

The healing encounter of dance, Gestalt, and art based on Anna Halprin's Life/Art Process

Ursula Schorn

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Abstract: Anna Halprin, influential American dancer and artist, in her search for new ways to activate the transformative potential in dance, integrated Fritz Perls' approach to Gestalt therapy in her work, called Life/Art Process. Gestalt principles of awareness in the 'here and now' find a structure in the Principles of the Creative Process, a central theoretical model of the Life/Art Process offering a holistic approach to creativity. The experience of physical, emotional, and mental awareness through movement extends into the field of artistic expression in dance and visual arts. The creative encounter between dance and art follows guidelines of the Psychokinetic Visualisation Process as applied to therapeutic settings.

Key words: transformative potential of dance, Gestalt and dance, Principles of the Creative Process, Psychokinetic Visualisation Process, from the narrative to the abstract, the intelligence of the body.

Introduction

Looking back on a long series of trainings in the fields of dance, Gestalt, and art, I realise that my studies with Anna Halprin at the Tamalpa Institute, California, have left the strongest impact on my personal and professional life as a dance and Gestalt therapist. It is the Life/Art Process with its innate integration of dance and the visual arts that keeps my inquiring mind alive in searching for a deeper understanding of the healing potential in this creative process. In this article, I will give an introduction to the historical context in which the Life/Art Process developed, introducing the theoretical outlines of this approach to dance, called Principles of the Creative Process, as well as the model of the Life/Art Process, called Process of Psychokinetic Visualisation, which leads to the interplay of dance and visual arts. In the conclusion, I will reflect on the particular resources the Life/Art Process provides for therapeutic settings, guiding into experiences which will eventually lead the client to deeper insights and understanding of the self.

Historical context and theoretical roots of the Life/Art Process

Anna Halprin's approach to dance received its strongest impulses during the 1960s, when humanistic psychology developed. This approach to psychology was not

only a key element in the development of Fritz Perls' Gestalt therapy, but also a stimulus for a social movement that affected therapy, pedagogy and artistic work. In humanistic psychology, influenced by French and German phenomenologist philosophers, existentialism and humanism, basic assumptions were made about the nature of being human. Man is seen holistically as a biological, psychological and social being. His self-responsibility and freedom of choice enable him to act decisively and to realise himself: as a being capable of subjective experience and perception, he is able to gain knowledge of himself and the world through his senses. In the search for meaning, man transcends his own existence (Völker, 1980, p. 15). The whole person appears in the potential for creating and transforming and, according to Anna Halprin's conviction, embraces

. . . the emotional life, which dancers rarely study. Dancers studied movement. But movement is related to feeling, and we had no system for looking at those feelings that were evoked through movement. Nor did we have any idea of how the mind was really functioning in relation to movement or feeling. (Halprin, 1995, p. 12)

In her search for integrating emotional life experience in dance, Anna Halprin became acquainted with Gestalt therapy at the Esalen Institute in California in the 1960s. As a participant in Fritz Perls' groups, she saw how directly the language of the body conveys emotional processes. In Gestalt therapy, the focus of attention is on

experience in the here and now. Not just what is said, but the way the language of the body is manifested – in breathing, posture, gesture, voice and movement – is crucial, and points the way to the inner landscape of emotional experience and understanding. The phenomenon of perception gains significance. But how is perception structured? Perls says:

Gestalt therapy has its support in its own formation because the gestalt formation, the emergence of the needs, is a biological phenomenon. So we . . . simply consider the organism as a system that is in balance and that has to function properly. Any imbalance is experienced as a need to correct this imbalance. (Perls, 1969, p. 16)

According to Gestalt psychologists,

. . . the perceiver was not merely a passive target for the sensory bombardment coming from his environment; rather, he structured and imposed order on his own perceptions. Basically, he organized perceptions of the incoming sensory stream into the primary experience of a figure as seen or perceived against a background, or ground. (Polster and Polster, 1973, p. 29)

In the gestalt, the experienced phenomenon, Perls sees the highest unity of experience. Experience takes place at the boundary between the organism and the environment: first of all, on the surface of the skin, then the organs of sensory perception and finally the motor response. There is a correspondence between external and internal perception as the organism reacts to external and internal stimuli. The kinaesthetic sense is activated by means of proprioceptors in muscles, joints and tendons, enabling the persons to perceive themselves (Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951/1991, p. 15). With self-perception and the perception of a need, an open gestalt comes to the foreground. Fritz Perls recognises the phenomenon of self-regulation when he points out:

