

# **The Performative Power of Architecture.**

## **Anna Halprin's Dance Deck as the Source of her "Transformational Dance"**

Serena Massimo  
serena.massimo@unipr.it

This paper aims at investigating the intertwining between dance and architecture by taking as a case study the dance of Anna Halprin (1920-2021), whose character of rupture with modern dance contributes to the questioning of dance codes and conventions that essentially informs western contemporary dance. After a presentation of Anna's intention to strengthen dance's function of transforming people's lives by restoring the original link between dance and nature, we will show how this intention leverages the ritual, essentially performative dimension of dancing. After underlining, with Alberto Pérez-Gómez, the original link between architecture and ritual understood as an action of displaying – rather than imposing – a pre-existing meaning and opening up to its unfolding, we will emphasise how the outdoor dance studio built for Anna by her husband, the urban architect and landscape planner Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009), invites to take up this action. The notion of lived corporeity developed by Hermann Schmitz in his "New Phenomenology" (1965), and that of "atmospheric affordances" (Griffero 2013), will allow us to show that dancing on this studio triggers an "exploratory" attitude of unprecedented ways of moving and interacting with one's own surroundings by virtue of the everchanging interaction between architectural, meteorological and natural elements provided by this space. Finally, the conception of "material performativity" (Dalmaso 2020) will bring out that the transformative capacity of dance derives precisely from its ability to grasp and differentially decline the performative process of mutual constitution and influence between human and non-human entities.

Keywords: dance, architecture, ritual, performativity.

# The Performative Power of Architecture.

## Anna's Halprin's Dance Deck as the Source of her "Transformational Dance"

Serena Massimo  
[serena.massimo@unipr.it](mailto:serena.massimo@unipr.it)

### 1. Introduction

The life and artistic partnership between the dancer and choreographer Anna Halprin (1920-2021) and her husband, the urban architect and landscape designer Lawrence Halprin (1916-2009), is a clear example of the fecundity of the dialogue between dance and architecture. The "RSVP Cycle"<sup>1</sup> is generally considered as the emblem of this fecundity. It is the notational system of movement elaborated by Lawrence to provide people involved in the collective creative processes explored by Anna with a tool with which to «develop [the emergent materials] fully» opening the way to «new creative possibilities»<sup>2</sup>. Inspired by Anna's use of dance to «heighten [dancers' and architects'] environmental awareness and generate new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration and collective creativity»<sup>3</sup>, in 1966, Lawrence had already developed "Motation", a movement notation system that allowed architects, dancers, and planners to transcribe and project both choreographic and ordinary movements.

Like Motation, conceived as a «matrice organisatrice pour toutes sortes d'activités» to provide a combination of space, time and activity able to «met[tre] en forme la mode de vie (travail et loisir)»<sup>4</sup>, the RSVP Cycle enhances the creative relationship with space more effectively, as it systematises and reveals the creative process «while it is

---

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. P. Merriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, in "Cultural Geographies", 17(4) (2010), pp. 427-449; F. Pousin, *De la chorégraphie à l'architecture du paysage: noter pour concevoir*, in "Les carnets du paysage. Actes sud et l'école nationale supérieure du paysage", 13/14 (2007), pp. 23-47; G.A., Tiberghien, *Le paysage est une traversée*, Paranthèses, Marseille 2020; J. Wasserman, *A World in Motion: The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, in "Landscape Journal", 1/2 (2012), pp. 33-52.

<sup>2</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 1995, p. 199.

<sup>3</sup> P. Merriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, cit., p. 435.

<sup>4</sup> F. Pousin, *De la chorégraphie à l'architecture du paysage: noter pour concevoir*, cit., p. 42.

happening»<sup>5</sup>. This enables the people involved to contribute – to the realisation of the goals of the creative process initiated, and even to modify it. This notation, in fact, makes it possible to elaborate not only “closed” but also “open” scores, i.e., scores that provide few instructions, encouraging free interpretation and leaving room for exploration and experimentations and the development of a «sensitivity towards different situations»<sup>6</sup> thanks to which there is a participatory and creative appropriation of the environment.

Our purpose is to investigate the contribution of the “dance deck”, the outdoor dance studio designed by Lawrence for Anna on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais, to the development of this “sensitivity towards different situations”, which is the basis for Anna’s “transformational dance”. Although Anna and Lawrence are engaged in very different fields of research, they share an interest in a creative, participatory, essentially kinaesthetic approach to the environment that inscribes itself in the «broader exploration and creation of radical environments»<sup>7</sup> typical of American artists of the 1960s and 1970s.

Since our aim is to investigate how Anna’s transformational dance was essentially influenced by the experience of dancing on the dance deck, we will focus on Anna’s perspective rather than on the influence exerted by Anna’s dance on Lawrence’s experimental architectural and notational works.

## **2. The prerequisites for a “transformational” dance**

«Being labelled as the pioneer of postmodern dance is kind of missing the point. I was trying to get at something more basic, more humanistic. And I did that by using ordinary movement»<sup>8</sup>. Anna’s intention is not to invent a new dance genre but to restore the anthropological function of dance as an instrument able to solve individual and collective problems through the sharing of a creative way of moving. In so doing, Anna breaks with the way of conceiving and doing dance typical of modern dance, which focused on the imitation of a style of movement of a choreographer leader, and embraces the concept expressed by her teacher, Margaret H’ Doubler (1889-1982) that dance students should explore, for example, by dancing out of doors, all possibilities of movement so as to

---

<sup>5</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, cit., p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> F. Pousin, *De la chorégraphie à l’architecture du paysage: noter pour concevoir*, cit., p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> P. Merriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, in “Cultural Geographies”, 17(4) (2010), p. 440.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2diNM6EA0&t=86s>.

develop their «own experience of movement»<sup>9</sup>. Unlike H' Doubler, however, Anna's purposes are not exclusively pedagogical, but serve to emphasize the ability of dance to positively transform people's lives, acting as a “self-healing” community.

