

# ‘Happeners...don’t merely dig the scene, they make it’: The Social Meaning of the Work of Art in Allan Kaprow’s Happenings

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## *Abstract*

This paper looks at Allan Kaprow’s Happenings through the framework of Peter Bürger’s 1971 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. It suggests that Kaprow’s Happenings project can be read as a detailed investigation into the way in which the category ‘art’ was formulated in his society, and an exploration of alternative possibilities for the social meaning and function of works of art excluded by this dominant ontology. The paper focuses specifically on Kaprow’s interrogation of the dominant understanding of the relationship between the art work and the spectator in the mid-century American art world, and the alternatives to this model that his Happenings proposed. Throughout the course of the 1960s, I demonstrate, Kaprow painstakingly explored and developed these alternatives, slowly formulating a model for the social function and meaning of the category ‘art’ that decentred hegemonic ideas about artistic autonomy and sought to ‘reintegrate art into the praxis of life’ (Bürger, 22).

Keywords: Allan Kaprow; Happenings; Avant-Garde; autonomy; Peter Bürger

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1971), Peter Bürger argues that the movements of the historical avant-garde are defined by their diagnosis and critique of the autonomy status of art. In bourgeois society, Bürger argues, the institution or idea of art ‘occupies a special status (of...) autonomy’ (1971: 24) that is, of detachment from the praxis of daily life. The autonomy status of art, Bürger argues, became apparent with nineteenth century Aestheticism, an artistic style that sought to rid all social relevance or critique from the subject matter of art, operating instead upon the maxim of ‘art for art’s sake.’ In light of this complete removal of social and political referents from the subject matter of art, Bürger argues, the institutional autonomy of the practice, and the implications of this for its social significance also became apparent:

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Only after art, in nineteenth century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop 'purely.' But the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact, also becomes recognisable. (1971: 22)

The avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, Bürger demonstrates, responded to Aestheticism by challenging art's autonomy status and the yawning gap it had facilitated between the values and ideals expressed in high culture and the political and social insanity of a Europe that had been torn apart by the First World War. This critical approach to the institution of art can be seen, for example, in the writing of the Dadaists. Hans Richter claims:

Dada was not a school of artists, but an alarm signal against declining values, routines and speculation, a desperate appeal, on behalf of all forms of art for a creative basis on which to build a new and universal consciousness of art. (1997: 49)

As this quotation suggests, the historical avant-garde was not only interested in destroying the existing cultural tradition, but was also engaged in a rigorous attempt to find a new social and political meaning for the work of art. The central social and political aim of the historical avant-garde, Bürger suggests, was to 'reintegrate art into the praxis of life' (1971: 22). Using the work of Herbert Marcuse, Bürger argues that

All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art. (1971: 50)

It was the intention of the historical avant-garde, he argues, to bring these characteristics of art back into the sphere of lived experience, to 'attempt to organize a new life praxis on the basis of art' (1971: 49). The political significance of the historical avant-garde as theorised by Bürger thus lies not in the specific content or referent of their works, but in institutional critique and, particularly, in the attempt to envision a new social role for the work of art:

When the avant-gardistes demand that art becomes practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of the work should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to *the way art functions in society*, a process that does as much to determine the effect of the works as does the particular content. (1971: 49, emphasis added)

A second important aspect of Bürger's theory of the avant-garde is his assertion of the 'failure' of the avant-gardist attempt to bring together art and life, and the implications of this for any 'post avant-gardiste' (1971: 57) work. While art as an autonomous institution survived the avant-gardist attack, Bürger observes, this attack served the art-historical purpose of making apparent art's autonomy status and thus its social and political ineffectuality. Within this context, he argues, 'art cannot simply deny its autonomy status and pretend that it has a direct effect' (1971: 57). Bürger is particularly damning of work that he labels the 'neo-avant-garde,' that is, art works of the nineteen fifties to seventies which employ some of the stylistic techniques of the historical avant-garde, such as collage, provocation or intermediality. Such works, Bürger argues, repeat avant-gardist techniques within a provenly autonomous art sphere and, thus, serve only to further institutionalise and neutralise these techniques. This is true, he argues, regardless of the intention of the artist, because it operates at the institutional level, through 'the status of their products' (1971: 58).

One of the art forms that Bürger directly identifies as such empty, neo-avant-gardist repetition of earlier avant-gardist techniques are Happenings. He writes:

Even today, of course, some attempts are made to continue the tradition of the avant-garde movements...But these attempts, such as the happenings, for example, which could be called neo-avant-gardiste, can no longer attain the protest value of Dada manifestations, even though they may be prepared and executed more perfectly than the former. (1971: 57)

This paper, however, argues that Bürger's theory of the historical avant-garde is, in fact, particularly useful for understanding the Happenings work of Allan Kaprow. The majority of the scholarship on the Happenings refers to the group shows held at the Reuben and Judson galleries between 1960 and 1962, and it is undoubtedly this definition to which Bürger refers. In these shows, visual artists including Kaprow, Claes Oldenburg, Jim Dine and George Brecht presented non-narrative performances in front of a seated audience. For the majority of artists involved in the Reuben and Judson, the performance of Happenings was a short, experimental part of their careers. Barbra Haskell (1984), for example, describes Happenings as both an individual and an art-historical stepping stone between the stylistic self-sufficiency of Abstract

Expressionism and the commercial referentiality of Pop. Allan Kaprow, by contrast, both coined the term 'Happening' and continued to experiment with the form throughout the 1960s. Through his decade-long development of the Happening form and concept, I suggest, Kaprow engaged both in a detailed investigation into the way in which the category 'art' functioned in his society, and an exploration of other possibilities for the social meaning and function of the work of art. While the thematic content of Kaprow's Happenings was rarely politically explicit, I demonstrate, his work engaged in an avant-gardist exploration of the social meaning of the category 'art,' and attempted to forge an alternative, more democratic relationship between art and life.

