

Untitled Essay

and other works

by Allan Kaprow



1967
A Great Bear Pamphlet

ubuclassics

2004

Untitled Essay and other works
Allan Kaprow

Originally published in 1967 as a Great Bear Pamphlet by Something Else Press.

ubuclassics
www.ubu.com

UNTITLED ESSAY
AND OTHER WORKS

ALLAN KAPROW

Untitled Essay

*(This essay was first printed without any title at all side-by-side with **The Demiurge**, the first published *Happening* scenario, and at the heading of which the word is used for the first time in its present meaning. This scenario is available in **Happenings**, by Michael Kirby, published by E. P. Dutton, New York.)*

I think that when an artist writes about his art, he should write in the profoundest sense only for himself. He should amuse himself, question, cajole, invent roles for himself, saddle his image with great tasks, address with studied relish his towering ambitions, and above all, take himself as unseriously as possible. It is just at that moment when the words become most perfectly soliliquized that they take on something of the air of authenticity. This is not easy—one always thinks of amusing others as well as oneself—but if it happens that a high level of privacy of ideas is reached, then the more likely what is said will approach the status of pure “lies,” resembling nothing more than another plane of invention or art.

After all, who really wants to write on what he does? A whole career is devoted to imagining things and if the artist is to be at all interested in taking his pulse as though he were a patient to be examined, he must find some way to turn this procedure into an adventure, a form of life itself. He cannot be satisfied merely to translate in digest form what already has been completely expressed in his latest creative efforts.

He realizes somewhere in his innards that in him at least, the greatest artifice, the most outlandish thought, the least believable mental construction—, is closest to the truth about him, and beyond him. He is the concocter of impossible visions and is thus the creator of reality. He knows for certain that he is among the remaining few in a world of tired, sour souls, who is brave enough to dream away his time.

It cannot fail to delight him to stand at his mirror making faces, scowling, grinning, shedding tears and making queer noises in quick succession. His own ham and audience at the same time, he is free to shatter the whole scene if he wishes; and free as well to applaud the next game coming along. And why not? Has he a greater personal duty than this? A greater social one? In dreaming up a “statement,” in revealing an attitude towards his art, he is performing his deepest function.

I have always dreamed of a new art, a really new art. I am moved to roaring laugh-

ter by talk of consolidating forces, of learning from the past; by yearnings for the great tradition, the end of upheavals and the era of peace and seriousness. Such an essentially fear-ridden view cannot know what a positive joy revolting is. It has never realized that revolutions of the spirit are the spirit's very utterance of existence. Caution against indulging the new for its own sake can be flung aside. The truly new is hard to find and when one has it, it is very real indeed. I tip my hand to the man who stumbles on it; for I do not believe he can prepare for it in advance. He can only prepare himself for its discovery by leaving himself as unprotected, as exposed to "strangeness" as his ties to civilization will allow.

I have taken my cue from those rare screwballs that emerge every once in a while in unexpected places, who are crazy to transform themselves into the Essential Absolute of each moment that passes through them and who are perhaps in that manner the purest living forms of art. These men, these marvelously deranged beings, do not (or cannot) stop long enough to call their selfness a creative thing. They hurl themselves to furious deaths; or collapsed from the sheer excessiveness of their energy, they open up cigar stands and are never heard of again. They leave no monuments (and I am tired of monuments, those tokens to eternity), no testimonials, but they know more about renewal than the rest of us.

We live in a time when thinkers who are most religiously concerned with what the Valuable is for men, say that insanity is more profound than humanity, however terrible and painful the former may be. The classical virtues have dried up into little gray chips that settle slowly on our tongues, mocking at a world they have not helped and at us whom they have not inspired.

I am convinced that the only human "virtue" is the continuous rebirth of the Self. And this is what a new art is. We today are not damned (as we have all been told); we are simply bored to death. If we seek salvation, it is still Baudelaire's ennui that we wish to be saved from. To be born not simply again, but again and again, is now our loftiest social obligation. As an artist it means living in constant spiritual awe and inner disequilibrium. (This is perhaps the only real state of harmony; all the rest is undreaming sleep.) It means casting our values (our habits) over the edge of great heights, smiling as we hear them clatter to pieces down below like so much crockery-because now we must get up and invent some, thing again.

It means also living in constant fear of reaching the end too soon ... If necessary it is this, too. But the exaltation of meeting nose to nose the real challenge of being or not being an artist, a man of values, is much the greater worth. And I don't mind paying the

price of my soul for the simple reassurance that it is there for a while.

