

The Re-invention of Eternity

As artists get older they often tend to revise the claims of their early years, if not to revoke them completely. This tendency is even more prevalent among revolutionaries than among those who always remained within the conventional framework. The most revolutionary phase in recent art history was certainly in the late 1950's and early 1960's when a multitude of new developments emerged which up to this day function as signposts in the debate about the position of art in society. Comparable processes occurred for the first time during the 1920's in the context of Dada and Surrealism. They were resumed consciously by some of the artists of the 1960's. But only through intensified integration of art into the communication and media society after the second World War could these revolutionary approaches take full effect. Some of the triumphant achievements of the avant-garde have meanwhile become commonplace. The art term «Happening», for example, was transformed into a form of political activism in the student movement of 1968, and later became a marketing-gag. Today, «Happening» serves as the brand name for an Italian clothing company. At the same time a great number of artists that proclaimed the death of painting and sculpture in the 1960's are back to oil on canvas and bronze.

When I met Allan Kaprow in 1986 during the preparation of his first major retrospective at the Museum am Ostwall in Dortmund he told me that after 30 years of working as an innovator he was still empty handed, as hardly any tangible objects had remained from his activities. I did not exactly know whether to pity or congratulate him.

Indeed, in most museums one would search for works by Allan Kaprow in vain.

At best there might be one of his early abstract paintings from around 1956. The reason for this lies in the fact that Kaprow has been faithful to his principle of re-invention since 1957: each of his pieces must be realized anew everytime according to the occasion. For the Happenings this is self-evident anyway, but the Environments too are meant to be temporary constructions and their components are discarded after the exhibition.

Without a doubt this principle of re-invention contains an enormous obstacle to success within the art world, especially as the traditional structures in that world have proven to be surprisingly resistant to assaults by the avant-garde. For mere practical reasons, the artist using the principle of re-invention becomes the victim of his own success: the more often his work is shown, the greater the number of pieces on exhibit, the more he has to work, as he does not have a stock of pieces at his disposal that can be sent around the globe by shipment and insurance agencies without his personal presence. Every show demands his engagement and presence. Kaprow compares his situation to that of a dog owner—he has to hold his works by the leash and walk them where he wants them to go, he can't let them roam on their own. Naturally at some point the question arises, who is holding whom by the leash.

What other solutions are possible? One look at the historization of the 1960's avant-garde which is currently well underway demonstrates that the art world has little else to offer. The easy way out—as I mentioned earlier—is certainly the return to conventional techniques whether it be oil on canvas, perhaps freshened up with a photograph, or a combination of bronze and video. The other option reveals itself in the Beuys section in the Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt where the visitor wanders around among the pieces that were once arranged by Joseph Beuys and since have been immutably conserved as if he was walking through the relics in a Pharaoh's tomb.

With increasing historical distance it becomes obvious that the revolutionary art forms which aspired to trespass the boundary of the image and the museum, as well as the boundary between artist and audience, are

even more dependent on the museum for their lasting existence. While traditional works in solid materials, executed with craftsmanship, can well last outside the museum, the remains of Happening and Fluxus art can often only be preserved under extreme conservational efforts. Thus their initial purpose and idea of being used and changed by the audience is completely turned upside down. The crucial issue here is how the notion of the «original» is expanded and misapplied to works that were not conceived under this pretext.

The final mummification of an artist's work usually coincides with its creator's death. In a sense one can say that the works die with the artist.

Allan Kaprow certainly deserves merit for having left only a few such relics in the museums—which is the cause for his above-mentioned rare presence in museums and international exhibitions. Asked about the dependence of his pieces on his personal existence, he simply stated that the claim which art-objects lay on eternity is based on the fact that «we in the West don't like to die» and therefore try to secure our immortality through traces that we leave behind.

With the current exhibition in the Fondazione Mudima, Kaprow tries a third way outside the two previously outlined options of either returning to tradition or conserving the unconservable. The Environments that are on display here are purchasable for museums. Once in the museum, though, they are supposed to be used continuously and thus worn down by the audience. Some parts, like the fresh apples in «An Apple Shrine» are subject to natural decay anyhow. That is why Kaprow suggests a kind of service contract between the artist and the museum. The museum, for example, assumes the obligation to replace the pneumatic wrenches and tires in «Yard» from time to time, and maybe after a long time even the car has to be replaced. By and by almost all the «original parts» would be replaced by possibly different looking new ones. The typical reaction of museum curators to this concept is, according to Kaprow that they «rationally say yes, but emotionally don't support it.» This indeed is fully in accord with my personal reaction, when I was undecided whether to pity or to congratulate Kaprow in regard to his physically non-existent life-work. Everyone admires Lucky Hans (the boy from Grimm's fairytale) who happily pursues his path free from all burdens of worldly possessions—but no one wants to trade places with him.

