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In Memory

Allan Kaprow

1927–2006

Frantisek Deak

Allan Kaprow, one of the seminal figures of the great generation of American artists of the late 1950s and early '60s, died at home in Encinitas, California, on Wednesday, 5 April 2006. Kaprow's accomplishments over his long and productive life are many. *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, which took place at the Reuben Gallery in New York in October 1959, was the first Happening, a term that Kaprow coined to describe his new work. With *Eighteen Happenings*, Kaprow, initially trained as a painter, created a complex theatrical event with scripted performances taking place simultaneously in three connected rooms built in a large, loft-like space. Performances included readings of texts, everyday activities such as squeezing oranges, choreographed movement, slide projections, live music, recorded sounds, and the scripted movement of the audience through the space. Kaprow had previously articulated the radical move from painting to Happenings in a brilliant article entitled "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in which he argued that Pollock's mural-scale paintings took on the aspects of environments, turning observers into participants and indicating a way of transcending or abandoning painting. Pollock, Kaprow wrote,

left us where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. [...W]e shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movement, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are material for the new art:

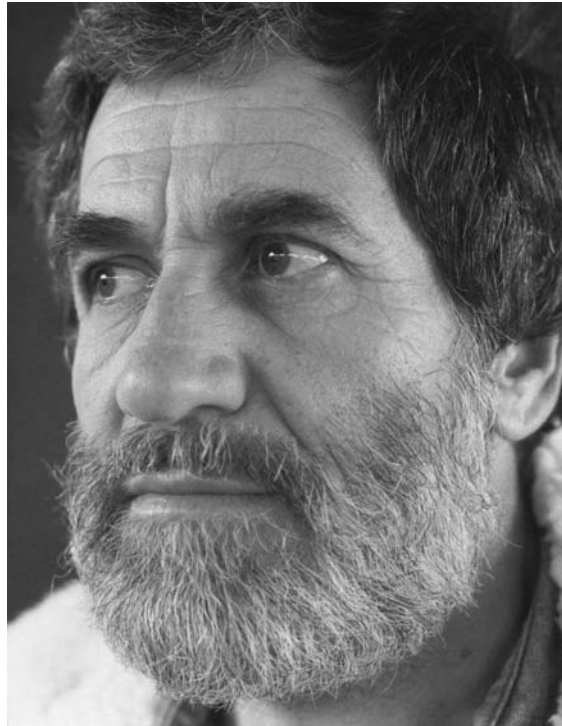


Figure 1. Allan Kaprow, American artist and creator of Happenings, 1986. (Photo courtesy of Hauser & Wirth Zürich London)

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paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. ([1958] 1993:7, 9)

The prophetic tone and radicalism of this new concrete language of art is reminiscent of Artaud's *Theatre and Its Double*, published in the United States that same year.

There are moments in history—and this was one of them—when artists break out of the dominant scene and go back to the raw material of life, the very source of art. These artists do not only look at things differently, but also the things that they look at are different. As Gertrude Stein wrote in “Composition as Explanation”: “The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything” ([1926] 1971:21). The move from painting to Happenings, events, and actions seems today to be clear-cut. Historians and critics brought out the antecedents of Happenings, the sources of possible influences, and theories to account for the change, but the single act of moving from the rectangular or oval space of painting to Happenings, actions, events, and other performance genres still holds some of its mystery. This unprecedented move was one of those acts that, without any ambivalence, separated “before” from “after.”

After *Eighteen Happenings*, Kaprow staged several Happenings in quick succession: *The Big Laugh* (1960), *Coca Cola Shirley Cannonball?* (1960), *The Apple Shrine* (1960), and *A Spring Happening* (1961)—trying different theatrical strategies but gradually moving away from overly scripted and choreographed works, and eventually expanding his work to move outside galleries to church basements, city streets, and the outdoors. *Sweeping* (1962) took place in a forest clearing near Woodstock, New York, and *A Service for the Death II* (1962) was performed on the beach at Bridgehampton, New York.