This purpose is strongly influenced by the Bauhaus notion of «usable art», where art «lives in people's lives»<sup>10</sup> thanks to a multidisciplinary approach. This conception of art and approach unites the work that has characterized the artistic collaboration between Anna and Lawrence since shortly after they met in 1939, at the University of Wisconsin, where Anna was studying in the undergraduate dance program, and Lawrence was earning a master's degree in biology. After discovering, in 1940, his passion for landscape architecture, Lawrence begins to study at the Harvard School of Design in Cambridge. Anna, who follows him, attends lectures in design and, with architecture students, begins to translate design problems into choreographic ones. Together, they explore the changes caused by the sensation of different surfaces and spatial planes on their own ways of feeling and moving. At the request of Walter Gropius, Anna holds a lecture on “Dance and Architecture” at the design school, analysing the relationship between movement, space, and experience, following Lazlo Moholy-Nagy's idea of dance as a means of articulation and ordering of space.

After the war, in which Lawrence served in the U.S. Navy as an officer, he and Anna move to San Francisco, where their partnership begins in earnest. In 1947, Lawrence starts designing stage sets and costumes for Anna's performances; two years later, he writes in an article about gardens, that «The job of the architect and landscape architect [is] to design environments that provide “constantly pleasant movement patterns” such that “our lives can be given the continuous sense of dance”»<sup>11</sup>. Influenced by Anna's experimentations, Lawrence develops a multisensorial and kinaesthetic conception of landscape architecture that contrasts sharply with the traditional oculocentric idea:

The immersion in a world of explorative dance led to an integrative design approach that foregrounded movement derived form. Multisensory elements are designed into the work

---

<sup>9</sup> J. Ross, *Anna Halprin. Experience as Dance*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 2007, p. xvi. Anna shares with H' Doubler also the conviction that dance should be included in the educational system, a conviction arisen in H' Doubler thanks to the influence exerted on her by the philosopher John Dewey's valorization of the importance of experience in the learning process.

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVKGT5V\\_sD8&ab\\_channel=Jacob%27sPillow](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVKGT5V_sD8&ab_channel=Jacob%27sPillow).

<sup>11</sup> L. Halprin in P. Merriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, cit., p. 433.

with visual and compositional principles taking second place. Engaging movement as the primary impetus in form-making has arguably created spaces that invite movement, exploration, and physical engagement<sup>12</sup>.

Anna, in turn, recognises that her husband's work and that of the architect William Wurster – who designs the Halprins' home in Kentfield where they move in 1952 – influenced her art

On a daily basis. Their style allowed for a free-flowing connection between inside and outside, a major theme in my own work which would develop through explorations of dance both inside and outside the theatre. At my new house, sliding glass walls opened onto tan-bark terraces and led into the resounding redwood groves, and the views reached to the bay and the slopes of the majestic mountain. My new house in the country felt like an integral part of nature, and increasingly it was a contemplative environment, free of the distractions of the city<sup>13</sup>.

Aiming at developing a dance capable of having an impact on people's lives, Anna could not fail to be inspired by an architectural work that enhanced the “free-flowing connection” between the indoor and outdoor world, man and nature, dance and everyday movement. The place where this connection was practiced daily is her outdoor studio: the “dance deck”.

## **2. The dance deck**

Built to enable Anna to work while remaining close to her two little daughters and originally designed to overcome the expense and difficulty of building a large indoor studio, Anna's “dance deck” designed by Lawrence with the modern-dance lighting designer Arch Lauterer, is where the interests of Anna and Lawrence Halprin integrate one another perfectly<sup>14</sup>. The deck, in fact, allowed Anna to explore the connection with nature and allow the dance to emerge and unfold, while Lawrence was able to realize his dream of «creating spaces that would invite movement, exploration and physical engagement»<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> J. Wasserman, *A World in Motion: The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, cit., p. 34.

<sup>13</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, cit., p. x.

<sup>14</sup> In this regard, Lawrence claims «We felt this linkage would symbolize our life – living and working, learning and growing together» (L. Halprin, in J. Wassermann, *A World in Motion: The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, cit., p. 37).

<sup>15</sup> J. Wasserman, *A World in Motion: The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, cit., p. 34.

## 2.a Nature, rituals, and architecture as a “performing art”

Connected to the Halprins’ house through a stairway and garden designed by Lawrence «as a “choreographed sequence of penetrations leading from the house, through the woods”»<sup>16</sup>, the very shape of the dance deck is dictated by nature, namely by the slope of the land – the dance deck itself is a sort of pile-structure – and of the position of the trees, two of them rising directly from the platform. Nature is thus an integral part of the dance deck and bring the dancers into direct contact with its essentially dynamic character. Rather than being an «inanimate object [...] to exploit and control»<sup>17</sup> – as the technological and urban lifestyle would lead us to think, nature is conceived by Anna as a living entity whose processes reflects human ones. Her work pivots on three principles: 1) the human body is a “microcosm” of nature; 2) natural processes provide Anna’s aesthetic guidelines; 3) nature is a “healer”.

