

# Anna Halprin's 10 Myths: Mutual Creation and Non-totalizing Collectivity

Tusa Shea\*

## Abstract

This article argues that within the cultural field of American event-based art practices during the 1960s, artists were modeling forms of contingent non-hierarchical collectivity. I read West Coast artist Anna Halprin's experiments in "Mutual Creation" through the anarchist lens of Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone in order to demonstrate that her participatory events reconnected embodied experience to social experience and, in this way, exposed the violent nature of authoritarian collectivism.

Throughout the 1960s, an emphasis on the creation of human relationships was emerging in art practices that expanded beyond discrete formal divisions into an unspecified territory inhabited by artists who focused on the "participatory event." Initially, American art critics and historians attempted to frame such practices in relation to the dominant analytical paradigm of formalism or its foremost alternative at the time, the existential act. Both positions tended to adopt an individualist stance informed and supported by a Marxist-based argument against mass culture's "all-consuming" totalitarian drive.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, the individual experience

---

<sup>1</sup> In particular, although Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg had an ongoing debate about the nature of abstract expressionist painting, both were influenced by the Marxist critique of mass culture and the ideological role of representation, which

\* Tusa Shea is a doctoral candidate in Art History at the University of Victoria, where she is completing a dissertation on the emergence of dialogical art practices and the creation of embodied, contingent collectivity in event-based art of the 1960s.

of autonomous art was understood as a primary mode of opposition to collectivism and its codification of authentic human experience. Significantly, however, a number of artists were also producing participatory events that encouraged the creation of temporary non-hierarchical collectivity. In fact, consistent efforts to bring about anarchic social organization can be discerned in the cultural field of American event-based art practices of the 1960s.

One example is Anna Halprin's experiment in "mutual creation," in which she explored the relationship between the individual and the collective through her audience participation series of 1967–68, *Ten Myths*. Through these events she put the social power dynamics existing between individuals into a process-based dialogue that modeled a temporary form of non-totalizing collectivity. As she explained her artistic stance: "the old idea of the artist is that he was intuitive, which meant that he knew what he was doing but nobody else did. Therefore he had power. He was a hero and his art came down to you. I find that kind of hierarchical structure oppressive."<sup>2</sup> In contrast, she stated, "as an artist I am interested in methods of working collectively. I want to give up power in order to help other people find their own creativity in meaningful ways."<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the creative art experience advocated by Halprin takes place in the embodied present moment; creative action is itself a dialogue negotiated in presence. Because embodied dialogue defies abstraction on a fundamental level, I argue that it has important repercussions for the kinds of social relations generated.

Halprin's approach to event-based art as an embodied experience that creates a dialogue between participants is grounded in an alternative understanding of aesthetic experience that parallels, rather than opposes or deconstructs, the dominant formalist approach. It emerges from a pragmatic understanding of the social role of the arts in John Dewey's philosophy and Bauhaus principles, which later encouraged her to adapt aspects of Fritz Perls' and Paul Goodman's Gestalt therapy for participatory events. These holistic approaches share an emphasis on experience as something more than an individualistic "internal" matter and embodiment as a *transactional* state of

---

led them to defend art's autonomy. Each reasoned that if mass culture communicates through the common languages and symbols that reinforce an oppressive society, then autonomous art must avoid using those common languages and symbols.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Halprin as quoted in Wilma Salisbury, "Getting High on People," *The Plain Dealer*, 25 January 1970, 1E.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

being that is always in dialogue with its environment.<sup>4</sup> In a similar way, anarchism too asserts that knowledge cannot be pinned down to an abstraction or a generalized representation without severely restricting the dynamic nature of human experience. The three viewpoints of pragmatism, Gestalt, and anarchism share an emphasis on direct experience/action as a process of relations between people, events, and things that cannot be fully understood if isolated from the context of a holistic situation: all three reject abstraction in favour of direct experience. In each case, these ways of understanding human experience are based on biological models of symbiotic ecosystems that privilege the organic state of embodiment as a site of transaction. In other words, they share a deeply dialogical foundation that places the embodied participant in the forefront and refuses to substitute “texts” for actual bodies.

Indeed, anarchism is a social and political theory that can accommodate the embodied subject without either essentializing the body or treating it as a surface constructed by discourses.

In what follows, I analyze key events in Halprin's *Ten Myths* series through the lens of anarchist theorist Hakim Bey's “Temporary Autonomous Zone” (TAZ). Because Bey's anarchist model of sociality does not seek a hegemonic moment, it provides an alternative collectivity, modeled on what Richard Day has termed the “logic of affinity” rather than hegemony, which helps to clarify the social meaning of embodied experience.<sup>5</sup> Exploring the community-building role played by the body in Halprin's *Ten Myths* through Bey's concept of the TAZ allows for the connection between embodied experience and non-hierarchical collectivity to come to the forefront.