Kaprow's exploration of the way in which art functioned in his society addressed a number of different issues, such as the way in which the presentational spaces of the museum or gallery, and the booming capitalist art market of mid-century America, came to shape both the category 'art' and the possible meanings and uses of individual works, or the possible relationships between art and the rapidly developing commercial and mass culture that characterised his society. In this paper, however, I focus particularly on Kaprow's investigation of the dominant post-war understanding of the communicative model of art: the relationship between the spectator and the work of art. Kaprow's Happenings, I demonstrate, challenged the dominant communicative model of mid-century formalist aesthetics, which understood the work of art to be 'a static object with a single, prescribed signification that is communicated unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalised viewer' (Jones 1999b: 1). Moreover, his work, like that of the historical avant-gardes, also began to explore alternative possibilities for the social role and significance of art opened up by this critical consideration of the relationship between work and spectator. Throughout the course of the 1960s, I demonstrate, Kaprow painstakingly explored and developed these possibilities, slowly formulating a model for the social function and meaning of the category 'art' that decentred hegemonic ideas about artistic autonomy and sought to 'reintegrate art into the praxis of life' (Bürger 1971: 22).

#### *Autonomy and the Post-Second World War Art World*

Kaprow created his Happenings in the context of the American art world which rapidly attained a position of international significance in the wake

of the Second World War. While Bürger demonstrates that the historical avant-gardes mounted a sustained challenge to the autonomy status of art in the early twentieth century, the post-war art world foregrounded and reinforced the idea of art as an autonomous sphere through its dominant artistic style, its critical discourse and its institutional structures. The post-war American art world is, for example, synonymous with the style of Abstract Expressionism, which purged the canvas of any illustrative or representative features. The move towards abstraction was not only a rejection of the methods of previous art, but also of any direct social, political, historical or commercial referent:

A number of these artists claimed that meaning was determined in their work not by external factors, but by a kind of transcendental transfer of emotional purpose from artist to art work. For this transfer to take place, it was necessary to establish a kind of cultural vacuum around the work. Social function and historical meaning necessarily had to be ignored so that meaning could be determined by the artist's attentions alone. (Gibson 1997: xxiv)

The Abstract Expressionists presented this rejection of referentiality as an assertion of individual freedom and vision in the face of the incomprehensible political turmoil of the Second World War and the Cold War. Art, they suggested, should be a means to communicate essential truths about human experience that were absent from and could not be communicated by other forms of discourse.

This idea of art as a separate sphere was further foregrounded in the discourse of high modernist criticism that characterised the American art world from the 1940s onwards. This argument is epitomised in Clement Greenberg's famous 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch.' Here, Greenberg argues that the avant-garde originated in social critique, as a rejection of bourgeois values. Greenberg goes on, however, to suggest that 'once the avant-garde had succeeded in 'detaching' itself from society, it proceeded to turn around and repudiate revolutionary as well as bourgeois politics' (1939: 36). Thus, he argues:

it developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was ...to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public all together, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would either be resolved or beside the point. (1939: 36)

Greenberg goes on to offer a definition of the avant-garde that runs entirely counter to Bürger's later theory. He defines avant-garde art as abstract art, in dialogue not with society but with its own traditions and techniques, in order to preserve 'culture,' regardless of the societies and regimes that play out around it. The role that Greenberg outlines for the avant-garde as the preserver of high culture was elaborated in his important 1940 essay, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (*Partisan Review* VII, no.4), in which he argues that 'the avant-garde. [...] becomes the embodiment of art's instinct for self-preservation. It is interested in, feels itself responsible to, only the values of art' (301). Throughout the rest of his criticism, the term is used exclusively in this sense and interchangeably with 'modern art.' Building upon his redefinition of the avant-garde, Greenberg's criticism throughout the 1950s and 60s described modern art as engaged in a developmental process that took the form of increased medium specificity. Each art form, he suggested, progressively purged itself of everything inessential to the medium. In pictorial art this process began with the elimination of illustration and, thus, of any reference to the world outside the sphere of art.

In this way, the idea of art presented by Abstract Expressionism and advocated by Greenberg bears an interesting similarity to the Aestheticism described by Bürger as the impetus for the institutional 'self-criticism' of the historical avant-garde. Within the dominant discourse of the American art world, thinking about the social function of art moved from the public orientation of the nineteen thirties towards a situation in which the power and efficacy of art was located precisely in its autonomy from the cold-war and late capitalist society that was developing around it. This autonomy, the artists argued, allowed art to operate with an alternate value system to that of bourgeois society. As in Aestheticism, Abstract Expressionism and Greenberg's formalist criticism brought the autonomy of art to the forefront of artistic practice and understanding. In doing so, both discourses also opened up the possibility for subsequent artists to challenge this definition of art.