And the past? Those heroic men who also gave their lives to amuse themselves? What of them? I suppose to be a revolutionary, one must know and hate-love the past deeply. I admit to becoming sentimental over this and that which has a touch of the antique air to it, and I do occasionally shake the hand of some fellow out of all that dimness behind me. But there is this unavoidable feeling of being fed up to the gills with masterpieces, most of which were not made with the idea that they were going to be masterpieces but out of simple necessity.

The only general use the past has for me is to point out what no longer has to be done (as someone unremembered once said). The past cannot and does not want to be embalmed. I think that it can only be kept living in artists who appear to be spitting in its face. (Historians always like to point out years later how much part of the main stream these ingrates were and how worthless were those toadies who padded up and down before the “monuments,” accompanied as always by the plaudits of other “sensitives” and keepers of the good life.) So I am ruthlessly impatient with anything I seriously attempt which does not shriek violently out of the unknown present, which does not proclaim clearly its modernity as its *raison d’être*. Once this frame of mind is implicit in the origins of any work I do, the final character of that work may correspond to any emotional state whatever. It may be violent and cruel as well, but it can as easily be deathly quiet or suffuse a sweet air of morbid delirium.

I am filled with reverence for nothing except man’s capacity to create what he will thereafter believe to be the truth. The spirit of aesthetic anarchy is our only accurate expression of this great tradition. Invoking the name of this or that “great” will help no artist and praying to a cultural heritage which does not respond to prayers, will only rub more salt into a wound already too painful to bear. We have things to do.

“Anarchy” can now be reevaluated. If we owe allegiance to no one and no institution of Beauty, however sanctified, we are only turning away from what should be left behind: the idea of achievement. This bogey has stifled us too often. The long shadow of Dante or Michelangelo is only a shadow after all, and not the intensity, the electricity that infused their art. We can approach them with understanding and genuine affection when we have made something actual ourselves. Until then we have no right to look them in the eye.

Anarchy now testifies to the healthiest part of us: our fundamental creative powers. It is time that we begin to be, lieve that the philosophy of no man being an island was

thought up by an island and has only rationalized the weak' ness of countless thousands of others who should have tried harder.

We are adventurers. We do not have to "hope" for anything. We are busy dreaming. We are hard and tender with, out nostalgia, fearless ecstatic. We are giving to the past and to the future the present.

1958

New Brunswick, New Jersey

The text of this essay first appeared in *The Anthologist*, Volume XXX, Number 4 (1959),©, 1959 by Rutgers, the State University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and is reprinted here by the kind permission of Rutgers, the State University.

Mushroom

(Presented November 1962, under the auspices of the Center Arts Council of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.)

Not more than a hundred people will assemble at an appointed hour in the fore-chamber of a huge cave, the remainder of which is divided off by a hanging partition of plastic film.

There are several exhibits set up in this area on light card - or folding-tables: a desk model TV set, a tape-recorder, a vacuum, a "Skill" power'saw (or similar hand type), and a large bowl or pot containing a marinade of mushrooms, over which hangs a cluster of the fungi tied around with parsley. An attendant stands at each and there are hanging placards with the products' names above them. The attendants act as salesmen and engage the visitors by delivering rapid-fire pitches about their respective displays, while demonstrating them frequently. For example, the mushroom salesman dressed as a chef will offer small samples in little paper cups, and the tape' recorder man will record the voices (against all the background noise) of those whom he engages in making his pitch.

This goes on for about five to ten minutes, when from the entrance, a crew of three "press photographers" (large signs saying "PRESS" stuck in their hat-bands) rush in, make their way through the throng and approach, at random, different people in order to take their pictures. The flashguns keep on popping as they excitedly pose people near this or that display, asking them to smile, to hold up the product if possi' ble, asking them what they think of it, how they like the cave, thanking them for their help and cooperation, etc., etc. With each shot they present the person with a ticket of some kind telling him that he can pick up his photo next week for a stated sum (at the Art Center, for instance). (And if there are any genuine press reporters, they can be assigned one or more of these parts if

they don't mind.)

