

INTRODUCTION

We all make notes to ourselves between the lines and along the margins of our favorite books. Often such notes—in their scribbles and abbreviations—belie our urgency about holding on to insights before they fall back between the pages of the book or into the fissures of the mind. We assume that we will use them later, but mostly we forget. If we run across them some years hence, they seem like half-decipherable artifacts of prior thought, less urgent, more hasty, than we recall.

But with some, we rewrite the book in terms of ourselves. We distill a clause from a paragraph, and if it resonates with whatever else we read and write and think and do, it becomes in time an operating principle, a philosophical stance. Allan Kaprow took his stance in the yellowed margins of a small black book that looks as if it had been checked out of a library thirty years ago and never returned. It is *Art as Experience* by the American philosopher John Dewey, and in it, around 1949, the young, ambitious artist and philosophy graduate student penciled in his thoughts as he read, including, among many, such phrases as “art not separate from experience . . . what is an authentic experience? . . . environment is a process of interaction.” While skipping across the surface of Dewey’s broad ideas, these inscriptions nonetheless carry a certain weight, like subheadings for pages not yet written. One feels in them the tug of re-cognition as it pulls the artist away from the philosopher’s text and toward the margins, where his own thinking begins to take shape. With these and other scribbles, Kaprow grounds himself in American pragmatism and forecasts the themes of his career.

Not that he knew it at the time. In fact, Kaprow found Dewey confusing at first. The philosopher’s “categories” weren’t clear: mind and body, knowledge and experience, subject and object were all mixed up. They kept circulating through Dewey’s writings like reminders of what philosophy was supposed to be seeking. For Dewey, intelligence and values were matters of adaptation to human needs and social

circumstances that arise from “the particular situations of daily life.” Indeed, Dewey reconceived philosophy itself as an intellectual expression of conflicts and choices *in* culture. This was not, initially, what the young artist-scholar was looking for. He wanted categories that were clear.

But Dewey was as inelegant as culture itself, for what he had said was that the arts, as practiced in the industrial West, had set themselves apart from the experiences of everyday life, thereby severing themselves from their roots in culture and human nature: “Objects that were in the past valid and significant because of their place in the life of a community now function in isolation from the conditions of their origin.” While this severance perhaps indicated a deeper split in Western culture between matters spiritual and practical, its effect on the modern arts had been to idealize “esthetic” experience by assigning it to certain classes of culturally sanctioned objects and events. These, in turn, were sequestered from the currents of communal life according to the boundaries of taste, professional expertise, and the conventions of presentation and display. For artists, communal memory, ceremonial place, and ritual action were transformed into historical time, esthetic space, and artistic intention. Indeed, even the capacity to *have* an esthetic experience had been estheticized, becoming the purview of experts. Thus severed from its *genius loci*, art *per se* became the exclusive site of esthetic experience.

For most of his career, Allan Kaprow has been working to shift that site from the specialized zones of art toward the particular places and occasions of everyday life. For him the modernist practice of art is more than the production of artworks; it also involves the artist’s disciplined effort to observe, engage, and interpret the processes of living, which are themselves as meaningful as most art, and certainly more grounded in common experience. (In fact, they *are* common experience.) Although famous first as the inventor of Happenings—a late-fifties art form in which all manner of materials, colors, sounds, odors, and common objects and events were orchestrated in ways that approximated the spectacle of modern everyday life—and since then as a stubborn avant-gardist who, like a spy behind enemy lines, keeps reversing the signposts that mark the crossroads between art and life, Kaprow might best be described as an artist who makes lifeworks. For him, the contents of everyday life—eating strawberries, sweating,

shaking hands when meeting someone new—are more than merely the subject matter of art. They are the meaning of life.