### Ten Myths: An experiment in Mutual Creation

Anna Halprin and a group of collaborators, including members of the San Francisco Dancer's Workshop, musician Casey Sonnabend

---

<sup>4</sup> I have borrowed this term from philosopher Shannon Sullivan's interpretation of John Dewey's “transactional body” in which the material experience of the active subject brings knowing and doing together. See: Sullivan, *Living Across and through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).

and artist Patrick Hickey, staged *Ten Myths* over a series of ten Thursday evenings between October 1967 and February 1968 at her Divisadero Street studio in San Francisco.<sup>6</sup> Each event was loosely structured to allow participants to explore subjects such as conflict, aggression, celebration, and play. (Fig. 1) For the most part, participants were an eclectic mix of students, professors, artists, businessmen, architects, tourists, homemakers and other curious individuals who responded to a series of announcements inviting them to engage in an experimental evening of mutual creation.<sup>7</sup> Although the initial purpose of the *Myths* series was to explore the audience/performer relationship, with Halprin and her collaborators acting as guides or models, participants quickly transcended this relationship to become collaborators themselves. According to Halprin, “Myths became a total involvement through audience participation . . . Not in any abstract way but through physical actions.”<sup>8</sup> Above all, participants were encouraged to physically experience each event. She explained that a myth is not only a discursive structure outside of oneself: “the symbol of people’s myth,” stated Halprin, “is their own body. How people experience their body is their story.”<sup>9</sup> What might she mean here, and how can we understand myth as an embodied form without seeing it through a constructionist lens? Halprin’s understanding of how the body is implicated in collectivity was informed by holistic principles in which movement is not so much a performance for others as an embodied experience that integrates physical bodies and their environments. This distinction is significant and bears some elaboration.

<sup>6</sup> Any interpretation of ephemeral events of the past is shaped by the archival documents and the testimonies of the participants. In this case, what remains of *Ten Myths* are Halprin’s accounts, newspaper reports, commentary by members of the Dancer’s Workshop, the testimony and written comments of public participants, photographs, and Halprin’s written “scores,” which she developed during the course of staging *Ten Myths*. My description is based on these sources and is intended to highlight their dialogical purpose. I therefore draw out and emphasize aspects that are pertinent to my own analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994, “Dancers’ Workshop questionnaires, Ten Myths.” See also, Ann Halprin, “Mutual Creation,” *Tulane Drama Review* (Fall, 1968), 163–174.

<sup>8</sup> Anna Halprin, “Introductory Statement, Ten Myths,” Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Kaplan, ed. *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 203.



**Figure 1** *Masks*, *Ten Myths* 1967–68. Originally published in Anna Halprin and Douglas Ross, “Mutual Creation,” *The Drama Review (TDR)* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1968): 163–75.

The critical approach to the body tends to interpret it either as a surface on which a text is produced by discourses of power or as the essentialist “natural” body. One of the limitations of categorizing bodies as “natural” is that they tend to be understood as either deeply immersed in a hidden inner world of inexpressible feeling or subject to a generalizing force at work in which expressive gestures are seen as universally understood signs across time and different

cultural contexts. Conversely, if we allow that body gestures are socially constructed, then interpretations tend to assert that bodies are merely surfaces on which a text is written and performed. According to this paradigm, only the surface of the body has the ability to be discursive since it is the “mirror” of socially constructed identity — an abstract language that can be codified and shared. In this way, the body as text will always be subject to ideological violence and implicated in totalizing collectivity. However, I want to interrogate Halprin’s concept of the natural body in terms of its “transactional” qualities, an aspect that becomes especially evident through her use of Gestalt therapy techniques.

Gestalt therapy emphasizes the experience rather than the representation (or performance) of self. Thus, if we begin with the holistic notion that bodies are “transactional” processes, then no gesture is isolated and can stand for one meaning alone. Each manifests in relation to external and internal transactions that, as John Dewey emphasizes, are always moving through the permeable boundaries of self and world. Dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar describes the body in a similar way as a process “that organizes as it apprehends and becomes what it organizes.”<sup>10</sup> “The body does not hold experience,” she notes, “rather, it is experience, a process rather than an object.”<sup>11</sup> In Gestalt therapy, this process is called the “contact boundary,” which is explained as “the organ of a particular *relation* of the organism and the environment.”<sup>12</sup> Contact, according to Perls and Goodman, is not a single act with an end-point. Contact occurs as a process between the organism and the environment; it is a physical experience in which one becomes aware of the sensate self *as action*. To put it another way, Gestalt therapy focuses on the present moment as experienced by the embodied individual, but since there is no fixed or stable “now” to pin down, this means embracing a changing “now.” One actively adjusts to an ongoing process occurring within the organism/environment field.<sup>13</sup> Anna Halprin integrated Gestalt therapy techniques into her workshop practice as a way to focus the

---

<sup>10</sup> Deidre Sklar, *Dancing with the Virgin — Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 193.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Fritz Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Volume II: Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), 269. My emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

body-mind on the present moment and to maintain awareness that the "contact boundary" is the self in dialogue with its environment.