. . . the organism is left alone to take care of itself, without being meddled with from outside. And I believe that this is the great thing to understand: that awareness per se – by and of itself – can be curative. Because with full awareness you become aware of this organismic self-regulation, you can let the organism take over without interfering, without interrupting: we can rely on the wisdom of the organism. (Perls, 1969, pp. 16–17)

The interface between organism and environment, individual and society, and man and nature is the point where awareness arises out of experience. If a space can be made where the body's senses are physically centred, sensing at the interface of inner and outer, organism and environment, and I and You, then apparently irreconcilable opposites will be reconciled in creative interaction. Bodily experience needs space

and time in order to be perceived and understood with all the senses. Based on theoretical outlines of Gestalt therapy, Anna Halprin developed her Principles of the Creative Process.

Principles of the Creative Process

What is the source of creativity? What gives rise to the motivation to engage in a creative process? Fritz Perls sees creative potential in the adjustment between the organism and the environment. For Anna Halprin, it is the search for meaning that leads to ever new forms of artistic expression. Both agree that man has the ability to extract meaning from the senses. This means that the faculty of perception is a prerequisite for creative action. But what happens if a person's channels of perception close down and emotional barriers block the process of expression? Anna Halprin says: 'In my approach to . . . dance, art grows directly out of our lives . . . Whatever emotional, physical or mental barriers that we carry around with us in our personal lives will be the same barriers that inhibit our full creative expression' (Halprin, in Roose-Evans, 1994, p. 129). Anna Halprin looks for ways of removing barriers in order to let the interaction of impression and expression reach a state of creative flow. She recognises principles of the creative process which are represented in symbolic form as a diagram.

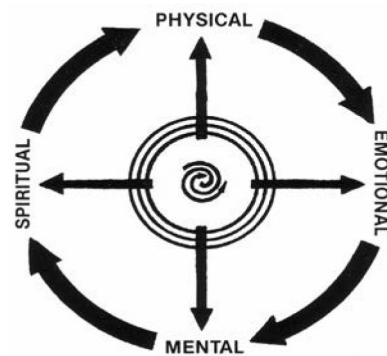


Diagram of the Principles of the Creative Process[®] (Halprin, 1995, p. 15)

The spiral, located in the centre of the diagram, symbolises the constant process of transforming experience as it moves between the poles of impression and expression, perception and action, and reflection and integration. In terms of the Life/Art Process, creativity requires being completely open to the awareness of what is happening in the moment. This involves direct contact with a body/mind experience, an integrated physical and emotional experience, finding the centre where evaluation takes place. From this contact, the motivation arises to give expression to what has been sensed and felt, be this through movement, dance, or

drawing. The more the senses open to the ability to perceive, the more direct the link between impression and expression. For 'deepened life experience' leads to 'expanded art expression' (Halprin, 1995, p. 15). That is how Anna Halprin describes the polarity of the spiral pathways. Openness of the senses requires a perceptual ability that is accessible to consciousness and is constantly differentiating on four levels.

The four arrows of the diagram point outwards in four directions. These directions are also linked in a large circle, symbolising four basic perceptions of the human being. The complex interaction reflects the embodied unity of the human being as body/mind, and soul/spirit.

The physical level of awareness has two dimensions: the sensory, exteroceptive contact with the outside world via the senses of sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste; and the inner proprioceptive depth perception of the body in the sensing of body temperature, breathing, pulse and heartbeat, along with perception through the kinaesthetic sense – awareness of the position of the body and direction of movement in space. Anna Halprin makes physical perception the central starting point and constant point of reference for the Life/Art Process.¹ She distinguishes between sensing, feeling and emotion. Sensing and feeling relate to physical perception. This in turn guides attention to the level of feeling in the emotional sense.

The emotional level of awareness encompasses the complex interplay of physical and mental patterns of response. Every emotion – be it fear, pain or joy – can be recognised by its characteristic expressive body language profile, and conveyed by gesture, mime, posture and voice. Expression in movement has, in turn, a powerful feedback effect on emotional experiences. This means that emotions can be initiated, for example, by movement, the sound of the voice, or facial expression. At the same time, as this process is working internally, the interaction of expression and emotional experience also affects relationships, and hence communication with the outside world. The more congruent the expression, the more convincing is the emotional experience mirrored in the witnesses of a creative process. To be as finely tuned as this, the interaction between the components of expression has to be developed and differentiated. Anna Halprin writes:

When movement is liberated from the constricting armor of stylized, preconceived gestures, an innate feedback process between movement and feelings is generated. This feedback process between movement and feeling is an essential ingredient of expressive movement. When you understand this, movement becomes a vehicle for releasing feelings, which is essential in the healing process . . . We are working toward

expression and congruency, and understanding movement and feelings in a constantly circulating feedback loop facilitates this process. (Halprin, 2000, p. 24)

