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Allan Kaprow's "Activities"

Looking back on the early Happenings, Allan Kaprow has expressed dissatisfaction with a notable feature of those works: the presence of an audience. Although there was often audience involvement in them, a conventional theatrical division still prevailed between performer and non-performer. From the early 1960s on, he sought to phase out the audience altogether and to achieve a more complete integration of his performances with the environment in which they were done. Beginning with the Happenings, his work was part of a movement that attempted to transform fundamentally the conditions under which art was experienced. He chose to characterize the new work as "intermedia" instead of multimedia, suggesting an art that hovered outside of previously defined boundaries and that fluctuated between art and the world. In both his writing and his art activity Kaprow has consistently explored the perimeters that delimit art from life. His position has never been anti-art, but it has become increasingly disengaged from an exclusively art-oriented framework. Psychology, sociology, and philosophy are no less important to him than art and aesthetics. But he does not consider these to be separate disciplines, and his recent work is often an interpenetration of them all.

In the mid-1960s Kaprow began to tone down the scale of his Happenings in terms of the number of participants and the scope of his imagery. By 1967 his work had assumed a distinctly new form, and he used the word "Happening" less frequently to describe his activity. He became pre-occupied with the problem of work as a collective social endeavor, and his performances from 1967 to 1971 consisted of groups of people engaged in

various kinds of physical labor. He called them “Work Routines.” In particular, he was interested in the area of overlap between work and play, and, whether it was building a road or erecting a wall, he questioned and blurred the differences between labor and recreation. By concentrating on the organizational aspects of his Routines, coordinating the operation of a social unit, he hoped to transform the teamwork required for work into a teamwork of play. Efficiency was discarded as a goal of organization, and real work became quasi-work. Also, the contingent and nonutilitarian nature of the tasks performed was important (e.g., a brick wall joined together with bread and jam instead of cement). The Routines seemed to contain a key transgression of the opposition of those primordial categories, work and play—work representing the stable order of socialized existence and play as something disruptive of that order, which, from earliest times, was generally limited to carnival and feast days and later to holidays. Kaprow’s current practice suggests that, in an increasingly technological society, this opposition has lost much of its force and that our conception of leisure time should be radically reevaluated.

Around 1971 another shift in his work became evident. He began to focus on relationships between individuals instead of on people functioning together as units. It was a turn from the observation of large group movement to smaller and more interiorized studies. (It can be assumed that this reorientation corresponded to the general social quietism that emerged in the wake of the 1960s.) Since 1971 Kaprow has done between thirty and forty related performances. The core of each piece is his set of written directions (or script). The procedure for executing the works begins with a gathering of a preselected group of people, usually a day before the actual performance, in order to distribute the directions and possibly explain them. The next day the participants split up into groups of two, occasionally three, which each perform the same script. In conclusion the whole group reassembles to discuss the event and individual experiences. This three-part structure is common to all the individual pieces.

Kaprow calls them “Activities” to distinguish them qualitatively from Happenings. Intrinsic to his conception of them are the absence of an audience of any kind, that it is carried out in a physical environment without art world or institutional associations, and that there be no documentation of the event. Each Activity has been performed only once, although there



1

**standing somewhere
facing a friend holding a large mirror**

trying to catch one's reflection

**signalling to tilt the mirror variously
until the reflection is caught**

**both moving apart a few steps
repeating process**

**moving apart again and again
repeating process
until it's no longer possible
to see oneself**



Allan Kaprow, *Routine*, 1973, activity book.

is no major reason why they couldn't or shouldn't be repeated. The scripts of many of the Activities have been released in book form with accompanying photographs of a simulated enactment of the work. He insists that this procedure does not document the piece, that the books illustrate in the manner of an instruction manual. In a recent article Kaprow expressed wariness about the documentation of performance art in general.¹ He believes that photographs and texts in a gallery shift the focus from the original event to themselves, thereby undermining the essential priority of the performance. His books, however, do not seem to completely avoid this "artification" of the work.