The restoration of a direct relationship with nature is functional to the restoration of the anthropological function of the dance, as it valorises the continuity between man and nature, between life and art. In particular, the contact with nature marks the encounter with «the ancient roots of dance and its primary importance to human beings»<sup>18</sup>. Here we come up against the powerfully ritual function of dance, namely its ability to

Confront a specific life issue with the purpose of bringing about a desired change, vision or transformation [...] A way to create ritual is to invest the objects of our daily lives with new significance [...] The symbol of people’s myth is their own body. How people experience their body is their story. That story is their myth and how they perform it is their ritual<sup>19</sup>.

The first “everyday object” that dancers are invited to invest in and to provide with a new meaning is thus their own body and the process of signification that involves the body is linked to a new way of experiencing it, namely of *performing* it. The use of this verb is not anodyne. In the same years in which Anna and Lawrence were experimenting on the west coast of the U.S., the American theorist Richard Schechner founds in New York what he called “Performance groups”, an “environmental theatre” characterised by an

---

<sup>16</sup> L. Halprin, in *Ivi*, p. 433.

<sup>17</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, cit., p. 214.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> U. Schorn, *The Life/Art Process*, in G. Wittmann, U. Schorn, R. Land (eds.), *Anna Halprin. Dance-Process-Form*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London-Philadelphia 2015, pp. 57-92, p. 87.

innovative approach aimed at understanding performative behaviour. Moreover, we owe to Schechner the illustration of the three meanings of the verb “to perform”: «to provide a performance» (e.g., in business, sport, sex), «to stage a theatrical, dance, or musical work», «to show» or «to illustrate what is shown»<sup>20</sup>.

Although Anna does not explicitly refer to Schechner, it seems that her own conception of the dance is related to the second meaning of “perform” pointed out by Schechner: her dance is, at the same time, the staging of an artwork, and the exhibition of the process underlying this work. The union of these two meanings highlights what we can define as essentially “performative”. This term, coined by the philosopher John Langshaw Austin in 1955 to designate the capacity of utterances to “perform actions” – think of the expressions «I name this ship Queen Elizabeth [or] I declare war»<sup>21</sup> – refers to the transformation of reality actualised in the very fact of its enunciation. The acknowledgement of the performativity of corporeal action is later pointed out by the philosopher Judith Butler, who claims that identity is the result of the reiteration of a set of behavioural norms through a set of “performative” acts, the repetition of which simultaneously transforms both the actions and the situation in which they are performed.

The attribution of performativity to artistic bodily gestures is made by Erika Fischer-Lichte, whose “aesthetic theory of performance”<sup>22</sup> confers centrality to the strategies – the switching of roles, the formation of a community and the interaction between performers and spectators – implemented by performance art to highlight the active participation of the public in the performance. Not only are these the precise strategies enacted by Anna during her performances, but the idea of a dance capable of positively transforming people’s lives relies – albeit implicitly – on the performativity of dance movements, namely on the fact that they already part of the transformation of the reality achieved solely through their performance. This is the reason why the collective creation of dance gestures is considered by Anna to embody a living and co-creating community.

This is the link between dance and rituals, as Janice Ross points out, quoting the anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport:

---

<sup>20</sup> R. Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction* (2002), Routledge, London-New York 2013, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> J. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1962, pp. 5-7.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. E. Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (2004), transl. *The Transformative Power of Performance. A New Aesthetics*, Routledge, London-New York 2008.

(1) “Ritual is performance. If there is no performance there is no ritual;” (2) “In ritual performance transmitters are always among the most important receivers of their own messages”; and (3) “In ritual the transmitter, receiver and message become fused in the participant” [...] Anna was beginning to move personal experiences across the boundary of contemporary performance. Instead of just aesthetic enjoyment, she had begun to manipulate not just object and actions but also space, time, and spectatorship ritualistically<sup>23</sup>.

Anna’s purpose is not to turn dance into a ritual but to strengthen the performativity inherent to rituals, valorising the ability of the dance gesture to not simply *cause* a change in the state of things, but to actually *be* the expression of this change, as already part of the new state of things generated by their performance. This new “state of things” is the configuration of the relationship between humans and things, and, in general, between humans and things that can be radically changed by actions that unfold their capability of performatively change their relationships to one another. This is the reason why Anna’s dance does not simply have an impact on objects and actions themselves but, more pervasively, on space, time, and spectatorship, all of which are expressions of the relational dimension we are in.

Our thesis is that dancing on the dance deck accentuates the performative nature of the dance just as it highlights the performative nature of architecture, which is due to the original connection between architecture and ritual, and which allows us to characterise architecture as one of the “performing arts”. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez points out:

The origins of architecture in human culture are closely related to ritual: as propitiatory and mimetic object-making (as in the case of an altar for sacrifice or a tomb), and as place-making for the deployment of rites, which came to include theatrical performances, particularly in the European traditions. As architecture is fundamentally characterized by its capacity to frame such events, rather than a particular style, materiality, or design method [...] Architecture may [...] recover its “original” dimension as performance as long as the program is understood not as a list of parts with square footage, but as a promise for a meaningful (political, public) life issued from the architect’s imagination (both rational and emotional)<sup>24</sup>.

---

<sup>23</sup> J. Ross, *Anna Halprin. Experience as Dance*, University of California Press, Berkley-Los Angeles-London, p. 148.