The mental level of awareness comprises not only the mental/cognitive faculty of thinking, planning, reflecting and analysing, but also the faculty of imagining, dreaming and making associations. The Life/Art Process gives these inner images room to reveal themselves, and this is the way neurobiology explains the origin and meaning of internal images: 'for anyone who has eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, skin to feel, the world is full of images. Certainly, we need a brain too, and it has to be as open as possible to everything that comes via the sensory organs into the sensory areas of the cortex' (Hüther, 2006, p. 22). Whatever internal image appears requires a brain that is open, free from value judgments and interpretations, in order to disclose its hidden meaning. Current knowledge based on neurobiology is – from my point of view – consistent with the findings of Gestalt therapy. Fritz Perls writes: 'via seeing, hearing and feeling we arrive at knowing; from there we get the primary information about ourselves and our attitude to life' (Perls, edited by Hilarion Petzold, 1980, p. 89).

The spiritual level of awareness is connected with the search for meaning in life and the interconnectedness with nature, as well as with other people. It is about areas of experience that cannot be explained in words, but which are expressed in the language of dance, music and visual arts. Anna Halprin says: 'I believe that the voices of the inner world speak to us in a language most similar to art. It is below words, above silence, and close to poetry' (Halprin, 2000, p. 159). The Life/Art Process makes space for the spiritual level in ritual that is created and performed by an individual or a group. Anna Halprin's definition of a ritual is the following: 'In an age where art has become decorative and lost its spiritual meaning, in an age where medicine has lost its connection to the heart and the intuitive spirit, art and healing can be reunited through ritual to become one again' (Halprin, 1997, p. 139). Rituals, individually or collectively performed, provide order in the midst of chaos, and give support during critical periods of life.

Dance happens in a social space. The individual, the I, meets and corresponds with the other, the You. Movements mirror or contrast with each other; bodies come into contact and move away, and reciprocate in giving and receiving weight; impulses to move are transferred to the body of another, accepted or rejected, changed or carried on. Dancers in a group are part of a moving organism. The contact with their own bodies is the base from which it becomes possible to go out into the world and come back to oneself. The more the faculty of physical/subjective feeling is experienced, the more the I

becomes able to make contact and resonate with the You and with the We of a group or larger community. The more sensitive the ability to sense inwards, into one's own body, the greater the ability to attune to another person. At the same time, in the encounter with another, the individual learns to balance outwardly directed perception in relation to an inner place of experience and evaluation. Out of this polarity between the inner and outer and between I, You or We – symbolised in the three concentric circles of the diagram – grows identity, and eventually acceptance of the other via the creative abundance of individual modes of expression. With the discovery of interpersonal space, the individual opens up in relation to the community of dancers by sensing connections with others, allowing resonances on all levels of awareness to flow into the individual movement expression. For the individually experienced movement is the vessel in which, symbolically speaking, bodily experience of the world finds its inner place.

Opening the senses, while being aware of individual space, activates the reception of the external as well the internal world. Entering the internal world opens a pathway to the world of inner images (Hüther, 2006, p. 13). Anna Halprin developed an approach to these images, which integrates the moving body with the expression in drawings, called the Psychokinetic Visualisation Process.

The process of Psychokinetic Visualisation

The Psychokinetic Visualisation Process involves three sequential steps: imagination, visualisation, and movement translation. These can be understood as signposts into the inner landscape of the dancer.

Imagination is the pathway to the internal images, and begins with opening up the senses. The question is: how and in what conditions do the senses become receptors for impressions coming from within? A peaceful, relaxed atmosphere opens the inner eye. In a state of restful concentration, an inner image appears which can relate to the physical level of awareness. Images emerge not only from concentrated inwardly directed perception, but also directly out of movement which provides the experience of shared interpersonal space. Through the shared experience of feeling with the other, gestures of giving and receiving, approaching and retiring, resistance and mutual support evoke resonances that become linked with internal images.