Barbra Haskell describes the mid-nineteen fifties as a crisis point in modern American art. While the work of the original Abstract Expressionists had been inarguably significant, the decade that followed produced a number of newer artists reproducing the same techniques. A young generation of artists in the 1950s thus sought a way to both move beyond and build upon the impasse that Abstract Expressionism had

become. One of the most significant ways in which this was achieved was through a challenge to the autonomy of style and subject matter that characterised the dominant style. As George Segal later observed:

We found it amazing...that so much avant-garde twentieth century work was rooted in the physical experiences of the real world and suddenly the Abstract Expressionists were legislating any reference to the physical world totally out of art. This was outrageous to us. (in Haskell 1984: 15)

This challenge was enacted through the introduction of elements of the real world into the work of art through a return to the collage tradition of Cubism and the production of 'Assemblages,' in which junk and found objects were combined with artistic materials to form sculptures. Assemblage achieved a brief moment of institutional recognition and representation, epitomised in the Martha Jackson Gallery's 1960 exhibition *New Forms-New Media*, and MoMA's 1961 exhibition *The Art of Assemblage*. The dominant art historical narrative describes this return of art to the real world through the debris of modern society as a stepping stone in the development of Pop art, whose adoption of commercial subject matter and techniques came to occupy the position of art world dominance previously held by Abstract Expressionism.

The challenge to artistic autonomy posed by Assemblage, Pop, and their critical reception, however, took place largely at the level of style and subject matter. What was foregrounded in the critical response to these styles was the rejection of the abstraction that characterised the Abstract Expressionist canvas. In his definition of the historical avant-garde, by contrast, Bürger argues that the early twentieth century avant-gardes did not challenge Aestheticism at the level of style or subject matter, but rather examined and sought to change the way in which art *functioned* in their society. Allan Kaprow developed his Happenings project in the context of the negotiation with Abstract Expressionism described above, and in the late 1950s produced a number of collages and Assemblages. What is most significant about Kaprow's work in this context, however, is that his attempt to move beyond Abstract Expressionism engaged not only with the style of the earlier form, but rather used this as a stepping stone into an interrogation of the assumptions, discourses and institutions that help to shape the meaning of the work of art in his society.

*'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,' Assemblages and Environments*

This approach to the problem of Abstract Expressionism was first articulated in Kaprow's 1958 essay 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock.' Here, Kaprow both describes the artistic impasse posed by Abstract Expressionism—epitomised and personified in the death of Jackson Pollock—and proposes a way beyond this impasse. Kaprow argues that Pollock's work directs the viewer's attention beyond the limits of the canvas. He cites the artist's interest in the 'diaristic gesture' over the formal coherence of the work of art as a whole, and his lack of respect for the edge of the canvas:

Pollock ignored the confines of the rectangular field in favour of a continuum going in all directions simultaneously, beyond the literal dimensions of any work... The four sides of the painting are thus an abrupt leaving off of the activity, which our imaginations continue outward indefinitely, as though refusing to accept the artificiality of an 'ending.' In an older work, the edge was a far more precise caesura: here ended the world of the artist; beyond began the world of the spectator and 'reality.' (1958: 5)

Thus, Kaprow suggests that Pollock's rejection of representation and his engagement with the flat picture plane—techniques advocated in Greenberg's developmental history of modern artistic autonomy—serve, paradoxically, to elide the edges of the canvas and to open the picture plane towards greater integration with the world 'of the spectator and reality.'

The question of the relationship between the work of art and the world around it that Kaprow poses in the 'Legacy of Jackson Pollock' represented a break not with the style of Abstract Expressionism, but, rather, with the dominant epistemological approach of the mid-century art world. In formalist criticism, epitomised in the work of Greenberg and later Michael Fried, the work of art is viewed as entirely self-sufficient from the world around it and artistic meaning is understood to be 'wholly manifest' (Fried 1968: 9) in the work itself. Amelia Jones describes the abstract painting and formalist criticism of mid-century America as the 'conservative end point' (Jones 2013: 56) of a tradition of Kantian aesthetics that sought a strict delineation between the work of art and lived experience. Kantian aesthetics, Jones argues, operates as a discursive '(and ideological)' framing of the work of art:

The 'inside' of art, defined by the logic of aesthetics as the true art work, is established and contained by the frame, which keeps art safe from the threatening abjection of outside. (2013: 55).

In light of this, Kaprow's suggestion that the best way to build upon Abstract Expressionism is to follow Pollock's gestures outside of the picture plane, and thus outside the defined and delineated 'inside' of art, presents a radical challenge to the dominant discourses and epistemological assumptions of the mid-century art world and its understanding of the social position of the work of art. The exploration of a different understanding of the relationship between the art work and 'the world of the spectator and reality' that Kaprow glimpsed at the edges of Pollock's canvases, however, became the guiding principle of his Happenings work.