Since 1953 Allan Kaprow has been writing about the meaning of life. In that time, which spans the contemporary history of American art, he has published over sixty essays, pamphlets, artist's statements, and a book (*Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*, 1966). Taken together, his writings represent a sustained philosophical inquiry into the nature of experience and its relationship to the practice(s) of art in our time. They show us the author's development as an artist as well as developments in contemporary art from the author's perspective. That perspective—across the space of four decades—is unique in taking its measure of life's meanings from outside art and inside common experience. Because Kaprow sees most art as a convention—or a set of conventions—by which the meanings of experience are framed, intensified, and interpreted, he attends as an artist to the meanings of experience instead of the meanings of art (or “art experience”). Because the meanings of life interest him more than the meanings of art, Kaprow positions himself in the flux of what Dewey called “the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”

The contemporary history of American art is also the history of how contemporary experience has changed. Because experience for Kaprow is the medium of his practice—contracting and expanding into the most intimate and communal spaces and occasions—changes in its fabric since 1950 have necessarily wrought changes in his practice as an artist. When he first began to write—which is also when he was making abstract paintings with bits of torn paper melded into their surfaces and when he was studying art history with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia—television had not yet transformed our private spaces into spheres of disembodied pseudo-public spectacle, communications technology was still largely anchored to an industrial infrastructure, there was no question of depletable resources or greenhouse gases, computers were primitive at best, people still watched newsreels in local theaters, feminism was something from the twenties, we had not yet gone into space (nor had the Russians), cars had steel dashboards and no seat belts, and in general we believed our own press as Americans. As a society, we were less aware than we are now of the depth of our discontent, although racism, addiction, and violence within the

family were rampant. Nearer the realms of art, New York was the art world's new capital, and one or two critics held sway. Out on Long Island, Jackson Pollock was flinging skeins of paint across canvases laid out on the floor of his barn, and the points where that slick black enamel overshot the edge of the canvas marked the boundaries of avant-garde experience at that moment.

One of the themes of Kaprow's essays is the changing nature of experience with the rise and proliferation of mass "communications" technologies and the corresponding ascendancy of the "image" in both art and communal—or at least commercial—life. As an artist who grounds his art in an interpretive interplay of body and mind, of doing and reflecting on what has happened, Kaprow approaches new technologies openly, even optimistically at first, sensing in their networks and reverberations a new capacity for art to reach out beyond its conventional limitations; indeed, it was his interest in experimental music that brought him to John Cage's class in 1957. Yet insofar as those technologies reinforce the passive/receptive role of an audience in relation to a performer—and in fact inscribe that power relation into the future they represent—Kaprow ends by backing away from their slick appeal and even criticizing artists' unimaginative use of them and the ways they preempt actual participation. What he wants is more than the "scatter" phenomenon in which modern materials (as in Robert Morris's felt pieces of the late sixties) and modalities (as in the video experiments of the early seventies) disperse energy and fragment perspective in reaction to the rectangular shape of the gallery. In other words, he wants more than antiformalism: he wants the shapes, thresholds, and durations of experience itself—the conventions of consciousness and communal exchange, whether personal habits or a Labor Day parade—to provide the frames in which the meanings of life may be intensified and interpreted. Briefly seduced by the allure of new technologies, Kaprow ultimately sees them as theoretical models—or, better yet, as metaphors of feedback and interactivity—for a truly participatory art with its sources in everyday experience.

Like many of his generation, Kaprow wanted a "new concrete art" to replace the old abstract order—an order articulated in the writings of Clement Greenberg and by then known as formalism. More a brand of American esthetic fundamentalism than a critical theory, formalism advocated the systematic elimination of any and all artistic conventions not essential to the viability of a given medium (mostly painting).

Storytelling, for example, or political subject matter would be peeled away from the surfaces of modern art, revealing the deeper existential tensions of the object itself. In typical American fashion, art was reduced to a physical criterion, which was then elevated to a metaphysical condition by an evangelical monologue.

Kaprow's views on formalism are more complex and go to the question of experience. Not simply an antiformalist—that is, one who “replaces the appearance of order with the appearance of chaos”—he maintains a Platonic faith in the “vaguely mystical attributes” of forms at the same time that he rejects the “dreary formulas” of academicism by which tasteful art is produced. Still, he sees the historical contest between form and antiform—a metaphor of the ancient struggle between reason and madness, heaven and hell—as finally irrelevant to the indeterminacy of modern experience. “At its root,” he writes, “the problem with a theory of form is its idea of wholeness,” and “when it turns out that the whole can't be located precisely . . . either all hell has broken loose or we're in another ball game.” That new ball game is our unprecedented experience of the shrinking planet and the “urgent fantasies of integration, participation, and signification” such experience brings about. And with it, perhaps, we come to know a new kind of madness—eco-systemic?—for which reason and order are no longer cures. In the last analysis, Kaprow regards the very idea of form as “too external, too remote,” to inform a time when artists must look to the “nonart models” of communication for insight into the changing nature of experience.