The first three events, "Creation," "Atonement," and "Trails," were largely orchestrated and developed by Halprin and her close collaborators at the Dancers' Workshop to incorporate group body contact, improvisation, and heightened awareness of the environment. (Fig. 2) It was during the fourth event, "Totem Chairs," that the participants began to take a more proactive role in creation. Initially, Halprin planned to have the audience sit next to and observe designated performers who were costumed and surrounded by empty chairs. After they balked at this passive role, Halprin encouraged the participants to take the evening in whatever direction they wanted. The entire group eventually constructed a "gigantic totem pole" out of all the chairs in the room and then enacted a dance procession around it.<sup>14</sup> The evening ended with anarchist poet James Broughton talking to the group about myths, chairs, and totems. "Totem Chairs" and the following two events, "Maze" and "Dreams," constitute a process of working through problems inherent in group dynamics, specifically the ways in which individuals exert power over others. "Totem Chairs" marks the beginning of a more complex dialogue between Halprin, her collaborators, and the participants who attended the event. Because Halprin was sensitive to hierarchical social structures she was mindful that dialogue between participants could result in unforeseen outcomes. Indeed, the idea of "mutual creation" invites each participant to take an active role in creating an event.

The fifth event, "Maze," provides a prime example of mutual creation. During this *Myth*, several members of the Dancers' Workshop took up positions within a maze constructed from a grid of wire, plastic and newspaper, with the purpose of confronting the audience at strategic points during their exploration. The plan was for the audience to move through the maze and then come out whenever they wanted. They were then invited to enter a briefing room and write words that represented their experience before returning back to the maze again. The participants, however, had a different response. Instead of following the plan, they pulled apart the original maze and constructed one of their own.<sup>15</sup> Rather than stop the process of

<sup>14</sup> Anna Halprin, "Myths," Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Pierce, "The Anna Halprin Story," *Village Voice*, 10 (March 1975): 5.



**Figure 2** *Atonement, Ten Myths* 1967–68. Originally published in Anna Halprin and Douglas Ross, “Mutual Creation,” *The Drama Review (TDR)* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1968): 163–75.

destruction, Halprin’s response to what might have looked like a disaster for a director was to work with the group through the chaotic process. Initially she was horrified that “the group tore apart this beautiful form with exuberant violence and wild energy . . .”; but, she acknowledged, “what they left, or reconstructed, while crude by comparison, was more beautiful in its responsiveness to what was happening at that very moment.”<sup>16</sup> For the participants, confrontation with the maze environment prompted creative direct action, which manifested in a desire to structure their own space. For Halprin, such moments of confusion were part of a process of dialogue that would lead to moments of order in a constant cycle of deconstruction and construction.

Given the participants’ desire to control their own environment, for the sixth myth, “Dreams,” Halprin divided the participants into two groups. Each was asked to construct an environment for the other group from assorted props that included random objects such

<sup>16</sup> Anna Halprin, “Myths notes” Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.



as ropes, ladders, boxes, risers and so forth. Here, she was asking the participants to consider issues of process, play and engagement, but also free will and safety — essentially to take on the responsibility that she herself had been assuming for the group. According to Halprin, the event generated an intense discussion about how to demarcate “difference” within the two groups. One created a challenging obstacle course that they tried to run the other group through, causing hostile feelings between them. A key issue that emerged was the exertion of power over other bodies. To further explore this, the seventh event, “Carry,” marked a return to body contact (Fig. 3). It was structured around participants voluntarily carrying another person through a passage between two groups. The groups entered the studio and sat on risers facing each other for a sustained time interval while drumming ensued. Then, Halprin asked if anyone would volunteer to choose a person and carry the individual through the passage between the two groups. People began to pick up other people and carry them. After a while, Halprin asked if those who wanted to be carried would stand in the passage, so that eventually everyone was either carrying or being carried. Part of the experience is to feel the weight of the other as an immediate and physical personal responsibility — to make the other, as a subject not an object, a physically present being. It should be difficult at this level of physical effort to objectify or abstract another person, and yet while some participants found it cathartic to place their bodies in the hands of others, others found the experience frightening and manipulative.<sup>17</sup>

One of the problems encountered in trying to interpret these events in a meaningful way is that experiences vary from person to person, and there is no way to measure how fully “engaged” or “collective” an experience is. As one participant in a later version of *Myths* noted “if you feel part of a community, then the community exists — at least for you. But the community didn’t exist for everyone — it didn’t exist for me.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, a number of commentators have questioned, aside from the direct experience itself, what the point of all this “togetherness” is — how might it be effective in the wider social world? How can we talk about it, and, further, why should we understand it as art?