Visualisation, according to Anna Halprin's terminology, is the process of making internal images, which are inspired by movement, visible in drawings. Drawings can be made directly and spontaneously after a

dance sequence, or can be introduced following a phase of restful concentration in which the inner eye has time to become aware of the bodily location from where the image emerges. The crucial objective in the visualisation process should be releasing the mind from judgements in order to be in a state of openness when encountering the images that present themselves. And, once again, as the process unfolds, there are questions to be asked: for example, how is openness of the senses to be maintained in contemplating the images one has drawn? How is it possible to create a seeing space that is free of interpretation and analysis?²

The approach to drawings can be done in the following three steps:

Step 1 is linked to the question: what am I seeing? The physical level of awareness is being addressed here. First of all, the images are verbally described in terms of their content and form. The content of the images refers to what is depicted, and is shown by pictorial means – lines, areas, dots and colours, as well as figures, objects, landscapes and symbols that can be made out from the background. In the foreground of the drawing, the viewing eye might recognise a form or figure, the colours and shapes of which make it stand out from the background. The form of the image relates to the 'how' of the representation. This is determined, on the one hand, by the specific dynamics of the medium – be it oil pastels, wax crayons, soft pastels or watercolours – and, on the other hand, through the movement factors that had been active in the dance. These have been transferred directly on to the drawing, giving it its structure. The power factor can be seen in the intensity of the strokes – delicate, soft or strong; the space factor can be seen in the direction of the lines – curved, straight or jagged; the time factor can be read in the density and rhythmic accentuation of lines; and the flow of movement is displayed in the continuous or interrupted nature of the strokes. When comparing images produced before and after a dance sequence, or over a longer period of time, changes become apparent: colours may be stronger or more delicate, brighter, more monochrome, or not present; lines may be more agitated or calmer, or go in new directions, perspectives and dimensions; symbols may be repeated, clearer or resolved, and transposed from the periphery to the centre; the boundaries and contours of the image become denser or more permeable, or open or closed; figures move from the foreground into the background; and previously unseen or overlooked details in an image gain significance and are drawn larger, like a 'blow-up', making them shift into the foreground. Being able to recognise, to non-judgementally name and describe phenomena shown in their specific qualities, without interpretation, this is the challenge of step 1.

Step 2 is linked to the question: what am I feeling? The

emotional level of awareness is being addressed. Which emotions does the image evoke in the viewer? Is the effect of the image soothing or disturbing? Does the image make me feel cheerful, sad or thoughtful? What comes as a surprise, gives me courage, or makes me hopeful or despondent? Which colours, qualities of line or symbols stimulate these feelings? Questions focus the seeing eye and clarify the foregrounded graphic means of emotional expression.

Step 3 is linked to the question: what associations do I have? The mental level of awareness is being addressed. Which aspects of the drawing stimulate fantasies or associations? The richer the pictorial language, the more open and wider the eye becomes, perceiving messages in the drawing. Breadth and depth of experience are increased in the movement translation, the third step of the Psychokinetic Visualisation Process.

Movement translation invites the dancer to translate what she has seen, felt, or associated in the drawing back into the three-dimensional space of movement, allowing the movement to guide her into surprising directions, dynamics and rhythms. Out of the graphic figures in the drawing, one figure in the foreground is chosen. The dancer finds the place in the body that corresponds to the chosen figure. So, for example, a spiral arising from the centre of the drawing resonates in a circling movement of the pelvis, which leads the spine and legs, and finally the arms, shoulder girdle and head, in a spiralling movement. Flowing, repetitive movements which speed up and then become slower, gradually leading the dancer into a straight line to the periphery of the dance space, finding her resting space. Out of the changes in the movement, its directions, dynamic, rhythm and flow, there develops a new movement gestalt, which again engenders an internal image in the dancer. A second drawing makes the inner image of this dance visible, which will now be compared with the first drawing. Questions guide the observing eye: how has the initial figure possibly changed in the second drawing? Through which qualities of expression does the alternation make itself seen and felt? Have new feelings or associations been formed, to invite the formulation of a theme?

Movement translation is accomplished not just by the person who made a drawing, but can also be taken on by a partner. Then the former is able to formulate a question regarding her chosen figure. This question is then translated by the partner into movement. The question should be open and not offer any hidden answers. A question might be: where does the spiral lead to? What is happening at the point where the straight line ends? The dancing partner has the task not of finding an answer, but solely of dancing the question. She lets the question lead her into an intuitive movement process. The witnessing partner closely follows the

translation of her question into movement, and registers any resonances on the physical, emotional or associative level of awareness. Finally, the two partners share their experiences: what have you felt or associated while dancing? What have I as your witness seen? Which of the movements had the strongest resonances on me?

In the following step of this process, the person whose drawing has been translated into movement now begins to integrate into her own dance what she has seen in her partner's dance. As she starts with the movement translation of her first chosen figure, and includes the movement translation created by her partner which has left the strongest resonances, her challenge will be to find transitions and ways to connect these movements. Out of the linking up a dance is created; this means movement motifs are connected and choreographed into a form with a clear beginning, development and closure. This dance will capture the essence of her therapeutic process by reducing the form to the central message which has been revealed via the inter-body encounter and the embodiment of what has been experienced.

