

Just Doing

Author(s): Allan Kaprow

Source: *TDR (1988-)*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 101-106

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1146610>

Accessed: 11/07/2009 14:15

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Just Doing

Allan Kaprow



(Photo by Annie Sandford)

For years I've been trying to pick up my shadow on a sunny day, to put it in my pocket for a rainy day. I remember to do this now and then. It's been difficult. And to tell the truth, I've never succeeded. The shadow changes as I bend over, and I can't quite compress it to fit into my jeans. (*All Mine*, 1987-)

*

On the same subject, I and a friend, the musician Jean-Charles François, did small events for each other in the 1980s to provide some diversion from our administrative duties at the University of California, San Diego. We did them together, usually just the two of us, sometimes with a few others. This one involved our going out to the hills east of the university campus. The idea was that one of us would follow the other without saying a word, only making sure to step constantly on the shadow of the other, no matter where he went.

The Drama Review 41, 3 (T155), Fall 1997. Copyright © 1997
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(Photo by Annie Sandford)

In practice, since the leader would go over boulders, around cactus, and up and down ravines, the length and relative position of the shadow changed. Sometimes it was in front of him, if he was walking away from the sun. In that case, it was a bit tricky; the follower had to jump in front of the leader and walk backwards to keep the shadow in view, making quick changes as the leader swung around to different directions. According to plan, the leader had no obligation to the follower.

At certain moments, for example, when walking up a ravine, the shadow would be shortened by the angle of the ground. Then we would find ourselves nearly on top of one another, our shoes touching. When the follower lost contact with the shadow (as it frequently happened), he would loudly bang together two stones he carried in his hands—again, as per plan.

This single sound marked the moment when we exchanged positions: the follower became the leader. But of course, since contact was lost so often, and the distances kept changing, it all got pretty unclear as to who was what. Nevertheless, it was very formally executed. (*Tail Wagging Dog*, 1985)

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Ludwig Thürmer, Barbara Glas, Coryl Crane, and I were together in Berlin. Ludwig and Barbara had a new baby. We went for a walk to look for some new grass, since it was spring. Soon we found a perfect field of young shoots. Coryl and Barbara, carrying her baby, walked slowly into it, leaving clear footprints. Ludwig and I followed, placing our shoes exactly in the same depressions. But before each step, we reached behind us to lift up the flattened blades of grass, so that no marks were left. Afterwards, looking at the field, it was very odd; it seemed that we'd never been there. (*Walking Light on the World*, 1982)

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A few years ago, a group joined me for a workshop in experimental art. A large room was set aside for us. After the usual introductions (whose conventional form—"My name is..."—we soon saw as an "event"), we decided to play with the light switch. The idea was that anyone in the room could get up from where they were sitting and turn off the lights. How long it would take was unplanned. Then, anyone could turn it on. Then off, and so forth. Long periods of time followed. Although there were no guidelines about silence, no one spoke. You could hear people breathing. We peeked at one another, trying to anticipate who would make the next move. Sometimes we stared at someone, challenging them, to see who would wait the longest.

People got up and played with the switch, flicking the light, or archly changing it back and forth, as if to convey some message. Equally, there were 15 minutes or more of doing nothing. The only advice given in advance was that

anyone could leave the room when they had to. The experiment would end when no one remained. After about two and a half hours I had to give a talk elsewhere. There were nine in the room when I left. I went to the airport after the lecture and never heard when the room became empty. (*On/Off*, 1994)

*

The playground for experimental art is ordinary life. But playing in this ordinary world does not mean including even more features of the commonplace than we are already used to finding in exhibitions, concerts, poems, dances, films, and performances. Such appropriations are the traditional strategies that turn life into art. No matter how much life we confront in them, their standard contexts never allow us to forget art's higher station. In contrast, the experimental artist who plays with the commonplace does so in the very midst of crossing the street or tying a shoelace. There is no excerpting and reenacting them on a stage, no documenting them for a show. Art is thus easily forgotten. And that is the condition for experimentation: the art is the forgetting of art.