<sup>24</sup> A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture as a Performing Art: Two Analogical Reflections*, in M. Feuerstein, G. Read (eds.), *Architecture as a Performing Art*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Farnham, Surrey-Burlington 2013, pp. 15-326, pp. 16-17.



As performances are not a set of physical actions, architecture is not a set of quantitatively measurable entities, but, exactly like performances, essential part of a signifying process where objects and places are endowed with a specific meaning that emerges from the interaction between people, objects and places. As we will see, architectural constructions, like performances, exhibit a configuration of the relationship between human and non-human entities, which is perceived as significant and which is brought into being at a moment in time, marking an indelible transformation of the relational structures existing prior to the “gestures” through which the architectural are realized, and which are elicited by the architectural works themselves. It is so because these gestures do not express the “modernistic” action of controlling and dominating nature, but are «done in the belief that their efficacy is not controlled by humans in any reducible sense, but proceed from elsewhere, ultimately manifesting the presence of the sacred, or the presence of a meaning that is “already there” before us. This second kind of action is called ritual»<sup>25</sup>.

The fact that the meaning made manifest by the architecture is “already there before us” is only apparently in contrast with its identification with the exhibition, through its realisation, of the emergence of a new meaning, intended as a new relational link between human and non-human entities. This contrast disappears as we grasp the link between the performative process and the attitude of openness to the unexpected unfolding of this process, which is the attitude required in both rituals and artistic performances for this meaning to exist. By performing in the sense of exhibiting a pre-existing meaning, ritual gestures are performed without the pretense of predicting and controlling their outcomes as they are already part of the reality that is being changed through them.

Vitruvius’s characterization of architecture as “a clearing in the forest that makes language and culture possible” reveals something more. As a clearing, which is, at the same time, a closed circle and an open space, i.e., an entity with an internal coherence and a transformation of the context where it is inscribed, architecture is an entity that, while inscribing itself in a pre-existing relational context, transforms this latter letting itself be transformed by it. Like a clearing, architecture implies interaction with an “otherness” so that its very perception engages in the process of mutual adaptation and transformation that underlies not only every language and culture but every form of

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

interaction<sup>26</sup>. The meaning that is “already there” and that is made manifest in an epiphanic, performative way – like a clearing in a forest – by architecture is the relational structure that precedes the architectural work and that it exhibits in its otherness, just as its existence invites a new engagement with the hybrid human and non-human environment where it is built, thereby regenerating it.

## **2.b The dance deck as trigger of a “pathic” and exploratory attitude**

In the case of Anna’s dance deck, this aspect manifests itself in the urge that Anna feels not only to question the existing ideas of dance, movement and composition in an experimental and creative way, but to do so in a collective, interdisciplinary way. It is as if the irregular, varied form of the dance deck required the constitution of a varied, interacting community capable of exploring the relational suggestions provided by the deck. This inspires Anna to organize a series of experimental workshops where dancers, visual artists, musicians, actors, architects, poets, psychologists, and filmmakers search for «ways to rediscover the basic nature of [their] materials free of preconceived associations and concepts»<sup>27</sup>. The absence of spatial separation between the performers and the spectators, of the rectangular shape and stage center, challenges the possibility of a hierarchy between the parts of the space and, consequently, between the people whose collective exploration of this space makes them part of a community: it is “Dancer Workshop”<sup>28</sup>, a co-creating community that arises because its members absorb the humble, open attitude, free of expectations, with which the deck was created. Lawrence Halprin claims:

We decided that we would not do a deck that seemed like an outdoor theatre with walls in it and a proscenium arch and all the things that a normal theater would have, and it influenced it on an interdisciplinary level that it made for a completely new kind of dance theatre. There

---

<sup>26</sup> This is why it seems possible to speak of the performativity of architecture also as the capacity to “build community”.

<sup>27</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, cit., p. xi.

<sup>28</sup> As Annalisa Metta points out: «For Anna, the Dance Deck becomes an irreplaceable working tool: its total immersion in the open space, the absence of closed wings or walls, the irregular shape of the stage, the canopy of trees that takes the place of the proscenium, and the interference with atmospheric elements, stimulate the unconventional exploration of space, which she conducts with increasing conviction through dance. The Dance Deck is a device for looking, imagining and experiencing space in a different way.» (A. Metta, B. Di Donato, *Anna e Lawrence Halprin. Paesaggi e coreografie del quotidiano*, Libria, Melfi 2014, 49, my transl.)

was no shape like this ever and so it was responding to the environment itself, to what was there in the environment, to the character of the environment and it all influenced the shape of the deck and how it fit. The shape of the deck had a lot to do with the trees themselves because we had to go around the trees to allow them to live and that was more important than making it a special shape<sup>29</sup>.

The architect's assumption of adaptive attitude comes about because this unconventional space, all to be explored, is essentially dynamic, making it tangible that the movement performed in a space strictly depends on the "affective movement" of the space itself. As emphasized by Anna and Lawrence themselves in a co-written article quoted by Peter Merriman:

[The dance deck is] "designed specifically for movement experience"; the space itself is alive and kinetic. It is changeable – it invites movement – with the everchanging natural surroundings – light conditions, temperatures, air currents, seasonal foliage – lending a dynamic quality to the architecture of this performance space, which is "alive and kinetic" – challenging by its own sense of movement" [.]. "The non-rectangular form of the deck forces a complete reorientation on the dancer. The customary points of reference are gone and in place of a cubic space all confined by right angles with a front, back, sides and top – a box within which to move – the space explodes and becomes mobile. Movement within a moving space, I have found, is different than movement within a static cube<sup>30</sup>.