<sup>17</sup> “Comments From Some Workshop Dancers,” *Tulane Drama Review* (Fall 1968): 175.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Birtwistle quoted in “Ann Halprin: a symposium,” *Cleveland After Dark*, January 21, 1970, 5.



**Figure 3** Carry, *Ten Myths* 1967–68. Originally published in Anna Halprin and Douglas Ross, “Mutual Creation,” *The Drama Review (TDR)* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1968): 163–75.

### Ten Myths: A Temporary Autonomous Zone

There are two prevalent ways in which Halprin’s events have been framed within current scholarly discourse. One is as avant-garde art performance. This is the dominant approach to understanding event-based art within art history, and it understands such works within the linear narrative of an oppositional avant-garde art tradition. However, to categorize Halprin’s events as performance art is to trap them in the binary of spectator/performer and to ignore their experiential holistic foundation – a foundation that allows for a constructive understanding of the embodied *dialogical* imperative of event-based art. The avant-garde narrative also buttresses the individualism versus collectivism binary that precludes social dialogue and tends to see collectivity as a negative totalizing force.

A more sympathetic paradigm for understanding Halprin’s work is as “community performance.” Attention to community art practice tends to allow for productive analogies to ritual, festival, and other

popular cultural forms. With its American roots in turn-of-the-century social programs such as the Settlement House Movement and later related initiatives such as the Federal Arts Project and Dewey's own book on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, Halprin's events fit more comfortably into a community performance art framework.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, throughout the 50s and 60s, much of her artistic practice took the form of community-based work with children, including teaching dance at two settlement homes and establishing the Marin County children's dance cooperative, as well as collaboration with her husband Lawrence Halprin on community planning projects in which citizens worked actively to develop a vision of their built and landscaped environment.<sup>20</sup> However, there are two problematic issues that arise related to the "community performance" approach to understanding event-based art. A tendency to romanticize the notion of community as a positive feeling of "togetherness" can lead to the collective art event being interpreted uncritically as a "healing" practice.<sup>21</sup> Art historian Miwon Kwon explains that the assumption of "mythic unity" suppresses diversity by absorbing gender, race, culture and class under one generalized group identity, and, in this way, masks social inequity behind an appearance of commonality.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, theatre historian Richard Schechner has taken Halprin to task for her optimistic belief in the power of community, questioning whether dancing while blindfolded, holding hands, chanting, and

<sup>19</sup> The Settlement House Movement began as a British 19<sup>th</sup>-century social reform movement in which philanthropic individuals — often privileged women of the upper and middle classes — settled in urban poor neighborhoods in order to promote culture and art, education, socializing, and health improvement. This movement spread to the United States when Jane Adams and Ellen Gates Starr established Hull House in Chicago. In the U.S., immigrant neighborhoods were often targeted for Settlement Homes. Another notable participant in this movement was the anarchist and social activist Dorothy Day.

<sup>20</sup> Libby Worth and Helen Poynor, *Anna Halprin* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7. Halprin's work with children throughout her career has always been community-centred. She was instrumental in forming the Marin Dance Cooperatives beginning in 1947, which provided an affordable and open forum for children to learn body movement and dance.

<sup>21</sup> Art historian Grant Kester discusses the problematic ethical implications for artists engaged in community-based art in which "each new site, issue or community becomes another opportunity to reaffirm the artist's social transcendence through the language of art, which can bridge cultural differences and heal social divisions," in *Conversation Pieces: Community & Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>22</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 119.

building mazes can have any real effect on larger more complex social issues, such as systemic violence.<sup>23</sup>

The connection between community art and “healing” has also encouraged interpretations of Halprin’s work as a form of “group therapy.” This perspective sees her events as psychologically therapeutic for individuals and relates her work to the human potential movement. From the mid-60s onward, Halprin integrated therapeutic bodywork into her Dancers’ Workshop practice, including Gestalt therapy, Rolfing, Feldenkrais and Psychokinetic Visualization.<sup>24</sup> Through her association with Fritz Perls she began to teach at the Esalen Institute and, in 1978, she established the Talampa Institute together with her daughter, Daria Halprin, to explore the relationship between psychology, body therapy and creativity. As a result of these later developments, a number of scholars have interpreted *Ten Myths*, and other events, as personal art therapy — an individualistic pursuit having little to say about art outside of the experience itself.<sup>25</sup>

