

Vanessa Grasse_Lisa Ullmann Travel Fund report

I received LUTF to travel to San Francisco and Kentfield in California to study for two weeks with Anna Halprin in October 2018.

I wanted to meet Anna for both personal nourishment and to reflect further on my current project MESH. Her political and participatory work had particularly influenced this project. I was able to take classes and participate in her performance labs at her Mountain Home Studio in Kentfield, as well as take workshops, attend performances and talks at the de Young Museum in San Francisco during a period of curated events to honour Anna's work.

Experiencing her performative work as well as studying with her gave me a much more rounded insight into her practice. It provided me with an invaluable significant experience, relevant to my making, dancing and teaching.



Vanessa Grasse and Anna Halprin. Photo © Vanessa Grasse

The trip made me reflect, evaluate, challenge and consolidate aspects of my current approaches to MESH and my overall practice. It inspired me to create new work and has also woken up a joy and craving to dance more after a period of focusing on creating, leading and producing a touring performance.

Anna's Wed evening Performance Lab



Anna Halprin at the Wed eve Lab. Photo © Vanessa Grasse

After walking for 1 and a half hours up the mountain, I finally met Anna Halprin for the first time, joining her Wednesday evening lab. That evening the Lab was being used as rehearsal for the revival of *Paradise and Changes* (in 1965 she was arrested in New York because of nudity in this piece) to be performed at the de Young Museum in SF. I wasn't the only one visiting Anna from Europe...a lovely family of artists from Germany was there too, taking the chance to meet Anna whilst on tour in the US...Sasha Waltz with her family. This was an example of a series of encounters and exchanges I had with many incredible artists during my stay in California, including Anna's Performance Labs participants, which enriched the overall experience and seeded a ground for future artistic exchanges.

The Lab is a regular weekly session for a group of invited multidisciplinary artists, who under Anna's guidance explore ways of working with scores using Anna's RSVP cycles method.

Guests are welcome to attend and witness. I went to two performance Labs. Anna let the guests join a guided warm up, witness the rehearsals/explorations, invited us to give feedback and be part of their group conversations.

It was a privilege to witness their rehearsal and be part of rich conversations. We reflected on scoring, dramaturgy, presence, group dynamics, history of the works and more; I will take these reflections into my own making and research practice.



Anna Halprin explaining the RSVP cycles method at the de Young Museum talk. Photo © Vanessa Grasse

Anna's Thursday morning Classes



Class on the deck at Anna's Mountain Home Studio.
Photos © Vanessa Grasse



Anna Halprin during class

Each week after the Wed eve Lab I attended Anna's weekly Thursday morning classes, which are open to all. Her classes are filled with experiential anatomy wisdoms, with seeds to access imagination, emotions and awareness to the present moment. We explored connections between our two pointers/coccyx and sternum; allowing the nerves in the spine to nurture the organs; gravity and leverage; transformative cushions on the head dances; drawing and sharing our stories. The classes always ended with dancing on the amazing outdoor deck. In her classes I rediscovered a sense of purpose in my dancing and a desire to dance more and develop my own moving practice which had been somehow neglected by focusing on choreographing in the past few years. The classes were immersed in nature and I was also able to combine them with walks after class near the surrounding mountain landscape of her studio. This allowed me to reconnect with my walking practice and reflect further on my relationship with natural environments after a long period focusing on working only in urban spaces with MESH, and I began to draft ideas for a new research. Anna was more fragile than usual, she is 98 years old and has recently had a spine injury, this meant she was not available for one to one sessions, something we had originally planned to do, none the less she was happy to have conversations after the classes and Labs about my work and go into more details about her practice. It was incredibly inspiring and motivating to witness Anna persisting with her practice with passion, generosity and wisdom, despite her age and injury.

Events at the de Young Museum <https://deyoung.famsf.org/education/anna-halprin>

I had originally planned to go in the Spring and stay for a longer period of time to fit in more classes with Anna Halprin. However I had to postpone the trip and this meant the schedule and plan changed, which worked out for the best in the end.

Even though my trip shortened, by arriving in October it meant I was able to attend not only Anna's classes and workshops but also a series of rare events curated by The de Young museum in San Francisco to commemorate Anna Halprin's life and work. This included workshops, talks, screenings, and re-staging of various performances such as Blank Placard (1967), Parade and Changes/Paper Dance (1965) The Prophetess (1947) and Planetary Dance throughout the 2 weeks I was there.