After a few minutes of this (enough time for the whole scene to build up to a high temper), the lights go out, all action stops, and on the other side of the plastic film, flashlights are seen moving about accompanied by metallic thuds of barrels, scraping sounds of boxes being moved and low voices. Then the film partition is raised, bright overhead lights go on in this next area and there are five men in work pants stripped to the waist standing at attention at the crowd's edge. They face away, each one holding upright long black poles whose tops are tied with bulbous clumps of rags of the same color. Before them are eight columns (taller than a man), some made of large 50-gallon metal drums and others made up of wooden crates, stood upon one another. These are black as well and are sloppily hung with shredded rags and string. Over each column, resting on its top, is a roughly bent-together ball of wire-mesh, containing a live chicken. (A thin, barely visible nylon wire secures them to the ceiling, though there should be some slack left in the wire.) About fifteen feet behind these columns, a wall of cardboard cartons closes off the space.

The mushroom man blows a piercing blast on a police whistle and the five men level their poles and, one after the other, charge the columns. The barrels and crates crash down with a horrendous concatenation of banging, leaving the caged chickens suddenly hanging in mid-air as their weight jerks their nylon cords taut. As each workman's (one or two) assigned columns topples over, he throws down his pole and furiously starts rolling, pushing and dragging the barrels and boxes to a nearby side room. The noise and action continue frantically until the last barrel and man is out, when all is quiet (except for possibly the cackling of the chickens).

Now the mushroom man slowly pushes his way through the crowd to the arena and with studied patience picks up the poles and carries them with measured steps out to the same side room. He returns in the same manner, this time trailing a very large canvas sack after him on the floor. Approaching the nearest chicken, he proceeds to unhook its cage from the wire and places it in the sack. As he does so he says in a rather mechanical but friendly voice (as though on a broken record) "Hello, Connie! Connie! Connie! Connie! Connie!" etc., etc., repeating the chicken's name until it is in the bag. He does this for each chicken whose name—following Connie—are Phoebe, Clarisse, Paula, Jeannie, Donna, Sally and Molly. He then drags the whole lot out to the side room. Again he returns and walking to the cave wall opposite, he removes a 14 foot long 6" x 6" timber all wound in rags with a large, black mushroom protuberance on an end, this also covered with clumps

of messy frazzled rags. He carries it ceremoniously to the crowd and firmly advancing it into their midst, turns and points to the wall of cartons. His gesture is held meaningfully for a few moments (as some of the photographers now take hold of the battering ram and quietly encourage other spectators to do so). Then the mushroom man turns toward the assembly and if there aren't enough hands ready on the batterer, he solemnly beckons them to do so with a wide, arching gesture. Now, moving to the side and with continued ceremony, he raises his arm, and with the other hand puts the police whistle to his lips. In a slicing motion, his hand snaps down and another blast on the whistle signals the charge. (He leaves quietly.) In a matter of two seconds, the carton wall is penetrated and demolished. The photographers and salesmen who aren't holding on to the battering ram run beside it along with as many of the crowd who will do so spontaneously. As the wall comes down, they all shout back to the remaining people to "Come on!" "Let's go!" "Hurry!" "Quick!" motioning to them until everybody starts wading through and past the boxes. The battering ram is then dropped. There they are faced by a sea of used auto tires strewn over the floor, illuminated by a weak overhead light.

From the far end of the cave (which turns a right angle at the point where the tires lay), a workman comes along and switches on a hanging light bulb that begins to blink on and off monotonously. A bunch of mushrooms similar to those seen earlier hangs near it. The other four workmen follow him out directly and in a businesslike fashion rapidly walk over to the tires and commence rolling and throwing them to the space under the blinking light (this is a distance of about 20 feet). They work fast, not stopping an instant, and impatiently call to the crowd in breathless authoritative voices, "O.K. Come on now, let's get at 'em," "Let's get going," "Hey, you! C'mon! Get these tires moving!" etc. The photographers and salesmen begin to pitch in and here again urge others to help. Soon many people are working and a generally packed action ensues.

The tires begin to form a large mound at the cave's end, and as it nears completion, two of the workmen leave and return carrying a small cot or divan made up with fresh sheets and pillow. They place it securely on top of the mound. One of the other remaining workmen turns out the light where the tires had been after the last tire has been thrown on the heap and the four of them follow the first two out (to another side room here). They all return rolling out barrels and pushing wooden boxes (the ones from before) and with these construct four tall columns that encircle the edge of the mound. The men exit when finished. Now the mushroom man comes in dragging his sack of chickens and proceeds to

hook each one up to visible cords dangling from the ceiling. As each one goes up he says its name once and without emotion.