A corollary of formalism's insistence on the immanence and self-sufficiency of artistic meaning is that the spectator is viewed in formalist criticism as a featureless receptacle for the vision of the artist or the 'inherent' meaning of the painting. Jones has observed that the Kantian tradition that underpins modernist criticism is based upon the 'disinterest' of the viewer:

aesthetic judgment must, by definition, be 'devoid of all interest,' since desire marks judgment as mere liking...and not a pure judgment of taste. Kant's model instantiates the Cartesian opposition between mind and body, clearly distinguishing between contemplative, disinterested aesthetic judgment and embodied, sensate, interested, contingent and therefore individualised and non-universal judgments. (1999a: 40)

In the formalist criticism of the mid-twentieth century, 'the world of the spectator' was thus given very little consideration. Rather, it was assumed that each art work would be met by the ideal spectator: a universalised, disembodied subject capable of comprehending fully the immanent meaning of the work. As we will see, Kaprow's Happenings work of the 1960s slowly unpicked and challenged this high modernist communicative model and, in doing so, proposed a radically different social role and significance for the work of art.

Kaprow first addressed the dominant communicative model of art in the 1957 Assemblage *Rearrangeable Panels*. The work consists of nine panels, each eight feet tall and covered with a different combination of paint and materials such as paper and glass. Coloured light bulbs were strung along the top of the panels. While this work can easily be situated

in the Assemblage tradition which incorporated elements of the real world as a challenge to the stylistic autonomy of Abstract Expressionism, what is most significant about Kaprow's *Rearrangeable Panels* is not their junk medium, but the fact that the panels are *rearrangeable*: they can be stood up against a wall in the manner of traditional artistic canvases, placed together to create a wall, or slotted together to create a kiosk-like structure. The capacity of the panels to be rearranged means that the viewer's attention is drawn not only to the work of art itself or to its content, but also to the space around it, with which the work is able to interact in a number of ways. As Kaprow argued in his monograph, *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings*:

The work began to actively engage the air around it, giving it shape, dividing it into parts, weighing it, allowing it to interact with solids at such a rate or in such a strange manner that *one cannot help noticing the shape and feel of the gallery which...sends back its shape to contend with the work of art.* (1966: 164, emphasis added)

As well as drawing attention to the presentational context elided by the conventional art works, *Rearrangeable Panels* also directs attention towards the role of the art audience. The rearrangeable nature of the panels means that the work offers a plurality of options for viewers to physically engage with it: they can look at it, as with a traditional canvas, they can walk around it, as with an Assemblage. In its kiosk form it is also possible for viewers to enter the work of art and, finally, it is possible (at least theoretically), for them to rearrange it.

This opening up of the possibilities for spectatorship, which came to define Kaprow's Happenings project was developed in his 'Environments,' a precursor to the Happenings in which the artwork is entered by the viewer, who thus becomes both surrounded by and incorporated into the work. The rationale behind the form was described by Kaprow in a 1958 essay entitled 'Notes on the Creation of a Total Art.' He suggests that the presence of the viewer is integral to the meaning and construction of this art form which, as such, constantly changes with the passage of time and the presence of different audience members:

We ourselves are shapes [...] we have differently colored clothing; can move, feel, speak, and observe others variously; and will constantly change the 'meaning' of the work by so doing.... I believe that this form places much greater responsibility on the visitors than they have had before. The 'success' of the work depends on them as well as on the artist. (1958: 12)

This acknowledgment of the role that viewers play in the meaning and construction of the work challenges the dominant understanding of the work of art as a contained, autonomous entity. In Kaprow's formulation, the self-sufficiency of the artistic plane, and its direct, unproblematic communication of immanent meaning, is shattered by the intrusion of the viewer whose variable and contingent presence becomes an element in the composition. In this way, Assemblages and Environments offered Kaprow the means by which to open up the art work into 'the world of the spectator and reality' that he had glimpsed at the edges of Pollock's paintings. His Happenings throughout the 1960s worked to explore the implications and possibilities of this alternative understanding of the relationship between the work of art and the spectator.

#### 18 Happenings in 6 Parts

The challenge to the strict delineation between the world of the spectator and the work of art that Kaprow had suggested in 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock' and experimented with in *Rearrangeable Panels* was brought to the fore in his first public Happening, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, held at the Reuben Gallery in October 1958. In very brief summary, the audience of *18 Happenings* entered into a gallery space divided into three sections by a framework of polythene walls. Open doorways in these walls allowed movement between the rooms and a different number of folding chairs were set up in each one, arranged so that those seated could also peer into the other rooms. Upon entry, each member of the audience was given an instruction card which gave specific instructions as to which room they should sit in each part of the performance. Once seated, spectators witnessed a mixture of seemingly unrelated light shows, slide projections of both high art and popular culture, the recitation of poetry and nonsense, noises, and six performers enacting a range of movements and activities.

One of the most significant features of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was the way in which it drew attention to, and explored the role of, the art audience; both challenging the hegemony of modernism's universalised, disembodied spectator and building upon the implications of the new relationship between art work and spectator suggested in *Rearrangeable Panels* and 'Notes on the Creation of a Total Art.' Firstly, the audience were required to change their seats several times during the performance. In this way, they were made constantly aware of their own position and incomplete viewpoint in relation to the work. Additionally, such

movement between rooms and seats within the fairly narrow structure constructed by Kaprow must, inevitably, have forced interaction and negotiation between audience members when moving. Such interaction necessarily frustrates the idea of solitary, disembodied contemplation that underpins formalist aesthetics, blurring the artistic experience with the very specific, embodied sensations of each individual audience member.