Paper Dance performance de Young Museum 21 Oct 2018



Planetary Dance de Young Museum 28 Oct 2018 © Vanessa Grasse



Blank Placard San Francisco 20 Oct 2018 © Vanessa Grasse

This provided a richer and more rounded insight into Anna's practice that is feeding my own moving, making and teaching practice. Being able to experience her works Planetary Dance and Blank Placard was particularly special as they had been particularly relevant to my work MESH. I was able to directly experience and witness Anna's approach to choreographic protest and collective rituals that have both a healing and political aim. I got closer to understanding what she means by 'rituals' and her intentions behind invitations for collective participation. It allowed me to reflect on why I have been so keen for MESH to be not just a performative exploration but also what I have called a 'ritual of togetherness', my desire to facilitate meaningful experiences, the passion investigating socially engaged practices that can be meaningful, healing and connecting whilst still fuelling the work with strong artistic competence, integrity, aesthetic and vision.



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Anna Halprin workshop at the de Young Museum 20 Oct 2018



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The use of drawing during Anna's workshops inspired me to revisit my own movement and drawing practice which I had left to one side for some time.

It was incredible to see how relevant her work still is. It is a very powerful experience to meet a person who has indirectly shaped your life. Anna's radical decision to leave the east coast US modern dance scene to work in her own space immersed in nature to experiment in new ways, has influenced generations of dancers who studied with her, including Cunningham and artists who later formed Judson Dance Theater. If she hadn't existed or had taken a different path, many of us would probably be working quite differently or even be different kinds of people. To directly connect with our lineage is a profound experience I will from now on encourage people to nurture. Connecting with our historical lineage, artistic one, family lineage, our lineage with nature, is also an invitation you get from Anna's teaching. She invites us to connect generations, cultures, human & nature, past-present-future, the pragmatic physical self with the emotional, the imaginal self and the self of myths & stories. She invites us to find movement awareness whilst also sensing the complex feelings that let movement arise. She invites us to experience the meaningfulness of our moving and to sense how purpose arises. Her invitation for meaningful, transformational and healing experiences, fired by great political awareness and activism, was a great influence for my recent work MESH. Meeting her after 2 very intense years of developing and performing MESH was such a wonderful gift.

Change of plans and final reflections

I had planned to also meet Simone Forti for a mentoring conversation. Postponing and rescheduling the visit around Anna Halprin's events at the de Young meant it was no longer possible to meet her. My time with Anna was intense, filled with classes, workshop and performance, therefore I was happy to focus my energy mostly on meeting her. I made the most of my time there, whilst in San Francisco I was also able to study with Sara Shelton Mann and Abby Crain at the Joe Goode Annex and ODC studios, meet the local contact improvisation scene by attending classes and jams and attend many different performances like events at Counterpulse venue and the Trolley Dances outdoor events. These events and encounters hugely contributed to the richness of this trip. Both Sara's and Abby's classes have been transformational and left me with movement research material to work with for a long time. I will meet Sara Shelton again in Europe to study more with her and we have already spoken of potential collaborations.

This period gave me the opportunity not only to learn from these amazing practitioners but also to reflect on my practice, observe it from a distance and in dialogue with a different context. It gave me the opportunity to take some distance from my current project MESH, and create space for new ideas and a new research to emerge. Studying with Anna, Sara Shelton Mann and Abby Crain allowed me to re-find joy and passion in my own moving. The trip reminded me of how important it is to have periods to re-evaluate, re-visit, develop and take time to nurture my practice without any pressure from work and production. Whilst the two week study period was incredibly rich and fruitful, it was also quite short. I will look for opportunities to visit Anna and the San Francisco scene again. I had the opportunity to further reflect on what making 'dances that matter' (Halprin 2018) and dance that focus on social change means to me. It has motivated me to continue working in this direction whilst looking for new approaches.

Coming back – how to continue the journey?