In “The Education of the Un-Artist, Part III,” from 1974, Kaprow writes, “The models for the experimental arts of this generation have been less the preceding arts than modern society itself, particularly how and what we communicate, what happens to us in the process, and how this may connect us with natural processes beyond society.” What an elegant and pragmatic set of measures. Perhaps they constitute the priorities of modern experience. As a sequence, they mark stages in the acquisition of consciousness, knowledge, and meaning. What else would one want to know besides the eternal and unanswerable *Why*? And is it not compelling that this set of priorities—a means and a message, a process of transformation, and the hope of transcendence—though drawn from society rather than art, still sounds a lot like what artists do?

In this essay Kaprow identifies five models of communication,

rooted in “everyday life, and nonart professions, and nature,” that may function as alternative ways of conceiving the creative enterprise. These are situations, operations, structures, feedback, and learning—or commonplace environments and occurrences, how things work and what they do, systems and cycles of nature and human affairs, artworks or situations that recirculate (with the possibility of change and interaction), and processes like philosophical inquiry, sensitivity training, and educational demonstrations. Although Kaprow locates these models in the works of other artists, it is clear that as a cluster they constitute his own measure of experience.

But in 1949 his measures were less clear, and Dewey’s “unclear categories” provoked more questions than answers. On page eleven of *Art as Experience* Kaprow underlined a passage that reads, “Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience.” Next to this passage he scribbled the question, “What is an authentic experience?” One senses here a slight frustration, born less of a philosophical interest in esthetics than of a young artist’s confusion about the nature of experience itself—which makes sense, coming at a time when the authenticity of the artist’s experience was said to be the mythic content of modern Expressionist painting (the kind of painting Kaprow then did). Out of this frustration, though—and out of the question it provoked in Kaprow’s mind—came a subtle shift in emphasis away from art and esthetics toward the “categories” of everyday life. Though his search was masked at the time as a nearly romantic quest for authenticity, Kaprow—the life-long pragmatist—was looking for analogues of art in nonart experience. Perhaps reading Dewey deflected him from artistic statements and toward pragmatic questions. In any case, he found his analogues several chapters later.

There, in an insight rooted in good common sense, Dewey contrasted the often inchoate flow of experience in general with *an* experience, whose boundaries, density, and duration set it apart, giving it particular qualities and a sense of internal volition that make it memorable. “A piece of work,” he writes, “is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not

a cessation.” For Dewey, experiences could have an emotionally satisfying sense of “internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement”—that is, they could have esthetic qualities. Though Kaprow was less interested than Dewey in esthetics per se, the idea that experiences could have shapes, beginnings and ends, “plots,” moods, patterns—meanings—must have influenced him deeply, leading him as a practicing artist to a philosophical inquiry into the given natural and/or social “forms” of common experience. A quarter-century later, his five models of communication emerged as the core curriculum in the education of the un-artist.

It is in this sense that Kaprow is a formalist. A work of art, like an experience, has its limits; the questions are, what kind of limits and do they model themselves after those in other art or in life? The difference between Kaprow’s sense of form and the brand of formalism that continues to dominate academic thinking across the land is that for him forms are provisional. Academic formalism, by contrast, is finally a secular essentialism driven by a closed fundamentalist belief system intent on self-purification through rituals of rational renunciation (what better monkishness for the late-modernist academy?). If Greenberg had written of a modernist “law” by which conventions not essential to the validity of a medium “be discarded as soon as they are recognized,” then Kaprow turned that prescription on its head—not by resorting to chaos, but by setting out to systematically eliminate precisely those conventions that *were* essential to the professional identity of art (a reverse renunciation). In their place he embraced the conventions of everyday life—brushing teeth, getting on a bus, dressing in front of a mirror, telephoning a friend—each with its own formal, if provisional, integrity. Ultimately, Kaprow’s notion of “forms” is that they are mental imprints projected upon the world as metaphors of our mentality, not as universal ideals. Templates for modern experience, they are situational, operational, structural, subject to feedback, and open to learning.