Furthermore, the segmented structure of *18 Happenings* meant that no individual participant was able to witness the entirety of the event. This structure also functioned to make contemplation of individual segments difficult. While the audience were split between rooms, they were separated only by structures of polythene and wood, so that shadows and snippets of sound crossed the boundaries between the different sections of the event. In his 1988 account of the event in his memoir *The Motion of Light on Water*, science fiction writer Samuel Delaney notes that the attention of the audience was continually divided between what they were witnessing and the hints, traces and thoughts of what was going on in the other performance rooms:

There was much concentration on what was occurring in our own sequestered 'part,' and there was much palpable and uneasy curiosity about what was happening in the other spaces, walled off by translucent sheets, with only a bit of sound, a bit of light or shadow coming through to speak of the work's unseen totality. (1988: 204)

Spectatorship of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was thus continually split between that which was experienced, and the imagined experience on the other side of the polythene wall. Far from the dominant communicative model of the direct transfer of meaning 'unproblematically and without default from the maker to an alert, knowledgeable, universalised viewer' (Jones 1999b: 1), the meaning of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was explicitly both always already tied up with both the physical location and the subjectivity of the individual viewer.

Moreover, in addition to the actions witnessed by the audience, Kaprow also included two fifteen-minute intervals into the structure of his hour-long event. In these intervals, audience members were free to discuss and compare the events they had witnessed in their specific combination of rooms. In this way, Kaprow highlighted the fact that the meaning of *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was not only partial and subjective, but was also social: it could be supplemented through collaboration and communication between spectators. In direct contrast to dominant assumptions of the mid-

century art world, Kaprow's work suggests that the meaning of the work of art could be a collaborative, social experience and, through his intervals, brought such sociality to the 'inside' of the work of art.

*Moving Beyond the Gallery Space: A Service for the Dead I and II*

Much of the scholarship of the Happenings describes Kaprow's first work as a pre-cursor to the group shows held at the Reuben and Judson galleries between 1960 and 1962, which are presented as the culmination of this short-lived art form. The accounts of Happenings by Mildred Glimcher (2012) and Barbara Haskell (1984), for example, both end with 1963, the year after the group shows of Happenings at the Reuben and Judson galleries ceased and in which many of the artists who took part in these shows stopped working with the Happenings form. For Kaprow, however, this period marks only the beginning of his Happenings work, through which he continued to develop and explore the implications of the alternative understanding of the relationship between art and 'the world of reality and the spectator' that he glimpsed at the edges of Pollock's paintings. While the Happenings performed at the Reuben and Judson were radical for their exploration of performance or time-based art, Kaprow suggested in *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* that one of the most significant problems in the Reuben and Judson shows was that the conventions of theatre spectatorship had greatly impacted upon the reception of and understanding of the form:

The use of standard performance conventions from the very start tended to truncate the implications of the art...there was always an audience in one (usually stable) space and a show given in another...The rooms enframed the events and the immemorial history of cultural expectations attached to theatrical productions crippled them.  
(1966: 188)

Both the institutional spaces within which they were performed and the traditions of spectatorship internalised by art audiences, Kaprow suggests, served to reinforce the hegemonic separation between art and life, and thus to preclude the possibility of an alternative communicative model that he sought through his Happenings. In his work after 1962, Kaprow sought to circumvent the scripting function of the museum, gallery or theatre space by increasingly presenting his Happenings in venues outside of the traditional art world institutions of the gallery or theatre.

This decision was enacted in the 1962 Happening *A Service for the Dead I*, performed at the Maidman Theatre in New York. The audience of *A Service for the Dead* gathered in the foyer of the Maidman as they would before any play. The Happening began, however, not with the invitation to enter the auditorium, but with a loudspeaker requesting audience members to form two lines behind a troupe of musicians who had also entered the foyer. This procession of audience members was then led 'down a pitched stairway marked toilets' (Kaprow 1962a: np). They followed the musicians, playing a roughly tuneful funeral dirge, into the theatre's prop and dressing rooms and then out of the back-exit of the theatre, and onto the street. Through this subversion of the conventional behaviour of theatre goers, moving from the foyer not into the auditorium to sit down and watch a performance, but back into the world, *A Service for the Dead I* enacts in a very literal way the trajectory of Kaprow's Happenings work beyond the dominant venues of the art world.

From the street, the procession of audience members was led back into the building, down rickety metal stairs and directly into the boiler room. Once the audience were all gathered together inside, the doors were closed, plunging them into darkness. At this point, the room was filled with a loud crashing and banging as the musicians used ropes attached to pans and metallic objects suspended from the ceiling to make a clattering sound. The audience's attention was drawn, by means of roving flashlights, to 'tarpaper mounds' (Kaprow 1962a: np), each controlled by an actor hidden underneath, which began to shake. In the final part of the event, the audience's attention was directed towards the naked body of a young woman, suspended on a scaffold above the audience. The crowd watched the scaffold sway for a while before the young woman scattered fistfuls of torn paper over their heads, then went limp on her scaffolding. Finally, the musicians began their dirge again, leading the audience under the suspended woman, back up the stairs and onto the street.

In an *Art International* article published about the event, Kaprow describes the boiler room as bleakly and mechanically unnerving:

This is the boiler room: a huge pit dropping down from the iron landing maybe fifteen feet, another twenty feet above, twenty-five across and forty long. Cavernous extensions off side.... Enormous furnace doors hang open, black guts exposed, soot all over, everything festering and damp... High up, a caved in transom brings in street noise, pedestrians' steps on the sidewalk grating, and occasional gusts of cold air.