On a larger scale of insufficiency, however, community performance and avant-garde performance approaches share a common problematic assumption; both tend to understand the collective as a particular kind of hegemonic socio-political structure. In this reading, the individual is defined as an abstract unit of the collective and the collective coheres through discourse — that is, the sharing of fixed representational signs between disembodied universal subjects. In this way, a generalized static identity that represses individual autonomy and ignores embodied experience is assumed a priori. The problem with this model is that it cannot account for communalist events that neither presume relations of abstraction nor adhere to definitions of performance. In other words, it cannot understand works that do not seek a representational presence within the visible “public sphere” of communal identity.<sup>26</sup> Neither “avant-garde” the “community performance” approaches can do the work to clear us of this analytic tangle, a dilemma which has prompted Grant Kester,

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Schechner and Anna Halprin, “Anna Halprin: A Life in Ritual. An Interview.” *TDR* 33, No. 2 (Summer, 1989): 67–73.

<sup>24</sup> For more on this subject see Worth and Poyner, *Anna Halprin*, 62–64.

<sup>25</sup> A recent publication describes Halprin as “an experimental dance artist and ritualist, creating participatory events for social change and community healing.” See, Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: an Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2007), 27.

<sup>26</sup> See for example, Nick Crossley and John Michael Roberts, *After Habermas: New Perspectives on the Public Sphere* (Blackwell, 2004), 1–27; See also, Sandra Jovchelovitch, *Knowledge in Context: Representations, Community and Culture* (Routledge, 2007).

for example, to question, "Is it indeed possible to conceive of an emancipatory model of dialogical interaction?"<sup>27</sup>

I suggest that, in order to do so, we understand participatory collective events as cohering, not through representation, but through the somatic transactional body. In order to understand what is at stake here, I want to look at Halprin's events so as to highlight the connection between embodied experience and the creation of temporary non-hierarchical collectivity. Halprin's events are best understood as enactments of a non-totalizing collective experience akin to Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) — an alternative space of freedom that emerges in unmediated moments of direct experience and recedes as those experiences are abstracted and represented.<sup>28</sup> The TAZ can be productively compared to the liminal space of Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnival."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, for Bey, a TAZ is a "peak experience" in which participants step outside of conventional behavior into a "festival interval." It can also be likened to Paul Goodman's concept of "communitas." In his book of 1947, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Way of Life*, co-authored with his architect brother Percival, Goodman recommended we cultivate non-hierarchical forms of collectivity sustained through personal experiences of solidarity. For Goodman, "communitas" referred to a feeling of togetherness that occurs in an unstructured contingent community where everyone is equal.<sup>30</sup> Goodman's notion of an open, non-hegemonic, and temporary collective was informed by the combined force of his pacifist-oriented anarchism and his understanding of the gestalt notion of "ecological holism" in which an organism is always shifting in relation to its changing environment.<sup>31</sup> Like Goodman's communitas, a TAZ strikes at ideas, but avoids permanent solutions.<sup>32</sup>

Of particular importance is how the TAZ privileges the holistic transactional body. In anarchist social relations a body cannot be understood as a thing owned or abstracted by a State — as a number or an identity certificate, for example.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, in holistic thinking

<sup>27</sup> Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z., The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 99.

<sup>29</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Paul and Percival Goodman, *Communitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 109.

<sup>31</sup> Theodore Roszack, *The Making of A Counter Culture* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1968), 188.

<sup>32</sup> Bey, *T.A.Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, 101.

the body is understood as an active process that always exceeds the kind of objectification upon which the machinations of representation rely. Both pragmatism and anarchism firmly reject the abstractionist approach of instrumental rationality and acknowledge that the body fosters a different kind of knowledge gained through direct experience. Bey's anarchist social model allows us to address two problematic areas of critique that arise in Halprin's *Ten Myths* that have prompted commentators to question its efficacy. The first criticism is that the embodied group experience in these events did not solve issues of violence or conflict — neither for individuals nor for the collective. The second criticism is that the temporary collectivity generated was meaningful only in the moment and was otherwise socially and politically ineffectual.

A strong criticism of participatory experiential events is the naive belief that face-to-face encounters will solve the totalizing problems of abstract collectivism. The idea being subjected to doubt is that problems of bureaucratic or State oppression can be overcome by generating empathy through a face-to-face exchange of ideas and feelings. In several of the *Myths* conflict was experienced on both individual (physical) and collective (abstract) levels. Indeed, one of the specific goals of *Ten Myths* was to foreground conflict in order to open it up to a dialogical process. A key issue that *Ten Myths* brought to the forefront is that all violence has both an embodied and an ideological component. For example, in one version of the sixth *Myth*, "Dreams," two groups constructed challenging environments for each other to experience. One group "organized a series of ordeals, [in which participants . . .] were lifted and passed over head in the air, then rolled on soft sponge rubber . . . , then abruptly hoisted up against a block, faced into a bright light, [and] shoved into a carton which was being noisily hit from the outside."<sup>34</sup> Some members of the group undergoing these obstacles were so offended and disturbed by the hostile environment created by the organizing group that they left. One participant even took Halprin aside and reprimanded her. She was not only criticized for "having allowed

<sup>33</sup> For example, in "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," Emma Goldman explains that along with liberation from government, what anarchism stands for is "the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property . . ." See Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1917), 68.