Implicit in the provisional nature of these templates is Kaprow’s faith in the communicative function of art. But in the arts, communication tends to flow in one direction, from the artist through a medium toward an audience. We the audience find we’ve been “communicated” to, and what has been communicated to us is something of the artist’s creative experience. But implicit in communication is a reciprocal flow, and reciprocity in art, more verb-like than noun-like,

begins to move esthetic experience toward participation. Of course, we can say that any artwork, no matter how conventional, is “experienced” by its audience, and that such experience, which involves interpretation, constitutes a form of participation. But that’s stretching common sense. Acts of passive regard, no matter how critical or sophisticated, are not participatory. They are merely good manners (esthetic behavior?).

Actual participation in a work of art courts anarchy. It invites the participant to make a choice of some kind. Usually that choice includes whether to participate. In choosing to participate, one may also be choosing to alter the work—its object, its subject, its meaning. In choosing not to participate, one has at least acted consciously. In either case, the work has been acted upon (which is different from thinking about acting). Though the artist sets up the equation, the participant provides its terms, and the system remains open to participation. To Kaprow, participation is whole: it engages both our minds and bodies in actions that transform art into experience and esthetics into meaning. Our experience as participants is one of meaningful transformation.

If a central theme runs through Kaprow’s essays, it is that art is a participatory experience. In defining art as experience, Dewey attempted to locate the sources of esthetics in everyday life. In defining experience as participation, Kaprow pushed Dewey’s philosophy—and extended his own measures of meaningful experience—into the experimental context of social and psychological interaction, where outcomes are less than predictable. Therein, the given natural and social forms of experience provide the intellectual, linguistic, material, temporal, habitual, performative, ethical, moral, and esthetic frameworks within which meaning may be made.

From his vantage point in the thirties Dewey saw the task ahead as one of “recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with the normal processes of living.” For him, that continuity lay in the recognition that refined esthetic consciousness is grounded in the raw materials of everyday life, the recovery of which would require an excavation of the sources of art in human experience. Yet to many American artists of the thirties Dewey’s philosophy of art and experience seemed like an isolationist call to reject European modernism and return to the themes and styles of urban and rural commonness. Indeed, some of Dewey’s descriptions of the sources of the esthetic in

everyday life might have come out of the paintings of Sloan or Shahn or Sheeler or Benton: “the sights that hold the crowd—the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; the human-fly climbing the steeple-side; the men perched high in air on girders, catching and throwing red-hot bolts.” Scenes like these appealed to American regionalists. They were modern but not European, hence not *modernist*. Still, if they’d been scripted by the Italian Futurist Marinetti, they would have sounded like a mechanistic opera in a cult of the machine. With Dewey, the firemen and crane operators and window washers and welders are in there, rushing and balancing and climbing and tossing; his writing is about their experience. We hear Gershwin.

And we also hear Kaprow. In 1958 he wrote “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” his first important essay. Its subject is a threshold Pollock could not cross but probably “vaguely sensed” and constantly brushed up against. It existed where the edge of the canvas met the floor (or the wall, if the picture was hanging). Across that edge Pollock flung endless skeins of paint, each one reaching past the representational “field” of painting to encompass the space—no, the place—beyond it. Literally, that place was the artist’s studio; metaphorically, it was the boundary of avant-garde experience and quite possibly the end of art.

“The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” remains for some Kaprow’s seminal essay. It is certainly his most prodigious and prophetic. Indeed, it may have done more to actually change art than any essay of its era. It is both a eulogy and a manifesto, reflecting back but leaping forward. With its strategic use of “we,” it presumes to speak for a generation. With its lines of prosaic description, it threatens to break into a grand but common prayer. This is Kaprow coming down off the mountain, rewriting the book on Pollock, setting the stage for what he’s about to do as a Happener—with cardboard, chicken wire, crumpled newspaper, broken glass, record players, recorded sounds, staccato bursts of words, and the smell of crushed strawberries.