The number of Happenings by Kaprow and other artists such as Jim Dine, Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Whitman, and others taking place in New York in the early 1960s was extraordinary. Kaprow himself staged approximately 20 Happenings in New York as well as in other locales between 1959 and 1965. In 1966, he estimated that there were more than 40 men and women doing Happenings all over the world.

Happenings spread far and wide, sometimes by reviews, personal contacts, or even by rumor and hearsay. In my native Czechoslovakia, Happenings took place both in Prague and Bratislava. In 1965 in Bratislava, artists Alexe Mlynářčík and Stanislav Filko and critic Zita Kostrová published a manifesto, *What is HAPPSOC?*, and began producing happsocs, which were versions of Happenings (see Chalupecky 1990; Straus 1992). In Prague in 1964, when the Czech art critic Jindrich Chalupecky saw the actions of Milan Knizak, he told him that they looked very much like Kaprow's Happenings. He had some publications of Kaprow's work that he showed to Knizak, who claimed that he had no prior knowledge of Happenings. Chalupecky sent Knizak's scenarios and photographic documentation of his works to Kaprow, who included them in *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (1966). When Kaprow received the material from Chalupecky, he wrote back:

I cannot tell you how excited I was when I received your envelope of scenarios and photos of Milan Knizak's Happenings. These are quite beautiful works and I was pleased to know that he has developed quite independently. Happenings have that marvelous quality of mushrooms: they come up all over the world! (in Chalupecky 1980:26–27)

The publication of Michael Kirby's *Happenings* (1965); the T30 issue of *TDR*, coedited by Kirby and Richard Schechner (1965); and Kaprow's own *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* helped further establish Happenings nationally and internationally.

In 1969, Allan Kaprow moved to California. From 1970 to 1974, he taught at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts); and from 1974 until his retirement in 1993, at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). At CalArts, Kaprow taught Happenings by doing them with his students. Gradually his work in California underwent significant changes. The audience in most cases disappeared and the works were now usually uncomplicated and playful, focusing on the experience of participants. *Easy* from 1972, done in a dry stream bed with CalArts students, has these simple directions:

(dry stream bed)
wetting a stone
carrying it downstream until dry
dropping it
choosing another stone there
wetting it
carrying it upstream until dry
dropping it. (in Kelley 2004:168)

In the '70s, Kaprow also began to investigate the psychological and sociological drama of human interaction, body awareness, personal ritual, and social conventions. *Time Pieces* ("Pulse Exchange" and "Pulse-Breath Exchange") was done in Berlin in September 1973. In both pieces, participants took their own as well as their partners' pulses and then counted their own and their partners' breaths. In so doing, they had to pay attention to physiological processes and were forced into a potentially awkward intimacy, especially in the "Pulse-Breath Exchange," in which participants end up breathing into each other's mouths, drawing the breath in and out. In the review section (which usually concluded these works), participants discussed their feelings, which were often surprisingly strong, considering the emotions were brought up by the enactment of relatively simple directions.

Throughout his career, Kaprow also wrote thoughtfully argued essays on art. Published together as *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (1993), they provide a guide to the evolution of his thinking and work. Even though there were many variations, the common thread running through all of Kaprow's work is the direct engagement with life. The essays from the 1980s and '90s—including "The Real Experiment" (1983), "Art Which Can't be Art" (1986), "Right Living" (1987), and "The Meaning of Life" (1990)—connect Kaprow to the philosophical tradition of the art of living: seeking self-knowledge and personal transformation eventually became the major focus of his art.

Those of us who knew Allan Kaprow personally saw a unity between his life and work. Hazrat Inayat Khan, a Sufi mystic, wrote of the relationship between art and personality in terms that so clearly apply to Kaprow:

In a real artist a distinct personality is developed which expresses itself in everything he does. In other words, an artist need not paint a picture in order to prove himself an artist. When he has reached a certain stage of art his thought, his speech, his words, his voice, his movements, his action, everything he does becomes art. (1967:166)

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