<sup>34</sup> Anna Halprin, *Ten Myths Notes: Myth II Alter the Environment*, np, nd. Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.

it to go in this direction, but accused of deliberately pointing it in that way. He was outraged that such feelings should be expressed.”<sup>35</sup> Yet for Halprin, to “ritualize aggression” through such an experience was part of the constructive, dialogical purpose of *Ten Myths*.<sup>36</sup>

It is revealing that the man who felt especially victimized during “Dreams” appealed to an authority — in this case to Halprin. His reaction to conflict was to step outside of the event and re-establish order through the rules of the dominant “social contract.”<sup>37</sup> Within the event itself, however, there was also diminished conflict without an appeal to external authority. Verbal dialogue between participants allowed them to associate their physical experiences in the obstacle course with other less tangible forms of violence, namely, State totalitarianism and racism. The evening ended in a dance.<sup>38</sup> While it could be argued that this verbal dialogue itself was also an intervention of external authority — in this case codified language — such an argument ultimately depends on a constructionist view of the individual subject. I am taking a holistic approach that sees bodies as participating in dialogue through experience. Embodied dialogue is not separate from, nor is it equal to, textual language. It operates in relation.

There are two approaches to conflict evident in Halprin's *Myths*. One seeks to negate power struggles between people by invoking the political order present within the dominant society. The other seeks to understand power through an embodied dialogue between people. This distinction can be further clarified. One of the solutions to violent acts perpetrated by individuals is to establish abstract rules that make up the “social contract.” The underlying logic here is that as individuals cohere into collectives they mutually consent to give up autonomy in order to gain the benefits of political order.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Halprin's gendered readings are idiosyncratic. She did not address the fact that many of the outraged participants were also men, and that more men attended her group events than women.

<sup>37</sup> The social contract here refers generally to the idea that individuals agree as a collective group to adhere to rules and conventions that protect them from harming each other. Most commonly, the social contract describes a political relationship between individuals and their governing State form. An assumption is that without the social contract individuals would act idiosyncratically according to their own desires for power or according to individual conscience. See April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Routledge and Kegan & Paul Ltd., 1971), 14–17.

<sup>38</sup> Anna Halprin, *Ten Myths Notes: Myth II Alter the Environment*, np, nd. Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.

A core assumption in modern Western culture is that without this social contract life would be, as philosopher Thomas Hobbes put it, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>39</sup> Physical violence and other forms of direct harm affect both individuals and the ability of members of a collective to generate feelings of belonging or trust through mutual support. However, the social contract itself is also, in its rationalizing abstracting capacity, a form of violence against the individual. Just as physical violence disrupts our ability to establish a sense of community, so too does the violence of abstraction precisely because it separates us from our embodied selves. It substitutes itself for face-to-face embodied sociality; it is a form of violence similar to being physically restrained or wounded, which “amputates” the body from the mind and privileges the latter.

We can see this logic at work in the above example in which physical challenges were offensive not only because they were abrupt and possibly physically or emotionally painful, but because they objectified and abstracted the participants’ identities in the same way that the generalizing forces of, say, racism deny the direct experience and the diversity of a subject’s relations. Recognition of affinity — of another’s subjecthood — is a social connection, whereas objectifying the “other” is a form of violence that we experience as pain. Thus the pain experienced by the participants had both direct physical and abstract components, as events themselves allowed for the connection between the abstract and the concrete to be experienced. Temporary events such as *Ten Myths* do not erase or solve conflicts, but they do allow for the experience of creating a process through which to address them without succumbing to the abstracting operations of State intervention and authority. In this way, *Ten Myths* temporarily reconnected sensory knowledge to sociality. Thus, participants gained the embodied experience of collectivity with all its processes of order and disorder. As Halprin pointed out, “ritualizing violence” makes conflict physically present: “it is there to deal with.”<sup>40</sup> I want to keep this notion of experiencing

---

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Hobbes. *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*, ed. by Ian Shapiro (Yale University Press; 2010). The anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin offered a different view of human sociality based on mutual aid rather than competition. He criticized Hobbes’ version of humanity in a violent and competitive “state of nature,” and, using Darwin’s theory of evolution as a starting point, he understood that all animals — even humans — exist and thrive in a cooperative symbiotic relationship to each other and their environments. Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid a Factor of Evolution* (London: Heinemann, 1902).  
[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/kropotkin/mutaidch3.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/kropotkin/mutaidch3.html)



an alternative social space in which conflict is physically present in mind as I address the other main criticism of participatory art events, which is that they are politically ineffective and matter only during the moment of experience.

