daria Halprin in 1978 - wrote books, and since the 1940s has taught people of all ages and backgrounds. In class, Halprin tested methods that allowed for both freedom and structure in movement. She was interested in the structural conditions that promote spontaneous behavior in dance in order to avoid the recurrence of the same movement patterns. Because, since every movement is linked to a feeling, the same patterns of feeling are always relived. Through improvisation freedom can be achieved in a broader sense. The process is more important than the result. This is all the truer as Halprin began to take up social and political concerns in community workshops in order to react to racism, war and social exclusion in the middle of social hotspots. The street became the new setting for her artistic work, just as the landscape or nature did later.

Halprin's path anticipated much of what has become commonplace in the visual arts since the 1990s as "participatory" art. As a result, its achievements are celebrated in the dance world as much as in the field of performance art. Nonetheless, this focus arose from questioning the nature of dance. What is the original function of dance and how can it be updated in the present? Halprin's illness, which had challenged everything that had gone before, led the dancer to the answer: Dance is (also) a moment in which a collective comes together to

honour a cause within the framework of a ritual. This ultimately therapeutic attitude is the basis of Anna Halprin's legacy today: on the one hand, to have given back social relevance to the art form of dance, and on the other hand, to see dance as a vessel in which socially or individually transforming experiences are lived through. Thanks to the three films Ruedi Gerber has made on Anna Halprin so far, it is possible to gain a deeper insight into the monumental works of this extraordinary artist.

Kathleen Bühler, curator at the Kunstmuseum Bern, met Anna Halprin in 2010 on the occasion of the world premiere of Ruedi Gerber's film *Breath Made Visible* in Zurich.



Texts taken from the official website of the film <http://www.breathmadevisible.com>

Other suggested sites:

<https://www.annahalprin.org>

<https://www.tamalpa.org>

<https://lawrencehalprin.com>