For John Cage, an experimental action in music was one whose outcome couldn't be known in advance (my paraphrase). Musical and nonmusical sound ("noise") were equally welcome, along with their unpredictable arrangements. But, for the most part, Cage's experimental music was still music, and took place in the concert situation. Art was automatically affirmed despite Cage's commitment to the stuff of life. But that was the 1950s and it was a big step into the vernacular.

Today, we may say that experimental art is that act or thought whose identity as art must always remain in doubt. Not only does this hold for anyone who plays with the "artist"; it holds especially for the "artist"! The experi-

the art is the forgetting of art

ment is not to possess a secret artistry in deep disguise; it is not knowing what to call it at any time! As soon—and it is usually very soon—as such acts and thoughts are associated with art and its discourses, it is time to move on to other possibilities of experimentation.

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A woman agreed that she needed guidance. Her friends proposed to give it by moving her in the right directions. So she just stood and waited to be moved. Her friends had a discussion and decided on some right directions for her; that is, out the door, down the stairs, along a river... They moved her by pulling, shoving, dragging, and carrying her in the right directions. They set aside some days for this, as their decisions were quite serious. And, naturally, there were some disagreements. But the woman was patient and just waited until they agreed on what to do. (*Help Is Always Welcome*, 1990)

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In answer to my suggestion to Brian Dick—that he might like to do the stupidest thing he could think of, and then the smartest—he hung a roomful of big pickles from a ceiling, wrapping them with electric wire attached to the house current. When he turned on the switch, the pickles glowed and sent out blue sparks before burning out and smelling bad. Then, for his "smartest" thing, he repeated the whole procedure the next day. (1990)



(Photo by Annie Sandford)

*

Play, of course, is at the heart of experimentation. Elsewhere, I've pointed out the crucial difference in the English language between playing and gaming (1993:110–26). Gaming involves winning or losing a desired goal. Playing is open-ended and, potentially, everybody “wins.” Playing has no stated purpose other than more playing. It is usually not serious in content or attitude, whereas gaming, which can also involve playing if it is subordinated to winning, is at heart competitive.

*

Experimentation also involves attention to the normally unnoticed. I scratch my ear when it itches. I notice the itch, notice my scratching, and notice when the itching stops, if it does. I attend to my raised arm and my fingers pulling at my ear (it's the left one), while discussing politics. But mostly, I scratch itches without noticing. I learned as a child not to scratch an itch in public, and now that I intentionally notice that I do so anyway, the whole action looms large. It's a little strange, and my conversation about politics loses interest as itching and scratching shine brighter. In other words, attention alters what is attended. Playing with everyday life often is just paying attention to what is conventionally hidden.

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For example, we all know about those creeps who telephone someone and breathe a lot but don't say anything. Five friends and I decided to play with heavy breathing on the telephone. We exchanged numbers and were free to call any of them at any time for the next three days. All we were to do was breathe heavily for as long as we wished, or until we were cut off. Sometimes a phone would just ring and ring. It was never clear if the person was out or was refusing to pick up the receiver. Sometimes we would reach an answering machine, and we had to decide if we wanted to breathe for the recording. It was the same uncertainty when we were at home: Was the phone ringing because it was an expected business call, or was it going to be heavy breathing? Would the phone

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dirt

ring in the middle of the night? How long could we keep from giggling?

Once, I reached the mother-in-law of one of the group. She listened to me breathing for a moment and screamed in Italian that I was a pervert and worse, before slamming down the receiver. The funny thing about this caper was that you couldn't tell from the breathing who was telephoning. (*Touching Someone*, 1991)

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If the analytically inclined still want to know why to play at everyday life, an answer might go like this: Experimental art is the only kind of art that Anglo-American culture can call its own. This American culture has long rejected the fine arts as irrelevant and devoid of honest labor. "Idle hands make devil's work." Experimental art, as described here, is the one kind of art that can affirm and deny art at the same time. It is the one kind of art that can claim as value no value! It is in agreement with American philistinism and its throwaway materialism—while it is free to enact a sort of "native" creativity in the play of ordinary life (c.f., John Dewey). The one caveat is that it must not be called art.