(1963: np)

This description offers a stark contrast to the clean, neutral interiors of the mid-century gallery or the darkened auditorium of the theatre. Building upon techniques developed in *18 Happenings*, Kaprow ensured that the spectator's attention in *Service for the Dead I* was always already focused upon their individual, embodied experience in this new, uncomfortable and dangerous environment. Within the confines of the boiler room, the possibility of objective contemplation of the events and images presented, 'modernism's transposition of perception from life to formal values' (O'Doherty 1986: 14), became impossible.

As well as challenging the dominant relationship between the spectator and the work of art, *Service for the Dead I* also demonstrates Kaprow's interest in the possibilities for an alternative mode of spectatorial engagement. In *Service I*, this was developed through the use of ritual structure as a means to address and position the audience. The experience undergone by the audience in *Service for the Dead I* approximates the 'rite of passage ritual' described by early twentieth-century anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep:

The basic pattern... is the separation of participants from their previous environment, frequently through sensory deprivation or disorientation; an action that symbolises a change in their nature, and their physical integration into a new group.

(Innes 1981:11)

In *Service I*, for example, the audience move from the familiar world of the theatre foyer into the boiler room, in which they encounter 'sensory disorientation' through the darkness of the room and the brightness of the roving flashlights, as well as an assault of noise. The procession behind the musicians turns the audience milling in the foyer from individuals into 'participants' (Kaprow 1962a: np). In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger presents a developmental history of the social role of art. He argues that the autonomy status of art developed alongside bourgeois society, in which both its production and reception become individual activities. In contrast to this, he describes early 'sacral art,' in which art occupied a very different social role. In contrast to its modern autonomy status, sacral art:

serves as a cult object. It is wholly integrated into the social institution 'religion.' It is produced collectively as craft. The mode of reception is also institutionalised as collective. (1971: 47)

It is to this earlier formulation of the category ‘art’ that Kaprow first, briefly, turned in his search for alternative relationships between the work of art and the spectator.

This use of ritual as a means to structure the relationship between the audience and the work of art was, however, quickly abandoned by Kaprow in favour of a more open, democratic and active spectatorial role. This development can be seen in the contrast between *A Service for the Dead I*, and the very different *A Service for the Dead II*, held in August 1962 as part of the Ergo Suits Festival in New York. *A Service for the Dead II* entirely abandoned the confines of an art world venue, taking place on a beach in Bridgehampton, New York. The audience began the Happening standing together between two poles erected on the beach, from which they observed several figures carrying assorted junk materials and tools, including tyres, oil drums and a gas-powered generator down the dunes. While in the Maidman event the audience were ushered into a procession and led by musicians, Kaprow’s notes for *Service II* describe a man ‘motioning’ (Kaprow 1962b: np) for the audience to move forward to join him. This contrast between the closely controlled procession in the earlier Happening and the invitation offered by the ‘motioning’ man is developed throughout *Service II*. After making their way onto the beach, the audience of *Service II* encounter ‘carpenter’ figures building a structure out of wood on the sand. Kaprow’s notes for the event state:

Work is begun on a partially built six-foot-high platform. The cloth-topped wood is fetched for this purpose, and *some person who is asked to help* brings them over to the carpenters, now building matter-of-factly, banging nails and *shouting orders...ask the people once in a while how it looks and so forth.* (1962b: np, emphasis added)

From here, three men come running down the dunes and into pits dug into the sand. While the carpenters begin to cover the men with sand, they

motion to the nearest people and ask them to take over and suggest casually that the three men can be covered just to their noses. They return to their platform and grab some quart bottles of beer and begin drinking. (1962b: np)

Here, the audience are invited, casually, to take part in the event as labour, helping the carpenters in the real-time construction of the wooden structure or burying of the men. The relationship between the audience and the work of art presented in *Service II* is neither the direct communication of an artist’s vision to a passive viewer that characterises the reception

framework of the gallery and theatre or the distant, alienated power imbalance of priest and initiate enacted in *Service I*, but a reciprocal relationship, consisting of real social interaction between the 'actors' in the Happening and the audience

Judith Rodenbeck argues that one of the defining features of Happenings is the way in which they figure subjectivity and address the spectator. In contrast to the quest for 'authentic' (2011: 140) experience that characterised much political performance of the 1960s, Rodenbeck argues, 'the relation between participants (in Happenings) seemed if anything to take the form *not* of a relation between *subjects* [...] but rather of a relation between *objects*' (2011: 139, emphasis in original). While this description of reified subjectivity and the treatment of audience as objects applies to Kaprow's early work: the *Untitled Environments* in which spectators were figured as compositional elements of an art work, the actions of 18 *Happenings* and the cruel treatment of the audience in *Service for the Dead I*, it is, in fact, the social, collaborative and participatory relationship sought through the carpenters' invitations and instructions to the audience of *A Service for the Dead II* that sets the model for the relationship between audience and art work that Kaprow would continue to explore throughout his Happenings work of the 1960s.