Like the irregular shape of the dance deck, its changeability depending on environmental changes, challenges the usual sensation of being the only mobile element in an immobile space. Dancers are grasped by a sense of instability and loss of control of their actions, as they feel that they are not acting alone, but are also subject to a movement outside themselves. This requires a "complete reorientation", i.e., the acceptance of an attitude of readiness to be affected in new ways, involved in unexpected encounters, which may turn out to be sources of new creative ways of moving and interacting. The deck, in fact, «remove[s] the usual restrictions and add[s] elements of nature and chance and, with them, a lack of control and predictability»<sup>31</sup> forcing the dancers to accept what affects and

---

<sup>29</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z3-fcYa4Fs&ab\\_channel=TheCulturalLandscapeFoundation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z3-fcYa4Fs&ab_channel=TheCulturalLandscapeFoundation).

<sup>30</sup> P. MerrimanMerriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, cit., p. 433.

<sup>31</sup> A. Halprin, in L. Worth, H. Poynor, Worth, L., Poynor, H., *Anna Halprin*, Routledge, London-New York 2012, p. 11.

transforms their actions and to react creatively to it. Following Tonino Griffero<sup>32</sup>, we can characterise the attitude as “pathic”, i.e., related to the ability to abandon oneself to “what happens to him”, i.e., to surrender to what affects him paying attention to the way in which his way of feeling and moving is influenced.

It is in these terms that we can interpret Anna’s description of the effect exerted on her “sense of movement” by the dance deck:

It was the most marvellous space. And shocking. Because I had never danced in a space that was not rectangular – no ceilings no boundaries. It gave me a totally new attitude about how to relate to space in movement [...] It had a profound effect on my sense of movement.” Habitual limitation fell away, new elements came into play. The state of the location was unpredictable: the light would sometimes change by the minute. Extremes of nature, from smouldering heat to a sudden cloudburst, brought surprises. The trees move, and dropped leaves and entire branches onto the stage; uneven surfaces invite precise exploration with the skin [...] I began to feel that I needed to look for something that was more like nature itself. That was real. And that if I was going to dance, I needed to dance about real things”<sup>33</sup>.

The unexpected ways of being affected and of responding to the environment upon coming into contact with the changing, unpredictable nature of life itself, the opportunity to discover different ways to react to changes by transforming, in turn, one’s own way of dealing with real life issues. This leads to the involvement of the audience, which is no longer composed of “spectators” but of “witnesses” to a process of creative transformation of personal and individual issues<sup>34</sup>. Dance itself can be characterised as a «processual, embodied movement practice which brings about “transformations in movement space”, engaging “the whole of the senses in bending time and space into new kinaesthetic shapes»<sup>35</sup>.

---

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. T. Griffero, *Atmospheres. Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (2010), Routledge, London 2014a; Id., *Estetica patica. Appunti per un’atmosferaologia neofenomenologica*, “Studi di estetica”, 12 (2014b), pp. 161-183.

<sup>33</sup> A. Halprin, in G. Wittman, *The Life and Work of Anna Halprin*, p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> These latter are societal problems racial discrimination and, from the 1980s, problems related to health, involving people affected with diseases such as cancer or HIV, in strong increase in those years in nearby San Francisco, leading to the development of Life/Art Process, an approach to movement wherever people are helped to access their life story as the ground of an artistic shared creation.

<sup>35</sup> P. Merriman, *Architecture/Dance: Choreographing and Inhabiting Spaces with Anna and Lawrence Halprin*, cit., p. 431.

## 2.c A focus on the process: task-oriented movements and exploration

The new “kinaesthetic shapes” that emerge when dancing on the dance deck, and that are functional to developing a decisive perspective on specific issues, are revealed through the discovery of an individual and personal “style of movement”: the way in which one modulates the interconnection between the physical, the emotional, and the imaginative “awareness”. Influenced, over the years, by alternative approaches to the body such as those offered by the *Gestalt* therapy and the Feldenkreis method, Anna believes that the key to a “transformational dance” is this kinaesthetic awareness, i.e., the awareness of one’s own experience of movement, which concerns the three levels of the physical, personal association and the imaginary.

Thus, the dance technique she elaborates involves not only learning anatomical principles, but also acquisition of the ability to isolate and move with each of the basic components of dance (space, time, force, gravity, inertia, momentum and rhythm). This determines the quality of the movement, according to the idea that «awareness of this quality generates sensory states that contribute to the overall “ability to experience oneself in movement”»<sup>36</sup>. This mode of dancing is at the core of an “exploratory” approach based on the detailed examination of the relationship between movement and the basic elements of dance taken separately. One could, for example, focus on the change of the timing of the movement and explore, while repeating a short sequence of movements several times at different rhythms, the physical sensations, the feelings, and the imaginative responses arising each time.

