

# ALLAN KAPROW

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I am put off by museums in general; they reek of a holy death which offends my sense of reality. Moreover, apart from my personal view, most advanced art of the last half-dozen years is, in my view, inappropriate for museum display. It is an art of the world: enormous scale, environmental scope, mixed media, spectator participation, technology, themes drawn from the daily milieu, and so forth. Museums do more than isolate such work from life, they subtly *sanctify* it and thus kill it.

But speaking practically, museums are often useful for there are not yet agencies or means for otherwise making art accessible to the public. As a compromise—I spell it out—between what is and what should be, I have agreed to a museum exhibit of that part of my work from the past which was still partially conceived in the gallery spirit. I would have preferred a factory building, loading platform or storage yard. But these being unavailable, I shall try to camouflage the museum environment as much as possible. One new work, however, a *Happening*, is to be presented outside the premises.

The collaborating institutions have shown unusual understanding and willingness to accommodate the problem, because being sensitive to the broad issues it calls up today, they are trying to make a step in the direction of solving it. That issue is not so much the abolition of all museums—they are entirely proper for the art of the past—; it is rather the extension of the museum function into the domain of contemporary needs, in which it can act as a force for innovations lying outside of its physical limits. Eventually, in this way, the modern museum may gradually lose that cloying association of holiness that it presently inherits from another age. Hopefully, it will become an educational institute, a computerized bank of cultural history, and an agency for action.

ALLAN KAPROW

## INTERVIEW

Barbara Berman Did your studies with Hans Hofmann have a measurable influence on you?

Allan Kaprow Hofmann was a good bridge between the study of European art and what was being developed at that time in this country. In a very general sense I can't deny the impact of what he said upon me, because it helped me understand art history up to the point he taught it: about 1915. But, he really gave me very little that would help in dealing with the problems we now have.

B.B. What were you striving for in your early work?

A.K. My early painting was imitative. It accomplished what it was intended to do, which was to make me feel part of art history and master at least some of the main ideas of it. You understand now that I am talking about a conceptual mastery rather than specifically a pictorial one, although I do think some stylistic facility for those periods I was interested in, entered into my paintings. But once the conceptual understanding was part of my nature it was no longer useful. I reached a point where there was nothing else to do except jump — jump into what was unknown, even though when I look back at the results of that first set of jumps they look more or less traditional to the period, that period of 1955 or so.

B.B. When did you first feel the impact of Pollock?

A.K. In 1949 when I saw an exhibition of his work for the first time. For about ten minutes over coffee in the automat afterwards I rejected it violently, and ten minutes later I was completely sold.

B.B. What did you find most impressive about his work?

A.K. Its lack of pictorial veracity. It struck me as mostly an environmental activity. In those days his work was exhibited on all four walls of a rather small cubicle. Their presense was so loud and pronounced that the walls were left behind as the visual and tactile activity drowned the interior of the room and the spectator.



B.B. Were there other artists' work that you found of great interest?

A.K. I was interested in the ideas of Kurt Schwitters. He actually conceived Happenings but never did them. His writings about possible activities are almost like pre-Happenings. Yet, the most important influence during the course of my studying Dada was Duchamp, because of what he *didn't* do. After the big glass piece, he deliberately stopped making art objects in favor of little (ready-made) hints to the effect that you could pick up art anywhere, if that's what you wanted. In other words, he implied that the whole business of art is quite arbitrary. I was hoping at the time I went to college, to be a professional philosopher, and Duchamp struck me as essentially a philosopher. I think my only abiding interest in art is philosophical, and thus media and techniques then were of only passing fascination. Schwitters and Duchamp had lively minds.

B.B. Why did your early Happenings tend to be more theatrical than your recent ones?

A.K. Initially, I was probably stimulated by a post-Surrealist sensibility: that of making things marvelous. I looked for the strange and the odd juxtaposition. Now, more and more, this tendency is fading away. The ordinary, the unspectacular, is emerging as the dominant theme. However, I must say that the ordinary often strikes me as spectacular, so I'm not at all giving up that rather romantic point of view I've always had.

B.B. Why do you set up rules for making a Happening?