One may argue that, seen through the standard logic of hegemony, a face-to-face temporary mode of collective experience brought about through an ephemeral art event is invisible to the public sphere and, therefore, politically ineffectual. For example, some of the dialogue generated by "Dreams" dealt with issues of physical violence between men and women, but this did not resolve any systemic gender biases within a wider social context. Permanent solutions, however, were never the point of *Ten Myths*. The goal was not to move toward resolution, but to maintain an unfolding process. Process is always precarious and therefore active and in dialogue. It compromises and sabotages analytic certainty and totalizing social structures. Tellingly, none of the *Ten Myths* events attempted to solve specific social conflicts. For example, even though the third *Myth*, "Trails," eliminated the objectifying power of the gaze by having all participants blindfolded as they felt their way along lines of bodies, the haptic collective it formed did not dissolve or take the place of other collective identities in the wider social sphere, but instead emerged within them temporarily to provide a heightened sensory experience of the contact zone (Fig. 4) In this way, during the event, collectivity became a palpable experience rather than an abstract concept based on reductive racial or gendered stereotypes. *Ten Myths* created collective identities that were not entirely stable, essentializing, or totalizing, but, rather, were rhizomatic, contingent "zones" where participants could temporarily experience autonomy from dominant social codes and structures.

Although it would seem that these manifestations of freedom experienced by individuals could have no lasting impact, sociologist Alberto Melucci's approach to social protest can help us to see that, in this context, temporarily enacting autonomous zones of collectivity has a two-pronged effect. They can transform the power systems that "hide behind the rationality of organizational or administrative procedures" into physically present operations.<sup>41</sup> As Melucci notes,

<sup>40</sup> Anna Halprin, *Ten Myths Notes: Myth II Alter the Environment*, np, nd. Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco, California, Anna Halprin Papers 32, 1932–1994.

<sup>41</sup> Melucci, *Nomads of the Present* (Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 76. Melucci's framework for analyzing new social movements is influenced by phenomenology, Gestalt therapy,



**Figure 4** Trails, *Ten Myths* 1967–68. Originally published in Anna Halprin and Douglas Ross, “Mutual Creation,” *The Drama Review (TDR)* Vol. 13, No. 1 (Autumn 1968): 163–75.

“power which is recognizable is also negotiable, since it can be confronted, and because it is forced to take differences into account.”<sup>42</sup> At the same time, “rendering power visible,” as he puts it, also underlines the fact that it is usually masked by the rationality of organizational

---

and process-oriented approaches that emphasize the active construction of collective identity; see 183.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

and bureaucratic procedures.<sup>43</sup> Thus, autonomous zones of collectivity not only reveal what was hidden, they reveal the procedural nature of masking operations of power. Second, making power, conflict, and difference physically present reunites us temporarily with our bodies, and reinforces the body's role as the primary medium of communication.<sup>44</sup> To suggest that direct experience ends with an individual is to imagine the body as a sealed container of experience. The transactional body, on the other hand, should be understood as a process of exchange within a network of relations. With this understanding we can interpret embodied experience as a "signal" that travels through individual bodies' experiences into networks of relations.

Both Bey and Melucci use Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's social model of the rhizome in which networks of relations between groups and individuals are dynamic, non-linear and non-hierarchical.<sup>45</sup> Such networks are embedded in everyday life, and the individuals who unfold them are not stable or unified; they are constantly changing and producing meanings through relationships with others.<sup>46</sup> As Paul Goodman noted, the temporary experience of *communitas* may disintegrate, but the people who shared the embodied experience "irradiate society" through new enactments and realizations that signal a desire for meaningful alternatives to the dominant social system.<sup>47</sup> In this way, enacting a TAZ both models an alternative form of collectivity that puts autonomy into practice and provides an embodied experience that travels through networks of relations.

Tactically, by creating events in which an embodied face-to-face dialogue engenders temporary collectivity, Halprin and her participants manifested a social space that was physically present but invisible to the State. According to Bey, "the Temporary Autonomous Zone's greatest strength lies in this invisibility — the State cannot recognize it because History has no definition of it . . . as soon as the Temporary Autonomous Zone is named [that is, re-presented or mediated] it must vanish."<sup>48</sup> In this way, experiential forms such as *Ten Myths* can be understood as social spaces that purposefully escape

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>45</sup> For more see Karen Houle, "Micropolitics," in Charles J. Stivale ed., *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2005), 90–91.