It is the experience of dancing on the dance deck that marks a turn from an improvisational to an exploratory approach. Although, in disagreement with modern dance’s mode of teaching and performing dance, Anna initially resorts to improvisation to rid herself of the influence exerted on her by the dancers she had studied with, she soon notices that she keeps coming back to «certain attitudes of movement, certain ideas [...] And in a sense it became just as repetitious, and I began to feel restricted again. I believe the way I was improvising didn’t require that I break through my familiar ways of responding»<sup>37</sup>. She therefore spontaneously begins to change her way of improvising, shifting from

---

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, cit., p. 189

pure spontaneous movement using space, time and force for the playing elements [to] «tasks like carrying logs and passing them to people, fall and stand for 20 minutes, lean on 25 things, etc. [...] Elements like voice, words, sound, and found objects were introduced. Movement wasn't so pure anymore. Musicians became dancers, dancers became poets, actors and dancers were the same<sup>38</sup>.

The enhancement of the participation of the audience in performances leads to the emergence of a new dimension, an «emotional scripting» for the elaboration of which the tools provided by interpretation are not effective. What this work needs, in fact, is an approach that allows to focus and work on the specific emotional “resources” emerging, rather than an approach that merely instructed her to «go “up to a certain point” and then just leav[e] it to “go to something else”»<sup>39</sup> without providing tools for “developing” the resources discovered<sup>40</sup>.

These resources are discovered using “task-oriented movements”: repetitive movements performed at certain conditions or “constraints” such as carrying logs and passing them to people, falling and standing for 20 minutes or asking the dancers to dance holding long bamboo poles. The constraints provided by task-oriented movements only apparently prescribed a predictable specific way of moving; on the contrary, they «inhibited the attempt to establish by gesture a symbolism external to its pure actualisation»<sup>41</sup>. By limiting the possibility of moving and of moving in certain ways, constraints force the dancer to focus on the process rather than on the result of these movements. «An exploration requires that you stay on that particular path, focused on dealing with a particular element, for a given length of time, and you can't just run off. And you can't just move into some more familiar way of doing things»<sup>42</sup>. More “focused” and “controlled” than improvisation, exploration leads the dancer to be attentive to how

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> L. Worth, H. Poyner, *Anna Halprin*, cit., p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Anna's vision of improvisation is very much influenced by her intention to devise every possible way to facilitate the discovery of his own style of movement. O this intention, which leads her to insist on the exploratory and processual dimension - which is, moreover, inherent in every improvovisual form - and not on the production of original material for a choreographic work. This leads her not to notice, for instance, not only that the continuous change of artistic material discovered with each improvisation is part of an arthistic research in continuous development, but also that, as regards the risk of falling back into familiar patterns, improvisation is centred precisely about the unlearning of familiar motor patterns through their continuous creative reinvention.

<sup>41</sup> *À propos de The Mind is a Muscle d'Yvonne Rainer*, in “Le Travail de l'art”, 1 (1997). 1997, p. 90, my transl.

<sup>42</sup> A. Halprin, *Moving Toward Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance*, p. 193.

these constraints influence the relationship between movement and the basic elements of dance; this increases their own “kinaesthetic awareness” and enables them to discover unfamiliar patterns capable of changing their personal and collective situation<sup>43</sup>.

Anna’s dance deck inspires task-oriented movements because it presents not only the constraints provided by its irregular shape, but the innumerable and unpredictable constraints provided by the variations in the quality of the dance deck created by the environmental and meteorological conditions. These constraints, which are constantly changing in unexpected ways, amplify the exploratory possibilities of movement and, through them, the ways of simultaneously interacting with the dance deck, the other dancers and the environment. This changes the viewer’s mood as well: the initial sense of disorientation felt on the deck turns into a sense of curiosity and desire to explore all the possibilities of movement offered. The dance deck was designed precisely considering this affective action, and how it leads to an increasing of exploratory and experimental motor possibilities, as emerges from Lawrence’s description of his project drawings of the deck. For example, the largest, central area, is a «general area used for strong, large, active locomotor movement»; a lateral section of it is «a quiet place, also for exits, and entrances»; a small portion of it, one of the first one can access to coming from the house, is an «area for direct contact with audience»<sup>44</sup>, while a staircase formed by wooden planks sloping down towards it can be unconventionally used not by the audience but by the dancers themselves. Lawrence’s design of the dance deck seems therefore to conform to what Gernot Böhme (1937-2022) identifies as typical of postmodern architecture, where the main task «is not the production of sight but of space. That is to say spaces and location with a certain mood, i.e., atmospheres»<sup>45</sup>.

## **2.d The “affective power” of the dance deck: “architectural affordances”**

An effective explanation of how the dance deck influences the viewer’s mood, inviting a “kinaesthetic engagement” with the space and with the environment as a whole, can be

---

<sup>43</sup> As Laurence Louppe points out: «Dans la danse [...] la contrainte est souvent utilisée pour faire trouver des solutions inédites, ne plus se rabattre systématiquement sur les schémas connus ... et pour trouver, au coeur de cette contrainte, les voies d’une nouvelle liberté» (L. Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine* (1997), Contredanse, Bruxelles 2004, pp. 283-284).

<sup>44</sup> L. Halprin in J. Wasserman, *A World in Motion: The Creative Synergy of Lawrence and Anna Halprin*, cit., p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> G. Böhme, *Atmospheres: New Perspectives for Architecture and Design*, in P. Tidwell (2014c), *Architecture and Atmosphere*, Tapo Wirkkala-Ru Bryk Foundation, Espoo 2013, pp. 6-13, p. 11.

provided following Tonino Griffero's atmospherological approach and, specifically, his notion of "atmospheric affordances".