#### *Happenings at Universities: Household*

While Kaprow was dissatisfied with the split between audience and art work enacted in the Happenings performed at the Reuben and Judson, one of the results of this period of his career is that both Kaprow and the Happenings form gained a degree of notoriety, a fame that Kaprow was able to capitalise upon in order to allow him to present his works in public settings that were uncluttered by the conventions of artistic spectatorship. In 1964, Kaprow was invited to present a Happening as a part of the All-University Student Art Festival at the University of Berkeley in California. In response to this invitation, Kaprow produced *Paper*, performed in a multi-storey car park opposite the halls of residence in March 1964. This invitation from Berkeley and the Happening that it facilitated mark a milestone in the development of Kaprow's Happenings work, after which he presented many of his Happenings at or in conjunction with universities.

The move to events performed at universities was particularly important in the development of Kaprow's interrogation of the

relationship between audience and art work foregrounded in this paper. The setting offered a unique opportunity to create a community of participants for his works, finally closing the separation between performers and audience that constituted the dominant understanding of the relationship between art work and spectator. Perhaps the most significant of Kaprow's early university Happenings is *Household*, presented in conjunction with Cornell University's Festival of Contemporary Arts in May 1964. Kaprow's notes for the event begin with the assertion:

There will be no spectators at this event [...] Those wishing to take part in it should attend a preliminary meeting to be held (Saturday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2pm. Franklin 115) where the Happening will be discussed and parts distributed. (Kaprow 1964: np)

Similar notes accompany almost all of Kaprow's university Happenings. Before the Happenings, students who wished to experience the event would attend a meeting in which the themes of the work were explained to them, and in which various roles were assigned. Through this technique, uniquely facilitated by the university infrastructure, the space between performers and audience that Kaprow described as 'truncating the implications' (Kaprow 1966: 188) of the Happenings was significantly reduced.

While the preliminary meeting was held in the university, *Household* took place at 'a lonesome dump out in the country' (Kaprow, 1964: np). As Kaprow observed to the gathered students, the Happening was structured around the relationship between the sexes: 'a harmony, conflict, other harmony dialectic' (1964: np). The first part of the Happening required the male participants to build wooden towers surrounded by poles. At the same time, the female participants were asked to 'build a nest of saplings and strings' (Kaprow 1964: np). After three hours of building time, some cars tow a 'smoking wreck' of a car between the tower and the nests. The male participants then smother jam onto the wrecked car, and the female participants proceed to lick it off. Other instructions include:

Men destroy nest with shouting and cursing...  
Men return to women at wreck, yank them away, eat jam with fingers, slap white bread all over sticky stuff, eat with their mouths....  
Women scream at men 'Bastards! Bastards!'...  
Women go to heaps of smoking trash, call to men sweet-songy come ons ...  
Women jump men, rip off shirts and fling shirts into smoking trash....

Women take off blouses, wave them overhead like hankies, each singing own rock and roll tune and twisting dreamy like. (Kaprow 1964: np)

Finally, the men set fire to the wreck of a car, 'Everyone smokes silently and watches car until it's burned up. Then they leave quietly' (Kaprow 1964: np)

While these acts offer much scope for ideological commentary (not least, from a feminist perspective!), it is also significant that this Happening offers a radical redefinition of art spectatorship or consumption. Firstly, the embodied, located and social modes of spectatorship that Kaprow had experimented with from *18 Happenings* onwards became the only way to experience *Household*. The size and duration of the work, which lasted over five hours and included 150-200 participants, precluded the possibility of the objective contemplation. Furthermore, the actions that participants were instructed to undertake in order to enact Kaprow's theme of gender relations are highly physical and interactive. The participants, for example, were asked to 'rip off' each other's clothes and to call 'sweet-songy come ons.' Women lick jam from a car. In this way, *Household* not only represents Kaprow's theme of gender relations but also produces as many individual, embodied experiences and interactions as there are participants. Additionally, the majority of the participants in the Happening were students at Cornell and, as such, it is highly likely that a number of them knew each other. The new forms of interaction required by Kaprow's event are, therefore, very likely to have been woven into pre-existing relationships, or to have led to the formation of relationships that extended beyond the time frame of the work. In this way *Household* entirely thwarts the ideology of objectivity and containment at the heart of mid-century art world discourse, offering a very different understanding of the relationship between the work of art and 'the world of the spectator and reality' (Kaprow 1958: 5).

The production of *Household* with a community of university students also enabled Kaprow to question the assumptions about artistic authorship and meaning that dominated the communicative model of the mid-century art world. While the nests and the poles built by the participants clearly replicate problematic gender stereotypes, it is also important that these structures were not built by the artist for the spectators to contemplate, or even to enter, as were *Assemblages* and *Environments*, but were, instead, constructed *by* the participants. Similarly, while the Happening lasted for over five hours, Kaprow's descriptive notes for the work cover only three

widely spaced pages. This discrepancy between Kaprow's fairly brief, telegrammatic notes and the duration of the Happening reveals the degree of choice, independence and creative ownership of the event given to its participants. In *Household*, not only do embodied, subjective and social modes of spectatorship become the only way to experience the event, but authorship and creative control of the work is also pluralised and dispersed between all of the participants. In this way, the performance of *Household*, and other university Happenings allowed Kaprow to demonstrate that the dominant focus on the individual artist, the self-contained art work and its immanent meaning was, in fact, only one way to understand art, and to posit, instead, a more open-ended definition of the category which prioritised individual creativity within real-life contexts.

