

*Journey in Sensuality – Anna Halprin and Rodin*

Documentary dance film produced and directed by Ruedi Gerber

Cinematography by Adam Teichman

With The Sea Ranch Collective: Lakshmi Aysola, Joshua Bewig, Iu-Hui Chua Brian Collentine, Annie Hallat, Benjamin Jarret, Terre Parker, Lisa Pettigrew, Amanda Royce, Raina Stewart, Alexander Zendzian

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Dance that pushes sensual temporal boundaries and sculpture that pushes formal permanent boundaries have had a solid connection while simultaneously remaining in distinct opposition. In Ruedi Gerber's moving and thought-provoking one-hour film *Journey in Sensuality – Anna Halprin and Rodin* (2014) this flowing of temporary motion and the fixed permanence of solid art objects again comes into a stimulating dialogue. Spanning multiple decades and generations, Gerber beautifully chronicles avant-garde dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin as she takes inspiration from the sculpture of Auguste Rodin and passes Rodin's dramatic gesticulations along to her students, mostly emotion-filled millennials. They are artistic people for the most part, who have here put down their art and drafting tools and joined in with Halprin's touchy-feely eco-bent Sea Ranch Collective.

In the film, Rodin's gesturally expressive sculptures and Halprin's intimate, slow-motion, pelvic-based

postmodern dance process successfully come together under the cooled-out instrumental music of guitar genius Fred Frith to create an instructive and deeply emotional experience. On top of that it was lovely to see this also meditative film having its Paris première (where this erogenous story all began) at the Cinéma Espace Saint-Michel. Directly across the street from Neoclassical sculptor Francisque-Joseph Duret's 1860 sculpture of an expressively extended Michael the Archangel standing on a rock in flowing water over a writhing Satan. While in Paris for a major retrospective at the Centre Pompidou, from which Gerber shot the acclaimed dance documentary *Breath Made Visible* (2010), Halprin is captured mourning the pervasive human violence of our time after seeing images of famished naked bodies at the Memorial de la Shoah (Shoah Memorial / Holocaust Museum). Already her performance in Paris has a tortured, slow-motion quality similar to that of post-Hiroshima Butoh. Queued in by one of her female performers and in the hopes of lifting her spirits, Halprin visits the Musée Rodin and is so deeply moved that she decides to create a new dance performance based on some of Rodin's highly expressive figurative sculptures. The film takes us through that fascinating process, mostly carried out on the rough and rocky Northern Californian beach, and ends with a nude performance by Sea Ranch Collective in a near redwood forest.



Anna Halprin in performance Paris 2010

While the inclusion of some archival footage of Halprin's much earlier dances would have been appreciated, the majority of the footage take us within the workshop that trains the dancers to prepare for this earthbound performance. Halprin places the participants in the type of slow-motion self-exploration I associate with tai chi and the dances of Deborah Hay, with whom I participated in a dance workshop in my earlier years. Working on the beach, we watch the participants struggle to create intimate contact with the natural textures and surface of the environment when blindfolded. Through them we are invited to pay attention to the ecosystem from the inside of their bodies. Halprin's technique of kinesthetic awareness is one that stresses an immersive attention to the environment on an emotional level, and requires dancers to expand their scope of obligations as a fragile

human body within the context of the rough seashore. We see these people as innocently genuine and often beautiful, typical of Halprin's lifelong quest for non-stylized dance movement.

Based on Rodin's belief that "the world will only be happy when all people have the souls of artists," Halprin goes on to prepare the dancers for the performance, using a selection of Rodin's sculptures as models, to create a performance that is at once poetically cosmo-ecological and visually powerful for the non-cynically inclined. Human-ecological connections are established by entangling the naked dancers in the sensual net of nature that connects them to the water, rocks, trees and sky. Knotting them in a common story of multiple being where animals, humans, plants (living and dead) each bear the consequences of the others' ways of living and dying. A key ecological question Halprin, a cancer survivor, poses here is about the needs that ought to be met in the ongoing creation of healthy rapports and connections. This is consistent with Halprin's integration of therapeutic concepts and techniques into her work in the late sixties and seventies, working with Gestalt therapists Fritz Perls and John Rinn to develop dances which would serve a healing function (she has also devised workshops and rituals to help cancer and AIDS/HIV patients). So for quite some time her work has been asking: how does humanity achieve the task of holding onto its existence, and what does this achievement require?

The resulting naked redwood forest performance demonstrates that we sensual homo sapiens are not an external disturbance within nature but a beautiful addition within the complex natural system. Halprin's dance training, based on pelvic centering while groping and sensing the textures and forms of vibrant nature, suggests that in the long term, it may not only be the magnitude of the damage we have done to nature, with our unbalanced pollution habits, but our disruption of the fabric of ecological recovery and healing that is determining the rate and scope of global destruction.

Halprin, born Anna Schuman in 1920 in Wilmette, Illinois, not far from dance/sculpture maverick Loie Fuller's hometown of Hinsdale (also mine), at an early age began studying the techniques of Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan and went on to attend the University of Wisconsin from 1940-1944 where she first studied dance with Margaret H'Doubler. She then moved to New York where she studied modern dance with Hanya Holm and Martha Graham and then founded the San Francisco Dancer's Workshop in 1959 along with students Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, sculptor Robert Morris and John Cage. Halprin began incorporating a variety of Cage-like chance-generated techniques to determine the pattern of her work that developed the concept of task movement in which dancers repeated a simple task over and over again in order to focus upon kinesthetic responses. During this time she collaborated with the minimal composers Terry Riley and La Monte Young and experimented with mixing dance with spoken word in the Dada theater tradition.

Halprin's artistic achievement, her glory, as seen in the film, seems to me to be her successful cross-generational collaborative transmission that continues to inform and move us to this day (and beyond). This is something that

can only be accomplished through relative permanence. Therefore, it is interesting to contrast her approach to sculpture and dance with generation X's foremost, highly celebrated, dance-art practitioner Tino Sehgal, who this autumn is presenting something of a retrospective of his ephemeral and unrecorded constructed situations at the Palais de Tokyo. Sehgal, a choreographer who mostly makes dance for the museum setting, is celebrated for challenging the conventional museum exhibition of permanent art objects by placing a central focus on social interaction rather than on inanimate art objects. The obvious point of comparison is Sehgal's work "Kiss" (2007), first exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago that has two dancers kiss and touch, eventually resembling embracing couples from historical works of art, starting with Auguste Rodin's "The Kiss" (1889). Given a certain degree of charm in this work, Sehgal, by focusing on the fleeting gestures of lived experience, rather than on the permanence of material objects or recordings, deliberately limits his cross-generational collaborative potential to the present moment.

By contrast, the impression I had throughout this film is that the permanence of sculpture, even of kinetic sculpture such as that of Jean Tinguely, who is currently enjoying a retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, is indispensable. Understandably, Gerber also made the documentary film *Meta-Mecano* about Tinguely and Niki de Saint Phalle's joining with the Tinguely Museum.

This long-lasting benefit of merging the solidity of sculpture with the dynamic temporal is something I have also experienced through Rodin on a regular basis while living in Paris. Every morning, on my way to the gym, I pass by the distinctively onanistic "Le Monument à Balzac" (The Monument to Balzac, 1898) by Rodin at the crossing of the boulevards Montparnasse and Raspail. Viewing it, and reviewing, in every climatic condition has a deep value to my life that my temporary interactions with Sehgal's performative contributions to contemporary art distinctively lacks, regardless of their passing charms. Watching *Journey in Sensuality* reinforces the indispensability of art access to every generation, while delivering a dose of clarifying charm of its own.

Joseph Nechvatal