In line with the neophenomenological approach inaugurated by Hermann Schmitz (1928-2021) to restore the spontaneous, involuntary dimension of life experience, Griffero elaborates his "atmospherology" within a "pathic aesthetics"<sup>46</sup>, an aesthetics that investigates the way in which one "feels" within not the physical but the "felt" space: the felt through our felt body. This latter, which is what we «feel in the vicinity (not always within the boundaries) of our physical body»<sup>47</sup>, is characterised by a continuous oscillation between contractedness or narrowness (*Enge*) and expansiveness (*Weite*), according to which a range of positive or negative states – e.g., fear, anguish, pain, effort, pleasure – arises depending on whether contraction or expansion prevails, respectively. The felt body is a "sounding board" that resonates incessantly with atmospheres; it is composed of «feelings poured out into the lived and pericorporeal space»<sup>48</sup> ontologically characterisable as "quasi-things", i.e., «half-identities that, for their intrusive expressiveness, affect us like partners»<sup>49</sup>, continuously inviting us to act or perceive something. We are therefore always involved in a "felt-bodily" communication with the environment, which affects us through atmospheres that resonate in us either in a "syntonic" way, where the general affective state of the individual is coincident with the atmosphere perceived or in a "discrepant" way, which marks a complete reorientation (in the negative or positive sense) of one's own affective state.

The initial sensation of disorientation triggered in Anna by the dance deck corresponds to a discrepant resonance with the atmosphere emanating from the dance deck as it immediately requires a "complete reorientation" of the dancer. This latter is, in fact, led to assume a pathic attitude of openness to unexpected affective stimuli from and responses to the environment. The resistance to letting go of a controlling attitude manifests itself in the generation of atmospheric feelings such as frustration and impatience, which are

---

<sup>46</sup> T. Griffero, *Atmospheres. Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, cit.; Id., *Estetica patica. Appunti per un'atmosferologia neofenomenologica*, cit.; Id., *Quasi-Things. The Paradigm of Atmospheres* (2013), Suny Press, Albany 2017; Id. *Places, Affordances, Atmospheres. A Pathic Aesthetics*, Routledge, London-New York 2020a.

<sup>47</sup> H. Schmitz, *New Phenomenology. A Brief Introduction* (2011), Mimesis International, Milan 2019, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> T. Griffero, *Better to Be in Tune. Between Resonance and Responsivity*, "in "Studi di estetica", 2 (2020b), pp. 93-118, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> Id., *Atmospheres and Felt-bodily Resonance*, in "Studi di estetica", 1 (2016), pp. 1-41, p. 1.



characterizable as “spurious” atmospheres, i.e., subjective atmospheres generated and projected by the percipient in the space as reaction to the “prototypical” atmosphere. This latter is the atmosphere suggested by the “first impression” experienced when entering a space; it is objective, unintentional and external, and it changes over time<sup>50</sup>. The sensations arising from the interaction with the space, the environmental elements and the other people are the result of an affective mutual influence, i.e., a transformation of one’s own way of feeling that affects, in turn, one’s own way of moving and interacting. These sensations are “derivative” atmospheres, i.e., external atmospheres, produced through the interaction between individuals and between individuals and objects.

The “affective power” exerted by the human and the non-human entities present on the dance deck acts as an invitation to feel in a certain way, which manifests itself in a specific sensation of movement. This sensation is felt in the form of a contraction provoking, in response, a sensation of expansion that can express itself through a physical movement: «The atmospheric perception is direct and deambulatory, kinaesthetic and affectively engaging, synaesthetic or at least polymodal»<sup>51</sup>. This leads Griffero to characterise an atmosphere as «a set of affordances, [that] mostly occur as an in-between (between the perceiver and their environment)»<sup>52</sup>. His recourse to the term “affordances”, borrowed from James Gibson, the author of the “ecological” theory of perception, highlights the fact that we are continuously subject to «ecological invitations [...] that are ontologically rooted in things and quasi-things» (Griffero 2019, 21) emerging from the relationship with the environment and differentiated depending on the characteristics of the percipient. The affective states elicited are therefore not determined by the architectural design but suggested by this latter, which limits itself to providing the conditions for their possible emergence.

It is in this sense that we must understand the characterisation of an architectural space as «a choreographic score»<sup>53</sup> whose design is a “*mise-en-scène*” of felt-bodily affordances realized through specific “architectural gestures” that invite the perceiver to

---

<sup>50</sup> According to Schmitz, these are the only atmospheres that exist.

<sup>51</sup> T. Griffero, *Architectural Affordances: The Atmospheric Authority of Spaces*, in P. Tidwell (2014c), *Architecture and Atmosphere*, cit., pp. 15-48, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> T. Griffero, *They Are There to be Perceived: Affordances and Atmospheres*, in Z. Djebbara (ed.), *Affordances in Everyday Life. A Multidisciplinary Collection of Essays*, Springer, Cham 2022, pp. 85-95, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> T. Griffero, *Architectural Affordances: The Atmospheric Authority of Spaces*, cit., p. 27.

feel and move in a certain way. As Federico De Matteis points out, «certain architecture triggers in the subject clearly outlined emotional responses, on the basis of particular morphological articulations and material choices»<sup>54</sup>. The atmospheric affordances coming from the materials and the forms of architectural space are identified by Griffero with what Schmitz calls “motor suggestions” and “synaesthetic qualities”. The former are anticipations of movements grasped in still or moving forms or in movement while the latter are intermodal properties inherent to specific sensitive qualities that occur even in the absence of synaesthesia.