#### How to Make a Happening

As his Happenings with universities continued, Kaprow handed greater and greater creative authority to his participants, producing notes and scripts for the events that were increasingly cryptic or sparse and open for interpretation, and often requesting that participants document their individual experience of a Happening as part of its enaction. This development, and its expansion beyond the university setting, was epitomised in the release of the 1966 LP *How to Make a Happening*, which contained three brief scripts for Happenings, offered to listeners for their own enaction. The scripts for the three Happenings included on the record are brief and telegrammatic, described by Haywood as 'concrete poems' (89) more than instructions. In this way their enaction, which is greatly encouraged by Kaprow in a lecture given on the record, involves an enormous amount of interpretation and action on the part of the listener who wishes to 'make a happening.' The role of artistic creation is thus passed from a singular artist to an unlimited plurality of 'Happeners,' and the resultant works of art become similarly manifold and pluralised.

The LP medium also exemplifies Kaprow's challenge to the dominant institutional spaces of the post-war art world. In contrast to the isolated spaces of traditional art reception, the record is a popular, mass produced object which brought Kaprow's scripts into listeners' everyday lives. In a critical inversion of Pop's placement of the techniques of soup labels and comic strips into the gallery, Kaprow's record epitomises his insertion of Happenings into the spaces and mediums of daily life, popular culture and technology. Kaprow's lecture advocates that the Happenings produced in

response to the record should be similarly inextricably intertwined with life. Throughout the lecture he takes pains to distinguish between the categories of 'Happenings' and 'Art.' 'Art,' Kaprow claims, 'has always been different from the world's affairs,' while 'Happeners' must 'work hard to keep it blurry' (Kaprow 1966: np). The foregoing analysis suggests that Kaprow's scepticism towards the category 'art,' articulated on *How to Make a Happening*, should be understood as a rejection of the dominant formulation of the category in his society. While the dominant discourses of the art world both assumed and reinforced the understanding of art as an autonomous sphere, presented in specified spaces and expressing a self-sufficient meaning, Kaprow's Happenings explored an alternative understanding of creative activity, one which prioritised inventiveness, social interaction and the interrogation of the everyday, and was capable of offering a fresh perspective on the ordinary experiences it intersected.

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger argues that a central goal of the historical avant-garde was to bring the values associated with the sphere of art: 'such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity' (1971: 50) back in to the daily praxis of life. Speaking specifically of Aestheticism, Bürger argues that the style offered an important starting point for the avant-gardist endeavour. The ideology of art for art sake, he argues, was a direct rejection of the 'means-end rationality' (1971: 34) of bourgeois society, a rejection that the avant-garde hoped to incorporate into life praxis itself. Kaprow's Happenings, too, rejected this means-end rationality. On *How to Make a Happening*, Kaprow advises potential 'Happeners' who wish to persuade people or authorities to help facilitate their work to 'be your own PR man. Convince (officials) that what you're doing is worthwhile because it's enjoyable to play' (Kaprow 1966: np). This advocacy of 'play' as valuable part of life exemplifies the rejection of bourgeois values common in art world discourse, including that of the Abstract Expressionists and even Greenberg's early formalist criticism. Within the Happenings model, however, the listeners that Kaprow asks to spread this message of non-utility are not art-world insiders, but ordinary citizens intrigued by the Happenings idea, and the people they are speaking to are in real positions of power. In this way Kaprow's Happenings fulfil Bürger's definition of avant-gardist endeavour as the 'attempt to organize a new life praxis on the basis of art' (1971:49).

In 1969, building upon his understanding of art as a category which extends beyond the confines of the gallery space, Kaprow developed the

pilot educational program *Project Other Ways* in conjunction with the Berkeley California Public School System. The children who took part in the project were trained in the alternative understanding of creative work developed throughout Kaprow's Happenings project. Children and teachers engaged in a number of activities from

the making and playing of musical instruments, exploring the city's graffiti with box cameras...making film from discarded footage collected from the cutting rooms of professional studios, creating Happenings...creating pocket playgrounds in cooperation with the city Parks Department.' (Kaprow 1969: 3)

The majority of these activities present the same refusal of the frame between art and life that was developed throughout Kaprow's Happenings project. The photo reels made by the students, for example, are taken from the offcuts of a 'professional studio,' rejecting the separation between art professional as creator and audience as passive observer that underpins the dominant communicative model. Similarly, the children created 'pocket playgrounds' not on paper, but in 'cooperation' with the real authority of the Parks Department. *Project Other Ways* thus sought to teach its young participants to approach art not through the dominant ideology of autonomy, but through the lens of play, creativity and social integration that characterise Kaprow's Happenings work. Evaluating the progress of his trial project, Kaprow observed:

Other Ways believes in shifting more than the usual measure of responsibility for personal and social well-being onto the individual...Our uniform cultural upbringing, which all too often has emphasised the authority of an unchallengeable teacher or leader, opposes this kind of freedom, and it may be some time before a real sense of democracy can compete with the habits of passivity...Such a goal, nevertheless ...is at the base of the director's view of the arts and their potential contribution to educational change. (Kaprow 1969: 5)

Through *Project Other Ways*, Kaprow took his challenge to the hegemony of artistic autonomy beyond the art world, educating children in a radically different understanding of creative works and their relation to lived experience. Such a different 'cultural upbringing' Kaprow suggested, could help to bring the humanist values of art out of the frame and into life.

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