What Kaprow saw in Pollock was a stillborn desire, secretly held by his own generation, to “overturn old tables of crockery and flat champagne.” At the same time, he pointed out that the great painter’s death came, not “at the top,” but when both Pollock and “modern art in general [were] slipping.” Kaprow saw in this slippage a pathetic tragedy opening into a profound comedy. The tragedy, not Pollock’s

alone, was that of art's growing incapacity to be about, in, and of the rest of life—an effect of the proscriptive climate enforced by formalist art critics. In a penetrating insight Kaprow, then not yet thirty, wrote that “Pollock’s tragedy was more subtle than his death,” seeing a leap Pollock had sensed but not taken. For pulling back from that leap—into the environmental and performative implications of Pollock’s “overall” paintings—or for not knowing how or even whether to proceed beyond the space he had made for himself, the great painter drank and drove himself to his death.

After pausing respectfully at that monumental threshold, Kaprow took the leap for him: beyond the media of art and into the objects and materials of everyday life; beyond the space of painting and into the places of human social exchange; and beyond the actions of the artist and into a shared moral environment where every act, whether conscious or incidental, has meaning. For Kaprow, these were the esthetic dimensions of common experience, which was itself the profound comedy he found beyond the space of Pollock’s painting.

In one of the few examples of art writing as prophecy, Kaprow surveys the scene beyond the entangled web of Pollock’s painting, two years after the great painter’s death and one year before the first Happening:

Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point 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. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: 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. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become materials for this new concrete art.

Much of Kaprow's early work emerges from this paragraph: but if it points to Happenings, the genre that would make him famous, it also marks his passage as a writer. Its rhythms play out the parallel creative forces that have governed Kaprow's writing ever since—of empiricist and expressionist, scientist and prophet, academic and visionary, statistician and storyteller. Stylistically these parallels manifest themselves, on the one hand, as a patient, even tedious, accumulation of observable data—for example, “In short, part-to-whole or part-to-part relationships, no matter how strained, were a good 50 percent of the making of a picture (most of the time they were a lot more, maybe 90 percent)”—and, on the other, as a liberating, almost biblical, surge of passion, as when, caught up in a moment of avant-garde exuberance, Kaprow expanded the horizons of his new environmental art to include even “the vastness of Forty-second Street.” At least through the essays of the sixties detailed observation suddenly gives way to blinding insights and flights of risky intuition. One senses here the threshold Pollock could not cross, which Kaprow has been crossing ever since.

In 1966 Kaprow wrote that if the task of the artist had once been to make good art, it was now “to avoid making art of any kind.” A few years later, in the first of the “Un-Artist” essays, he wrote that nonart—lint gathering on the floor, the vapor trail of a missile—“is whatever has not yet been accepted as art but has caught an artist's attention with that possibility in mind.” Between these rhetorical positions—the avoidance of art and the impossibility of avoiding nonart—lay an experimental ground where artists might forget their professional identity and art might lose itself in the paradox of being whatever else, besides art, it is like, whether sociology, therapy, or shopping. The prolongation of this paradoxical condition was the un-artist's goal.

From his vantage point in the early seventies Kaprow saw the task ahead as one of restoring “participation in the natural design through conscious emulation of its nonartistic features.” In the second of his “Un-Artist” essays he charted a course from art to life that began with copying, moved through play, and ended with participation. Nonart, he said, was an art of resemblance in which an “old something” is recreated as a “new something that closely fits the old something.” In other words, it's a thoughtful form of copying. Moreover, because life imitates itself already—city plans, for instance, are like the human

circulatory system and computers are like the brain—nonart is a matter of imitating imitation (this a decade before deconstruction). Given the mythologies of originality that underwrite the avant-garde, what better means of escaping “art” than by copying?