In the case of «Yard», it would be the task of the museum to always keep the Environment functioning and therefore inevitably modernize it—if in the year 2010 the car had to be replaced, this would have to be done with a contemporary model which certainly would look different from a 1991 model—which already looks different from a car from 1961, the date of creation of «Yard». One of the side effects of this approach is that the work will always seem contemporary to the viewer. Art historians often date paintings by the fashion of the costumes represented, and for the 20th century precisely dateable consumer goods like cars, TVs or washing machines will some day acquire a similar role. This method won't function in regard to Kaprow's concept of re-invention. Maybe this is one of the reasons for the art historians' mixed feelings when confronted with Kaprow's work: there is no nostalgia.

What is nostalgia? An emotional revalorization of history for history's sake. Testimonies of the past become subject to aesthetic reflection merely for reasons of age—things of daily use turn into objects in vitrines. The art of the 1960's has gone through this process in the fast lane. In doing so it became a model case for the functioning of history and historization. It therefore missed its actual goal and at the same time reached it in another sense. The artists set out to produce an alternative to the historicizing, bourgeois culture—and by demonstrating its mechanisms rendered it absurd. They missed the first mark, but they succeeded in their second objective in the form of a quasi-self-experiment.

In 1966 Allan Kaprow wrote in his book «Assemblage, Environments & Happenings»: «Artists, like critics and historians, make the history they reflect, even with the best of intentions to remain objective.» (P.150) The art of the sixties aimed at the dissolution of the boundary between artist and audience, between production and reception—the Happening has become a prototype of that attitude. Initially these efforts were always directed towards the audience of the here-and-now. But the historians and critics certainly were part of the audience too, even if in the sixties their pretended objective distance was the very aim of the attack. In

the same book, Kaprow indeed unites all three functions in his person—he is the historian, critic and artist of the movement.

It is only natural to assume that Kaprow, the historian, has some influence on Kaprow, the artist. In this light the principle of re-invention may be understood as a well-directed reaction against historization. By means of re-invention Kaprow remains the «historian» of his work and does not leave it to the workings of art history and the interpretations of art historians at some point of completion—in whatever way that point is to be determined. The experience he gained in his varying roles may have contributed to Kaprow's ability to defy eternalization, as well as the monumentalization and commercialization that often go hand in hand with it, more successfully than many of his contemporaries.

Allan Kaprow writes regularly and thoroughly about his works—in this catalogue too, there is a text by him. Nowadays this habit is rather unusual—the critical trade is again left with the critic. But especially his openness to say what he thinks—as long as it can be said—contributes largely to the notion that Kaprow's art remains so human in scale and claims. Monuments are products of historical, spatial and intellectual distance—Kaprow tries to avoid all that. That is why the aesthete not only misses nostalgia, but what is worse: there seems to be no secret.

From my European viewpoint Kaprow's art could be seen as typically American, as pragmatic, open, democratic. But one could as well find elements of Asian philosophy in his attitude—eternity through change and the principle of re-invention as analogous to eternal reincarnation. As early as 1958 Kaprow wrote in a leaflet accompanying his show at the Hansa Gallery: «But one can insist, as many have, that only the changing is really enduring and all else is whistling in the dark.» Perhaps one could even ascertain some form of affinity between the American and the Oriental attitude, insofar as both form alternatives to a European historicism that is focused on relics and residues. In the thought and work of John Cage these two models have indeed been fused into a certain synthesis. As Kaprow says: «The museum wants objects but I sell services.» Cage similarly states about music: «If music is conceived as an object, then it has a beginning, middle, and end, and one can feel rather confident when he makes measurements of time. But when music is process, those measurements become less meaningful, and the process itself, involving if it happened to, the idea of Zero Time (that is to say no time at all), becomes mysterious and therefore eminently useful.» («John Cage», Edition Peters 1962, P.48) Here the secret we were just missing appears unexpectedly. Yet it is not the artist's secret, but each viewer's and listener's own secret—and to discover this secret is the challenge that Cage as well as Kaprow pose to us.

The Happening and the Environment do not behave like objects in the face of history—like immutable rocks in the stream—they are part of history as a process. The Happening itself is a brief piece of history, an exemplary episode about the formation of experience. The Environment is altered by history just as a historical building is changed through remodelings and different uses over the centuries. In reality the immutable rock in the stream is a false ideal—slowly the water shapes and alters the stone. Can an antique torso in the museum not be compared to a boulder that the streams and glaciers of the ice-ages have rounded and left behind as a strange presence in a foreign landscape?

When I talked to Allan Kaprow in Milan about the issues raised here, he said: «Somewhere between spontaneity and eternity there is history, which is not a bad thing.» This is in all modesty the most concise way to describe the solution that Kaprow offers for the conflict between genial spontaneity and object-oriented eternity: to be part of one's own time. Art as part of history and history as part of daily life—no more and no less.

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