*

I woke up one day and had an idea. I would dig a bucket of dirt from the garden, and I'd put the bucket of dirt and a shovel in my truck. On some future day, I'd trade my dirt for month went by and I didn't ery week, I go on Wednesday in San Diego. So, one the bucket of dirt. I asked there at the time, "Can I worry, I'll give you a bucket turn." I told him about the He looked at me and started plenty of dirt." He pointed

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someone else's dirt. A think about it. Usually, ev- days to sit at the Zen Center Wednesday, I remembered Ben Thorsen, who lived have a bucket of dirt? Don't of good garden dirt in re- rich compost in the garden. to laugh. "Sure, there's in all directions.

I went to get the bucket of dirt and shovel. When I came back Ben said, "I've got a better idea. Let's crawl under the Zen Center and get the dirt from just below the seat of our teacher" [Charlotte Joko Beck]. "That'll be heavy-duty Buddhist dirt!" I agreed it was a very good idea. We got a flashlight and squeezed our way under the floor of the house, dragging the bucket and shovel behind us. It was cramped, with maybe 15 inches of clearance, filthy dirty, cobwebs everywhere. But we couldn't determine the exact spot we were looking for. So Ben said he would go back out and would tap on the floor above; I could move over to where his taps were coming from, and tap back to him. That's what we did. At the right place under the floor, I scooped out a hole in the dreadful dirt that was only construction remnants. Replacing it with my garden dirt would be an improvement, I thought uncharitably. In any case, the heavy-duty Buddhist vibes were the main consideration. So I wiggled out with the stuff and brushed off my clothes.

Ben was thoroughly amused by then and said, "What are you doing this for?" I said, "Oh, it's what I like to do. No big deal." He said, "Well, I guess it's no sillier than sitting on a cushion for hours doing nothing" (as we seem to do at the Center). We talked for some time about the meaning of life.

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Some weeks passed, and I stopped at the local farm stand where I bought my fruit and vegetables. I asked the woman there, “Can I have a bucket of your dirt? I’ll give you one in return.” She stared at me. “You want a bucket of dirt? From here? Why?” She pointed to the barren clay of the roadside. She thought she hadn’t heard me right. I said “It’s heavy-duty Buddhist dirt,” and I told her the story.

She was clearly impressed with the Buddhist part. “I thought you were an artist.” I said to her yes and that this was what I did. “I thought you were a college professor.” “Sure. I teach this sort of thing, trading dirt.” “They pay you for it?” she asked me. Then she thought a moment. “But it’s not serious; it’s what my grandson does.” She gestured toward the child playing on the floor with cornhusks. “What’s serious?” I said to her.

So we had a long talk about the meaning of life while I dug a hole at the side of the road. As I was about to pour the Buddhist dirt into it, she tossed some dry seeds into the bucket. I said “What did you do that for?” “Why not? It can’t hurt,” she said.

(The dirt trading and the stories went on for three years. It had no real beginning or end. The stories began to add up to a very long story, and with each retelling they changed. When I stopped being interested in the process [it coincided with my wife and I having to move after our rental property was sold], I put the last bucket of dirt back into the garden.) (*Trading Dirt*, 1982–85)

Reference

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1993 “The Education of the Un-Artist,” Part 2. In *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Allan Kaprow helped to develop the “Environment” and “Happening” in the late 1950s and ’60s, as well as their theory. His *Happenings*—some 200 of them—evolved over the years, and in their present humorous form are nearly indistinguishable from ordinary life. He has published extensively and is Professor Emeritus in the Visual Arts Department of the University of California, San Diego.

“Just Doing” was the keynote address for the “Performance Art, Culture, and Pedagogy” symposium held at Pennsylvania State University, 13–16 November 1996.



(Photo by Annie Sandford)