In the context of therapeutic group work, the process of movement translation can be delegated to the group. The inter-body space is expanded as the group takes on a question that has been asked by one group member about her drawing. The question could be formulated as such: how does the circle relate to the two lines crossing in the centre? Group members who feel called by this question, without knowing anything about the background of the person asking the question, agree among themselves as to who will choose which graphic motif. Basic outlines might be decided among the group members. The challenge of the group is, again, not to find an answer to the question, but to be moved by it – moved by physical, imaginative and emotional resonances, by spontaneous encounters with other group members, moved by the chosen graphic motif: for instance, dancers moving in a circle, while others move in two separate straight lines, slowly approaching the centre, stopping, avoiding the centre, getting closer, touching the first one of the other line, blending, disconnecting, turning away. The group member who has asked the question about the drawing, now in the position of the witness, has the free choice to direct the process by asking the group to repeat or exaggerate movements, to speed them up or slow them down. She herself can decide to join in the movement process, taking on a part or position that seems significant to her, sensing where it takes her in the context of the group process happening around her. She decides when this process will come to an end. After this group process she shares her experience, and listens to the experiences that group members share, taking in whatever resonates most in her. The exchange of experiences between the group and the questioner can be surprising,

inspiring, or rejuvenating. A process of deep insight can be reached. Her initial question might have found an answer through what she experienced as a witness as well as a co-acting group member. At the same time, group members might have insights as well, which connect to their personal life questions.

Conclusion

Working with the Life/Art Process, the encounter between dance, Gestalt, and art, I have noticed over the years the effect which an almost immediate transition from movement to drawing has on the quality and form of what is expressed in the therapeutic setting, both in individual and group settings. I began to realise that such processes lead to rather 'abstract' presentations of colours and shapes, drawings which consist mainly of lines, dots, coloured surfaces, drawings with no obvious symbolic or metaphorical content. These drawings simply mirror back traces of movement factors, such as the degree of intensity in a movement, its traces in space and its structures in time.³ The absence of obvious meaning, symbolic images or metaphors, motivates the dancer to re-enter the journey into the 'unknown' territory of the drawing by translating aspects of the drawing back into movement. This experience opens the awareness to new perspectives, to free the body and mind and release the power of bodily expression. Rather abstract figures, intuitively chosen by the client as their 'open gestalt', are explored through movement and drawing with a partner or the whole group. This process finds its completion in an individually created dance performance, which connects the different elements explored through drawings and movements, and finally leads the client to an experience of insight and integration.

What happens when the narrative context goes into the background and the nonverbal expression of movement and drawing comes into the foreground? My experience in working with the encounter of dance, Gestalt and art, and the interpersonal connectedness in partner and group work, is that the field of experience grows bigger and the field of verbal interpretation loses its central focus. This process creates a free space of discovery in which self-understanding becomes possible, and, to quote Gestalt therapist Erving Polster, 'meaningfulness arises out of experiences into a natural and evident meaningfulness which helps tie experiences together' (Polster and Polster, 1973, pp. 16–17). The body itself, the moving body, develops an amazing intelligence once given space and time to explore and experience, thereby finding meaning through open senses, deep insights, and answers to questions expressed in dance and art.

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Notes

1. Anna Halprin developed her approach to bodywork in *Movement Ritual* (1979).
2. Gestalt therapy, as a non-interpretive method, represents the conviction that the meaning of symbols emerges from actual experience (Polster and Polster, 1973, p. 16).
3. Daniel Stern writes about the ability of the infant to be aware of abstract representations like form, intensity, and time structure, an interesting phenomenon which is activated through the process described above. See Stern (1992 and 1985).

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Ursula Schorn, MA in Dance Therapy, USA; graduated from Fritz Perls Institute for Dance and Gestalt Therapy, Germany; trained as Halprin Practitioner at Tamalpa Institute, CA, and co-taught with Anna Halprin at Esalen Institute, CA; studied and taught dance and music education at the Mozarteum, Austria; conducted trainings at conservatories and universities in the USA; was Instructor for Applied Arts in Socialwork at the University of Applied Sciences, Berlin; works as a Dance and Gestalt therapist in private practice in Berlin, and as director of advanced trainings in Berlin and abroad. Co-author of the book: *Anna Halprin, Dance – Process – Form*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015.

Address for correspondence: Brauerstr. 15, 12209 Berlin, Germany.
Email: ullaschorn@t-online.de