One of the earlier Activities was called *Time Pieces*. Participants were equipped with cassette recorders and divided into pairs. They were directed by the script to follow an intricate pattern of taping themselves counting aloud the rates of their breathing and pulse, first of one's own body and then that of the other. It also involved the physical exchange of breath, from mouth to mouth and by means of a plastic bag. As a body-consciousness piece, it seems relatively straightforward, but Kaprow made the intersubjectivity in the work of primary importance. It concentrated one's attention on bodily processes which are almost always unconscious, yet it did so by mirroring the identical processes in another person. If the work, then, became a meditation on mortality, it was a shared meditation, a kind of communal apprehension of human temporality. It should also be noted that the script of *Time Pieces* can be read as the score of a musical composition, formed in distinct movements, in which the sound of breathing and counting are arranged in an unusual theme and variation.

Another Activity, *Routine* from 1973, was also concerned with how the mechanics of self-perception are lodged in human relationships. Part of this piece involved the use of large mirrors: two people face each other, one holds a mirror, and the other gestures how the mirror should be tilted in order to catch his or her reflection. Each time a reflection is caught the pair moves several steps further apart, and the process continues until it becomes impossible to see oneself in the mirror. This procedure formed one section of five in the piece; the other four also called for some kind of echoing or reflecting of one's words or gestures through the use of mirrors or over the telephone. The work is structured very precisely, with a formal rhyming of its sections, but important elements of the performance are

determined by decisions of the participants, such as what words and gestures are to be used and, significantly, how long the Activity is to last.

Kaprow here works with an interplay of verbal and visual imagery which relates back to aspects of his Happenings. For example, he toys with linguistic phenomena of everyday speech (i.e., “he echoed what I had said” or “I saw myself reflected in her”) and directs the participants to enact literally this usage. In another Activity, *On Time*, he incorporated ice and boiling water into the work to explore what it means to say that someone is a warm or a cold person. Kaprow does not seem to be advancing any specific theory of language, but he is setting up a context in which the participants can examine what degree of overlap there is between the metaphorical and the propositional meanings of the same statement.

The Activities gradually became more complex, both structurally and psychologically. Scripts were written for three people instead of two, and alternations of roles within them were introduced. *Take-Off*, performed in Genoa in 1974, was important in this development. Units of three people enact the script. It is organized around the transmission of one person’s statement that he or she has performed a certain action (such as “I am undressing”) along with a request that the recipient of the message, who is in a different location, perform the same action. The communication is affected by an intermediary who documents the action with a Polaroid camera and tape records the statement and request. The go-between is to return to the first person with the same kind of audiovisual evidence to show that the second person has carried out the request. The catch is that the piece has the opportunity for deception built into it. It calls not only for a photograph of the action completed by the first person but also for a staged photograph to simulate a different action that never occurred. The go-between, who is in possession of a “true” photograph and a “false” one, may present only one of them to the third person; that is, he or she may choose whether to corroborate or contradict the taped statement with visual evidence. The third person must decide whether both the others are being truthful, or whether one or both are lying.

The Activity is in three identical parts, allowing the participants to experience each of the three roles, and each time new systems of trust and manipulation develop. In addition to the general problem relating to the “truth” of documentary materials, Kaprow is especially interested in the



**1 A and B
passing backwards
through a doorway
one before the other**

the other, saying you're first

**passing through again
moving in reverse
the first, saying thank me
being thanked**

**locating four more doors
repeating routine**



position of the go-between and the degree of confidence he or she wins from the others. Any trust or betrayal that occurs does so according to a logic and necessity distinct from real life. Decisions made by the participants are uniquely arbitrary, emptied of the usual kind of consequences, and the formal patterns of the behavior become discernible. Kaprow writes, "The Take-Off lies in the fact that the whole activity is a grand collusion in which each of the participants knows the scheme from the start and knows that the others know."