In the light of these considerations Lawrence’s description of the design drawing of the dance deck seems to testify his focus on atmospheric affordances: the large shape of the central platform is an atmospheric affordance as it triggers a sensation of expansion which expresses itself in large movements and active locomotion while narrower spaces, such as those used for entries, communicate a contracting sensation or of quietness inviting to rest. In general, the irregular shape of the dance deck, provided by the alternation of broad and narrow zones, angular forms and lines, seems to trigger a sort of urge to move, to explore the space through movements, now large, now small. As regards the synaesthetic qualities of the deck, the smoothness of the wood planks invites fluid motion, leading to a constant change of perspective and thus of perception of the atmospheric affordances present.

### **3. The performative nature of things**

To valorise the affective influence exerted by non-human – architectural and environmental elements – we can resort to Böhme’s notion of “ecstasies”. Neither the material nor the physical forms of things, ecstasies are the “expressive forms of things”, «the ways in which a thing steps out of itself and into the surrounding space, where it becomes palpably present»<sup>55</sup> acting as “atmospheric generator”, i.e., as the condition of possibility for the manifestation of a certain atmospheres. The dance deck, however, does not stand for the architect’s ability to design specific atmospheric generators but for his

---

<sup>54</sup> F. De Matteis, *Vita nello spazio. Sull’esperienza affettiva dell’architettura*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2019, p. 67, my transl.

<sup>55</sup> G. Böhme, in Id., *Atmospheric Architectures. The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces, Translator’s Introduction*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. 8.

ability to develop a sensitivity to the affordances that spontaneously arise from the interaction between and with the natural and the architectural elements present.

The peculiarity of dancing on the dance deck, in fact, is that this latter change continually, depending on the meteorological, seasonal, and temporal conditions. Therefore, they could not have been predicted nor designed by Lawrence who, however, by designing a space that invites kinaesthetic involvement, creates space for these affordances to manifest and freely come into play with each other, inspiring the most diverse movements and modes of unexpected interactions between dancers and between dancers and the environment. The exploration of these new relational modalities opens up the discovery of hitherto unnoticed motor suggestions, whose action is now captured and volarised, thus initiating a process of mutual influence between human and non-human entities. For example, dancing in a certain position may cause to notice a bright area of the deck that invites exploration; while moving, dancers may shift the position of fallen leaves on the deck, intercepting some of them and projecting their shadows onto the hitherto completely sunny deck eliciting both new sensations and new movements.

The most effective way of grasping these reciprocal conditionings is not that of cause-effect action, given the interchangeability of one and the other: there is no causal chain in place, but a changing process of mutual adaptation and influence, a source of unexplored ways of feeling movement and of interacting with the human and non-human environment. One cannot therefore separate one's own experience of sensation and movement from communication – a sort of dance – between non-human things, whose distinguishing feature is mutability, as they are affected by temporal and meteorological changes. The mutual influence between architectural and natural environment is therefore what allows dancers to encounter the dynamic and procedural character not only of nature but of matter in general.

This is a key aspect of the new materialistic approach, according to which

materiality is always something more than “mere” matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable, [as] innumerable interactions between manifold elements that produce patterns of organization successively *transform* those elements<sup>56</sup>.

---

<sup>56</sup> D. Coole, S. Frost, *Introduction the New Materialisms*, in Coole, D., Froster, S. (eds.), *New Materialisms. Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham-London 2010, p 14.

In the light of this characterization of matter the mutual influence between dancers, architectural elements, natural and meteorological elements can be conceived neither as a hierarchical interaction nor as a punctual response to a causal action, but rather as a process where the interaction between human and non-human entities is constitutive of their ways of being and mutually influencing. This process of mutual constitution that actualises itself through the generation of relational unities human and non-human entities efficaciously emerges if we identify to the affective “power” of these latter as essentially “performative”. This is the proposal of Anna Caterina Dalmaso who, to avoid re-proposing, by inverting the terms, of the opposition active/passive, subject/object, and thus the idea of an ontological and chronological primacy of the active component on the other, she replaces the notion of “material agency” with that of “material performativity”. Following Judith Butler’s performative theory of gender identity, according to which «gender is what emerges through the reiteration of [...] performances, not in the sense of a simple assumption of a role to be played, but as a repetition that is “at once a reenactment and a reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established”»<sup>57</sup>, she confers relevance to the temporal dimension of the process of formation of identity and thus of the continuous switching between active and passive roles, which are not fixed but rather “dynamic”, as part of «a reciprocal movement of co-implication [...] without affirming any chronological, hierarchical or axiological primacy»<sup>58</sup>.

To dance on the dance deck, where the performativity of architectural elements is constantly intertwined in the most unexpected ways with that of the natural and of the meteorological elements, means to daily experience one’s own belonging to such a movement where one’s own way of being, feeling and interacting changes in a way that cannot be foreseen or controlled. This leads one to assume the attitude of openness to mutual adaptation and transformation that that founds the gesture at the origin of both architecture and dance. The capacity of this latter to transform people’s lives emerges precisely when one experiences uncertainty as an opportunity to discover which aspects of the process of becoming common to the people and things one is interacting with to

---

<sup>57</sup> A.C. Dalmaso, *Things That Matter. Agency and Performativity*, in “Aisthesis” 13(1), pp. 155-168, p. 163.

<sup>58</sup> *Ivi*, 165-166.

leverage in order to collectively foster a positive turn of interaction for oneself and for others.