If there is a dirtier word than *copying* in the lexicon of serious art, Kaprow thinks it must be *play*. With its connotations of frivolity and childishness, play seems the antithesis of what artists are supposed to do. But Kaprow has always sought a certain innocence in his work, inviting humor and spontaneity, delighting in the unexpected. For him, play is inventive, and adults must be endlessly inventive to remember how to do it. Play is also instructive, since it imitates the larger social and natural orders: children play to imitate their parents’ behavior and rules, societies to reenact ancient dramas and natural schemes. As a ritual reenactment of what Johan Huizinga calls “a cosmic happening,” play at its most conscious level is a form of participation. As such, Kaprow sees it as a remedy for what he calls gaming (the competitive, work-ethical regulation of play) as well as for the ossifying routines and habits of industrial-age American education, which have less to do with learning and fun than with the “dreadfully dull work” of “winning a place in the world.” With the work of art as a “moral paradigm for an exhausted work ethic,” and with play as a form of educational currency that artists can afford to spend, Kaprow completes the education of the un-artist by assigning a new social role, that of the educator, a role in which artists “need simply play as they once did under the banner of art, but among those who do not care about that. Gradually,” he concludes, “the pedigree ‘art’ will recede into irrelevance.”

Is participation, then, the threshold at which art recedes into irrelevance? To participate in something is to cross the psychological boundaries between the self and other and to feel the defining social tensions of those boundaries. The experience of participating—especially when it is catalyzed in play—transforms the participant as well as the game. Participatory art dissipates into the situations, operations, structures, feedback systems, and learning processes it is like. In scanning the history of art, Kaprow likes to remember those strains of modernism that keep trying to lose themselves, playfully, in whatever else they are like. As an artist, he holds himself accountable for the thresholds he crosses. He is a true avant-gardist who actually follows

through on the crossings he invites himself to make—and invites us to participate in making.

Perhaps the most important measure of Dewey's influence lies in Kaprow's chosen identity as an "experimental artist," as one, that is, who tries to "imagine something never before done, by a method never before used, whose outcome is unforeseen." Such an artist commits to an experimental method over an inspirational medium or a determining style or product. Unlike the common definition of art—as a process and product that slides back and forth along a scale from the noun-like to the verb-like—Kaprow's definition of experimental art links it to experiences outside art, suggesting that he believes in the meaningfulness of all experience and of any art that might account for it. As an experimental artist he accounts for that meaningfulness with method.

Method is a style of making that tends toward the quantifiable and the mundane rather than toward the expression of extraordinary qualities. It is more like observation or calculation than revelation. As such, method allows Kaprow to replace the classical and romantic paradigms of art-style with the order and chaos of common experience, which is already full of life-style. Independent of the art meanings of medium, style, and history, method permits an engagement with the meanings of everyday life. Although not neutral—it is characterized by the problem-solving ideology of scientific optimism that was also Dewey's ideology—it is relatively flat compared with the subject matter it measures. It is the style, not of the artist-genius, but of the artist-accountant.

Accounting for the meanings of experience, however, can itself be a ritual act, its pragmatism an act of common faith. To carry cinderblocks up and down the stairwell of a university art department until you've counted the number of years in your life, staying with each block for "a long time," is to experience the disintegration of a methodical act into an obsessive autobiographical rite. Method becomes a discipline by which experience is shaped and interpreted. It is a pragmatic version of the creative "act." Meaning emerges, not from the enactment of high drama, but from the low drama of enactment—not from the content in art, but from the art in content. Carry enough cinderblocks, follow the plan, and meaning will emerge. That is the common faith Kaprow has.

If Dewey's influence upon Kaprow can be reduced to a single phrase, it would be that "doing is knowing." What Kaprow hopes to know is the meaning of everyday life. To know that meaning, he must enact it every day. This is where pragmatism becomes a practice. Trust in the instrumentality of ideas, in the effectiveness of action, in the validity of experience, in the reality of the senses, in the contingency of values, and in the value of intuition is not merely "materialism." Though often seen as a crude nuts-and-bolts philosophy—especially by Europeans—American pragmatism can also be a methodical verification of existence.