Another more complicated Activity was *Satisfaction*, done in April 1976. The core of the script calls for one person to demand specified responses from another, that is, to receive "satisfaction." But in order to be praised, fed, kissed, comforted, he or she must demonstrate to the other person exactly how the satisfaction is to be given. So whatever is received in the way of satisfaction must first be given as a means of describing what is wanted. Once the request is made by means of demonstration, the other person has the option of refusing to comply with it. The piece is further complicated by the entrance of another pair who have also carried out the same preceding routine. The second couple, as a team, proceeds to direct one member of the first pair to "satisfy" (praise, feed, kiss, comfort, etc.) his or her partner, but the second couple must demonstrate between themselves how this is to be accomplished. Again the participants are provided with the option of not complying.

It is difficult to summarize briefly any of Kaprow's recent pieces. The unfolding of the work is dependent on the choices, agreements, and refusals of the performers, and the possible permutations of the scripts are immense. Kaprow once said in an interview that the scripts "don't contain anything; it's what they unleash that interests me.... They contain only the system of a movement which sets off a mechanism, a system to make something happen. They are a potential waiting for what is going to happen, that's all. All the rest is done by the others, by the participants."² Kaprow has clearly concentrated on the unpredictable possibilities of his scripts. (The word "script" is an inadequate characterization for they often resemble scores, dance notation, or even poetry.) Some features are rigidly prefixed: groupings and combinations of performers, certain words and exchanges. On the other hand, crucial choices which will govern the development of an individual performance are left to the participants. Duration,

in particular, is an area over which he exercises little control. He has been critical of performance art that has been shaped to conform to conventional audience expectations of appropriate length. Some of his Activities are composed so that the obstinacy or enthusiasm of even one participant can extend the work indefinitely. Performance time, for Kaprow, should correspond to our experience of time in real life rather than in the theater. But his concept of duration is also like time in a chess game, whose length is determined by a combination of rules and free choices. The moves which he leaves open to his performers are countered by the moves he has written into his scripts.

Many of the Activities, including *Take-Off* and *Satisfaction*, investigate how various kinds of information are exchanged between individuals. Specific pieces will study single or combinations of sign systems. *Comfort Zones*, performed in Spain in 1975, examined the language of eye contact and territorial space by directing the participants to transgress conventional standards of physical distance and length of eye contact. *Maneuvers*, done this year in Naples, studied, in a kind of parody, the exchange that occurs when two people approach a doorway at the same time and each defers to the other. In a preface to this piece, Kaprow wrote, "Within the forms of polite behavior there is enough room to transmit numbers of complex messages." He is deeply concerned with the semiotic content of ordinary human encounters in which gesture, distance, hesitations become carriers of meaning as much as or more so than spoken language, and how secondary signs are fused onto primary ones to constitute an irreducible complexity of signification.

Kaprow has used the analogy of "research" to describe his work and has indicated that it sometimes comes close to being social-psychology. Certain features of his procedures have the semblance of research: for each performance he is careful to have at least three or four units of people perform the same script so that the different experiences of each group may be compared. He is also conscious of both the cultural environment where the performances take place and the backgrounds of his participants. This means that he has made an effort to work in many different nations and parts of this country and tries to assemble divergent groups of performers, although it has been difficult for him to get people who are free of associations with the art world, the social sciences, and universities. But

his work does not take the form of scientific inquiry and explanation. He is not interested in the kind of results yielded by detached observation of social phenomena; his Activities are not formulated with any preconceived hypothesis about the nature of what he is investigating, for which he is seeking experimental confirmation. Rather, he is after the commonsense knowledge gained from direct engagement in social encounters. The work becomes research in terms of the information acquired by each individual participant (of whom Kaprow is always one). Self-knowledge, then, is an important “practical yield.”