<sup>46</sup> Melucci, *Nomads*, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Goodman, *Communitas*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Bey, *T.A.Z.*, 99.

the stabilizing tendencies of the dominant system. Because the art event is temporary, it does not engage in any direct conflict with the dominant collective form, while modeling a non-totalitarian collective in the here and now. Not engaging in conflict with the State is a way of subverting the struggle for power that characterizes hierarchical social structures and totalizing communities. As Richard Day points out, to oppose the State through its own established channels of political opposition is simply to remain within the same logic of hegemony, with the shared goal of seizing and maintaining power. An affinity-based approach, on the other hand, seeks to bring to light the limitations of the established political process.<sup>49</sup>

Looking at *Ten Myths* through the lens of the TAZ can also help us understand more clearly that it was an art work. *Ten Myths* created a space to step outside of the dominant social and political system and experience temporary freedom from abstraction. Here, however, freedom resides not in stable things such as an art object or the special abstracted status of the artist, but in the dynamic embodied experience. Clearly, *Ten Myths* does not adhere to the traditional Kantian notion of disinterested aesthetic experience in which it is through the mind's contemplation that one can attain a critical distance. According to the Kantian model, the artist is granted a special status of autonomy from society, and aesthetic qualities are imbued in the art object and made available to the sensitive viewer through contemplation. *Ten Myths* pursues a different understanding: following the holistic model, freedom is accessible via the sensate self — that is, to paraphrase Dewey, through experience as an embodied organism in dialogue with the world. In this way, everyone has the same capacity to enact freedom from abstraction through direct experience. The critical distance necessary for an aesthetic experience lies not in the special status of the artist or the object the artist creates but in the body because embodiment is our existential mediator. Bodies, in Melucci's words "permit direct and intuitive perception, as a form of knowledge which is different from 'instrumental' rationality, and which allows the discrete fragments, times and discontinuities of experience to be synthesized."<sup>50</sup>

Crucially, experiential embodied engagement does not have to be understood as an individualistic pursuit. According to the Kantian model, bodies are seen as isolated and resistant to dialogue, but this

<sup>49</sup> Day, *Gramsci*, 69 l.

<sup>50</sup> Melucci, *Nomads*, 115.

view is premised on the notion that bodies are “sealed” and dialogue is always codified. Accordingly dialogue, as a discursive form, acts upon the embodied subject, but the fact that dialogue is also experienced, and in this way is also acted upon, gets little attention within this paradigm. Holism and affinity-based logic systems allow for a conception of bodies and societies as transactional processes that act upon each other. To locate aesthetic experience in embodied experience is not simply to replace the art object with the viewer’s body: rather, in order to have a creative experience one must be in a process of dialogue. The notion of non-hierarchical collectivity is central to this understanding of embodied group experience as art. If one is being creative, then one is necessarily in a non-oppressive relationship with others because creation does not seek a hegemonic moment. Creative dialogue happens between subjects, not within individuals. As a form of “mutual creation,” Halprin’s *Ten Myths* enacted community directly through participation in events as opposed to stabilized representational forms. It did not seek to solve social conflict, it offered an alternative space that revealed the violent nature of abstraction and, at the same time, provided a space of embodied sociality. Understanding direct experience through the holistic lens of pragmatist aesthetics allows us to see *Ten Myths*’ dialogical role in constructing anarchic temporary collective zones of autonomy. Such participatory works prefigure the direction of contemporary relational art practices in which, as art critic Nicolas Bourriaud writes, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real. . . .”<sup>51</sup>

Yet, as art historian Claire Bishop has pointed out, “if relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?”<sup>52</sup> For Anna Halprin the answers to these questions are clearly based on non-hierarchical collectivity. Her face-to-face embodied relations were enacted in order to put the social power dynamics existing between individuals into a process-based dialogue that attained a temporary state of collectivity. These collectives did not try to erase or solve conflicts, but instead provided an experiential process through which to address them as they occurred and without the

<sup>51</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. *Collection Documents Sur l’Art* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 13.

<sup>52</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 65.

authoritarian intervention of the State. In this way, the relations produced by Anna Halprin's events temporarily reconnected embodied experience with social experience. Her affinity-based approach to collectivity allows us to alter our understanding of the role of dialogue in the collective experience of art. Event-based art can be seen as a dynamic and temporary zone of collective autonomy. Anna Halprin was not an anarchist; nevertheless, the temporary autonomous zones she created are indebted to anarchism and can be more clearly and thoroughly understood through an anarchic social model in which embodiment and creation play key roles.

Creative Commons License

Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported

See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>

All content, including exclusive web content, is freely available at

<http://www.Anarchist-Developments.org>

ISSN: 1923-5615