A methodical verification of existence takes sustenance from Zen. Like Dewey's pragmatism, Zen mistrusts dogma and encourages education, seeks enlightenment but avoids formalist logic, accepts the body as well as the mind, and embraces discipline but relinquishes ego-centered control. In establishing discipline as a contemplative practice that opens the practitioner to knowledge, Zen loosely parallels the scientific method, in which controls are established in an experimental process that opens the researcher to phenomena. For Kaprow, pragmatism is the mechanics of Zen, and Zen the spirit of pragmatism.

In the late fifties the experimental music of John Cage best exemplified for Kaprow the merger of Zen and science, of passive contemplation and active experimentation. In Cage's music, the role of the artist shifted from that of the prosecutor of meaning to that of the witness of phenomena. Ironically, by eliminating traditional musical "discipline" from his performances, Cage appealed to another discipline: that of waiting, listening, and accepting. Though the link between Zen and Cagean esthetics is well known in the American arts, it was Dewey's pragmatism that best prepared Kaprow to accept it as method.

In "The Meaning of Life" Kaprow writes that "lifelike art plays somewhere in and between attention to physical process and attention to interpretation." The object of such attention is consciousness in its fullest sense. This sense of fullness is probably what Dewey found esthetic about experience. Ultimately, for Kaprow, it was not esthetics that gave meaning to life; it was life that gave meaning to esthetics. If his youthful ambition was once to be the "most modern artist in the world," Kaprow's mature achievement has been to shift the emphasis of that ambition from "most modern" to "in the world," *without* conceding his identity as an artist.

The history of that shift is the story of Kaprow's writing. His subjects evolved from avant-garde art to everyday life, his style from manifesto to parable, his eye from empiricist to witness, his body from expansionist to holist, his memory from historian to storyteller, his mind from intelligence to wisdom, and his heart from near-biblical surges of passion to passages of Zen-like contemplation. In these strains of emphasis one can hear Kaprow's primary influences, including Hans Hofmann (who gave him the compositional forces of "push and pull"), Meyer Schapiro (who taught him the value of a detailed formal and social analysis of art and art history), Marcel Duchamp (who, at a distance, left him the readymades), and, of course, John Cage (who inspired in him the discipline to sit back and watch it all happen).

But through them all one hears Dewey: his distinction between understanding and experiencing, his poetic feel for the prosaic textures of everyday experience, his embrace of scientific method, his critique of the institutions and conventions that separate art from life, his belief in progressive education, the often Coplandesque sweep of his ideas and the often Whitman-like roll of his prose, his willingness to forget art for the time it takes to remember esthetic experience "in the raw," his trust in the given social and organic outlines of experience, and his conviction that values emerge from social conflict, that intelligence is situational, and that philosophy can be socially diagnostic. Substitute a word here and there—say, *art* for *philosophy*—and these might be Kaprow's themes as well.

Art not separate from experience . . . what is an authentic experience? . . . environment is a process of interaction: by writing in the margins of Dewey's book, Kaprow set up theoretical thresholds that he would someday have to cross. In the years since he wrote his marginalia, writing itself has become instrumental to those crossings. As an experimental artist, Kaprow has written to hypothesize and interpret experiments in the meaning of life. Those experiments, as works of lifelike art, are intended to probe, test, and measure the boundaries and contents of experience. In turn, they are subjected to the test of rational analysis through language. The doing and the writing seem to move each other along—they are reciprocal, perhaps even causal, the way ideas and experiences resist and temper each other over time. As Dewey believed that ideas are instruments for dealing effectively with concrete situations, Kaprow sees language as a means to under-

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stand the barriers of mind that segregate esthetic from everyday experience—not for the sake of philosophy, or for the life of the mind alone, but to facilitate meaningful action in life.

Though he is never mentioned in the writing, John Dewey is Allan Kaprow's intellectual father. Whereas the others were his mentors, the philosopher was his elder. Mentors guide us in our youth, and, though we remember them fondly, we outgrow their influence awkwardly. We can choose our elders, by contrast, only when we are adults—when choice is meaningful. We may stumble upon them too early, but once we have chosen them, they will never leave. Perhaps one of the reasons they stay is that we never tell them who they are for us, either because they're dead or busy or famous or far away. In fact we rarely meet them, inscribed as they are on the margins of our lives. But they *are* the mothers and fathers we would have chosen had we known.

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