Kaprow’s art has always been highly formal. Many people are unaware how carefully composed his Happenings were. But if his work is formal, it is because “form is a character of mind... The structure of our cerebral cortex and all our biological functions permit us only patterned responses and thoughts of one kind or another.”³ The organization of his Activities is tied, in part, to his familiarity with contemporary music, and his study with John Cage is of significance in this respect. Most of Kaprow’s pieces are composed according to self-imposed regulations of groupings and regroupings with varying degrees of indeterminacy set into them. Although his work has identifiable and often sophisticated aesthetic form, it’s of secondary importance to him. The aesthetic attitude, which isolates aesthetic features from non-aesthetic ones, is now alien to him. Accidents, embarrassments, misunderstandings—developments that are flaws in an aesthetic sense—are frequently part of his performances, and he considers such disruptions fortuitous and vital to their success.

If Cage’s formalism was intended to “imitate nature in her manner of operation,” Kaprow’s could be said to imitate social processes in their manner of operation. As with all successful mimetic art, Kaprow uses techniques of defamiliarization, and these are central to his work. His Activities are like fictions about the substance of everyday life in which language and gesture are rearranged, recombined, and thus made strange. The alternation of roles, the use of tape recorders and mirrors, the repetition and ritualizing of certain actions, all work to break down our habitualized perception of the most basic kinds of social exchange. Henri Lefebvre wrote that everyday life was modernity’s unconscious and Kaprow’s Activities seem designed to rouse their participants into consciousness by decomposing and recomposing the fabric of that life. Put

another way, they are sensitizing devices. Despite superficial similarities, however, they are unlike sensitivity groups and certain psychological testing methods which are usually highly obvious in form, specifically goal-orientated, and intrinsically dependent on the presence of a leader or authoritarian figure. What also distinguishes Kaprow's work is its inherent unpredictability and its implied assertion that paradox and ambiguity will always be at the heart of any social interaction.

Although his activity reverberates with social and political implications, Kaprow disowns the roles of activist or theoretician. His relationship to politics is tempered with irony, characterized perhaps by a recent observation that "for every political solution there are at least ten new problems." Nonetheless, he is preoccupied with possible practical applications of the ideas behind his work, and, in the past, has been closely involved in teacher education and experimented with Happening-type situations as a means of transforming learning experience. Now he is hopeful that the Activities or related forms might fulfill a larger social purpose in the future. The current work is political on a small interpersonal level, and one of his toughest problems is how to transfer gains made in personal politics to the level of community politics. Kaprow offers no easy answers.

His inflexible opposition to spectators or audiences is linked to an underlying social critique. He appears aware of the increasing technical capacities of commercial and financial institutions to dominate the material conditions of our lives so that existence becomes spectacular (in the sense of looking on or watching) and that life itself, let alone art, becomes a show to be contemplated passively. His Activities work to subvert this kind of passivity, unlike much other performance art. The kind of self-awareness and introspection he hopes to cultivate is possible only in an interactional situation where there is reciprocal exchange and reflection on a basis of equality. Some performance art has tended to perpetuate the mystique of the artist whose aura of singularity is amplified by the performance event, excluding the possibility of dialogue and intersubjectivity. Kaprow is intent on breaking down this distance of artist from the world, insisting that there is no danger of contamination. Throughout his career he has persistently challenged "rectangular" thinking which inevitably puts frames around objects, roles, and experiences instead of apprehending them as part of a wider context. There are no sharply defined

boundaries for Kaprow, who once wrote that “as the identity of ‘art’ becomes uncertain, the artist can no longer take refuge in its superiority to life, as he was once accustomed to do. This is when, suddenly, decisions regarding human values become imperative.”⁴

1. Allan Kaprow, “Non-Theatrical Performance,” *Artforum*, May 1976, pp. 45–51.
2. Mirella Bandini, “Allan Kaprow,” *Data*, June 1975, p. 66.
3. Allan Kaprow, “The Shade of the Art Environment,” *Artforum*, Summer 1968, pp. 32–33. This is Kaprow’s response to Robert Morris’s “Anti-Form” essay from the same year.
4. Quoted in Barbara Rose and Irving Sandler, “Sensibility of the Sixties,” *Art in America*, January 1967, p. 45.

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Marcel Duchamp, *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*, 1912.

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