A.K. To provide as much liberation from past culture as possible. The rules are very broad and of a "do not" nature. They have to do with the *context* rather than the specific manipulations of the work or materials. For example, instead of recommending that one do one's work in a theater or an art gallery, where most Happenings seem to exist, I recommend that he should not. I recommend "no rehearsals," no "actors," no "roles," no repeats, etc.

B.B. Does this relate to game concepts?

A.K. Yes. If I'm trying to depart from culture while operating within it all the time, I have to set up some analogy between my activity and something else to avoid comparisons with the arts as we know them. At first I thought it would be

nice to allude to ritual—but games seemed more flexible. There are a wide variety of kinds of games to which one can refer. Mine are closer to children's made-up games, the kind they suddenly invent when they go into a backyard and find something to play with. They are also close sometimes to non-competitive sport such as surfing, in which there may be no real winning involved; or to adventures such as hikes or mountain climbing. It is in this broad zone, where activity is physical as well as playful, that my gamesmanship can be pinpointed. But again, unlike most games, mine are not to be repeated.

B.B. Do you utilize chance in the same manner as the Surrealists?

A.K. No, they were interested in chance as an unlocking of the unconscious. John Cage has channeled it into an imitation of reality. I think there is more interest now in Cage's point of view than in the Surrealists', because the everyday world is full of surprises. You don't have to dig into your psyche anymore.

B.B. Why haven't you created any new Environments recently?

A.K. The reason is simple, because the Environments, which included a maximum of audience participation, began to be so much like slowed down Happenings that the line between the two of them had vanished. There was no need to call one an Environment and the other a Happening.

B.B. Do you feel your art can be used effectively as a political tool?

A.K. I don't feel that my work lends itself to this kind of an end. When I've been asked to prepare Happenings for this or that political function, peace movement or protest, I have said no in all but one case (and that was a fiasco). I felt that to the extent that my work was politically useful as a tool, it would be bad as a Happening. The more the end was literally a kind of reward, that is, the achieving of a political goal, the less the work would have the broader philosophical implications that I'm interested in. So you might say that my work is not strictly topical, although its materials are topical.

B.B. Have you been concentrating on any new ideas that might affect your work?



A.K. Lately, I've been reducing the orchestral quality that seemed to characterize my previous work (in spite of not wanting this effect). For example, a single activity is treated exhaustively: digging a deep hole and filling it in, over and over again. Either one person can do this in many places over a period of weeks, or many persons can do it, once each, in different locales and times. There is a chance that this sort of reduction in range of images may lead to a simpler way of dealing with varied activities in the future.

B.B. Do you feel your art is a moral tool that concentrates on making people aware?

A.K. I'm quite sure that what I do is a moral tool of sorts. Most human activity is (or can be). But if I said I was trying to make people "aware," it would sound coercive and more didactic than it really is. Moreover, the question of what people are to become aware of would arise, and simple answers to that would be misleading and truistic.

I play games; if I called them sermons then nobody would play. Not even I. The game is the moral; the *moral* of the game is to beg the question.

A Happening is an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available, or altered slightly; just as its activities may be invented or commonplace. A Happening, unlike a stage play, may occur at a supermarket, driving along a highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend's kitchen, either at once or sequentially. If sequentially, time may extend to more than a year. The Happening is performed according to plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. It is art but seems closer to life.<sup>1</sup>

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An Environment is literally a surrounding to be entered into. Environments have tended to be handmade, built-up affairs, exhibited in studios and galleries. Their early forms in the late fifties had the feel of Abstract-Expressionism: lots of junk, lights, recorded noises, loosely hung together, and somewhat difficult to enter and walk or crawl through. Lately, the forms are close to the cooler styles of Pop and Primary art. And as a result they are easier to negotiate, and induce a sense of detachment in the entrant. They will prove most interesting when they are made away from galleries: in the woods, along a highway, in a stone-quarry, at the edge of an airport. . . .<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This definition by Allan Kaprow originally appeared in his Great Bear Pamphlet *Some Recent Happenings*. New York: Something Else Press, Inc., 160 Fifth Avenue, 1966, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>In a letter from the artist to Barbara Berman dated August 14, 1967.