I came back really inspired and motivated....and on my way back I was wondering how could I retain this feeling when I am back home when I will soon be immersed in my long 'to do lists', habits and more usual circumstances. How could I really utilise my findings and this energy to propel me and to allow the journey to continue here? This is something I always find challenging, how can the trip not be just a short parentheses but how can I actually channel forward it's energy, it's meaning, the desire to study and/or the type of activity I was involved in abroad, my findings? What helped me was to make a list of my 'motivating factors', my 'change of habits factors', and list how many of these factors I can find back home or how I could create favourable circumstances. I also made a list of what I'd like to do next and a list of key findings. This helped me to reflect on how to further develop the experiences from the trip, and also what/if anything I need to shift in the structure and conditions for my practice.

Some direct outputs after the trip

Straight after the trip I was able to share some of my reflections from my encounter with Anna during Encounters festival at Yorkshire Dance in Leeds where I was invited to give a provocation for a public discussion event. My provocation:

What I am going to say comes out of my latest work [Mesh](#), which is a response to our divisive global political climate and the UK Brexit. 10 dancers and a group of workshop participants create what a call a ritual of togetherness in urban spaces. They invite passers by and strangers to join in and to offer support. The work is based on principles of interdependence and collaboration. It approaches meeting others in an emphatic way, and as a very much in the moment embodied experience of being in relation.

Some notes about opening to encounter others when making work:

- *Opening to directly encounter others is an opportunity for the work to become a vehicle and a vessel for a shared meaningful experience, rather than being a representing/portraying or talking about an issue.*
- *Opening to others also means being available to meet resistance and rejection (all performers had to work with this aspect on a personal level). But can then resistance be met with malleability, generosity and porosity?*
- *Our experience of containment, borders and otherness starts from a very embodied place.*

I am interested in questioning the roots and preconditions of how we form our perception of self and other. So when making work that is concerned with 'otherness' can we question how and when our perception of otherness arises, and what do we actually mean by otherness??

Other thoughts:

We can be like permeable membranes. The edges of ourselves can be malleable, we can welcome and nurture otherness not only as something other to meet, deal with, accept and embrace but otherness as something that is an intrinsic part of our transformative self. Can we think of otherness as a constituting part of the self? a self that is constantly becoming into otherness. Perhaps softening the perception of our own identity can be a good way into encountering otherness with curiosity, respect and through a relational experience. So maybe the issue is not so much about how we encounter others but first of all how we allow ourselves to embrace otherness within ourselves. Anna Halprin mentions how we should acknowledge difference whilst appreciating commonalities. "we are different and it doesn't matter that we are different. What matters is that we are able to respect our differences and bring those differences together and find our commonalities." (Halprin in Kaplan 1995, p.16)

I was also already able to include my findings from studying with the different teachers in California in my own teaching (Contact Improvisation workshop on the 18th Nov and 2nd 2018 and a professional class for ProDanceLeeds on the 22nd Nov).

Tips on visiting Anna's Mountain Home Studio

The best way to get to Kentfield from San Francisco is by Ferry to Larkspour. I took the bus once and it dropped me on the motorway and it was quite far from town. The Ferry trip is instead beautiful and Larkspour port is close to Kentfield via a lovely walk by the creek. If you stay in San Rafael the bus is probably best (however Kentfield is closer to Anna's place and if you want a lift back home down the hill after class or up the hill before class most people will drive through Kentfield not San Rafael). Get a Clipper Card to get discounted travel.

I wanted to attend both the Wednesday Labs and Thursday morning classes so I booked an AirB&B in Kentfield/Greenbrae rather than commuting, it was very expensive but still the cheaper option. Getting to the studio involves about 1h walk up the hill towards the mountain. It is a nice walk, but there is no pavement and a bit much if you do it every day. I soon met some people who could give me a lift down the hill and some of the local and regular participants were willing to arrange a lift in to get to class for the following days. I learned from others that it is possible to commute from SF for the Thursday morning class if you use the ferry and then a taxi or get a lift.

There is limited info on how to get there, even Anna's assistant couldn't give much advice - if you are traveling from far and don't drive it is not so straight forward, so I hope this is useful. I will try to set up a Facebook page for people who are planning to go there so they can arrange car lifts and accommodation. I really recommend going for walks in the surrounding parks and lakes after class – I bought this [map from Amazon](#) in the UK and it was very useful, there is an entrance to a public footpath not far from Anna's place (from Anna's place go back up the hill turn left and footpath entrance is on your right) all walks are all well signed posted.

You can find updates on Anna's classes and workshop on her website <https://www.annahalprin.org/>