He goes out and once more two workmen return with the TV set, placing it atop the tires facing the bed, and attach its electric cord to a socket in the blinking light, turning on its picture but not the sound. They go out again and this time come back with the tape recorder which is similarly plugged in, but not turned on. (Both of these should be put up with dispatch.) They again leave promptly, and for a few moments, there in the blinking light is this unbelievable scene of tires, bed, clucking chickens, mushroom cluster, barrel-and-box columns, tape-recorder and TV set.

But then far in the distance, coming from the cave's entrance, humming a langorous melody to herself, now and then inaudible, a very pretty young woman dressed only in a sheer, white nightgown threads sexily over the boxes and through the crowd as though in no way aware of anyone. She goes to the tire heap, ascends, lies down luxuriously on the bed, rises up, plucks a mushroom, eats it, and then turns on the tape machine, lies down once more and gazes at the TV. As the tape begins, the sound heard is the actual recording made earlier of the crowd listening to the salesman and being interviewed by the photographers.

She lies there for a while, dreamily looking and listening, propped up on an elbow. Back at the front of the cave, a commotion is heard, doors slammed, voices excitedly asking, "Where is she?" "Which way did she go?" "Who is it?" "Did you see her come in?" etc., etc. Then there is running and shouting "Here!" "This way!" "Down here!" and the photographers (who have drifted off silently from the crowd when the mound was completed) come rushing through the people to the woman and start shooting pictures with their flashguns. They yell for her to "Look this way, please, Miss!" "Smile, please!" "We want a good shot, now!" "A bit more cheese, Miss!" "Thank you, Miss!" "Thanks, Miss, that was great!" etc., and depart as quickly as they came in.

She begins to laugh to herself in short little bursts, low at first but very gradually getting a little louder. The mushroom man re-enters, stately as before, carrying a huge pot with a soup ladle dangling from it. He climbs up to the girl, sits dignifiedly but intimately on the bed next to her and reaches into the pot from which he draws out a mushroom. He offers it to her. Still laughing quietly (it has begun to take on a slightly insane tone) she accepts and eats it, her laughs getting mixed up in her chewing. He studies her intently and reaches into the pot again and pulls out a handful which she takes and stuffs into her

mouth. He studies her and this time scoops out a larger handful and squashes it over her mouth, she in turn helping with her hands. His manner begins to change now into a sort of maniacal seizure. He reaches for more mushrooms and smears them over her face as she feebly helps. Then with the ladle he scoops out some more and pours them, repeating this over and over, faster and faster. The woman's arms now hang limply over the sides of the bed, and her laughter is shrill and quite mad. The man is now viciously flinging the ladle's contents at her until finally, he lifts up the pot and turning it upside down, hurls the last mushrooms at her head. He leaves abruptly taking the pot and ladle with him.

The woman's laughter is weaker now but continues with longer pauses until at last it peters out. She lies there for a moment, slowly rises, turns off the tape-recorder (which has been playing all the while), climbs down the tires and as languorously as when she came in, pushes over, one by one, the columns of the barrels and boxes. As the last of them crashes to the floor, she walks out slowly, following the same path as before. The pulsing light and changing, blurry pictures on the TV screen, remains.

After a time, a salesman in the crowd who is nearest the weak light that had lit up the sea of tires initially, turns it on, then walks to the next brighter lights closer to the entrance and so on 'til all the lights are on. The other salesmen begin to follow and so does the crowd until everyone has left the way they came in.

1964

Paper

(A Happening Prepared for the University of California at Berkeley, March 1964)

Setting

Street level of a three-tiered parking lot opposite residence halls. *(During the two days before the performance, each participant crumples sheets of newspaper and strews it over the eastern half of the lot.)* A record player is near the center and ten metal barrels are placed in line along the western end.

Events

- 1 ————— Twist gal arrives, puts on rock and roll record, dances.

- 2 ————— Sweepers (25, male) with brooms arrive, sweep paper mechanically in a line towards western end.

Barrel men (10) arrive and slowly tip barrels end-over-end toward sweepers and when wall is reached, reverse direction.

Gal twists.

- 3 ————— Cars (25) drive in at half-minute intervals, bright lights on, moving slowly like hearses; each dumps a body (woman) which rolls to sweepers and becomes part of trash line.

Cars drive off.

Barrels boom.

Gal twists.

- 4 ————— Cars return, moving faster, find a parking spot on west side, screech to a stop.

Drivers jump out, crouching, run wildly to another car, yelling, "Hey! Hey!" get into next car. Repeat this twice (third time they are drivers' own cars). Running steps echoing, car doors slamming.

Barrels boom.

Gal twists.

- 5 ————— Drivers wait one minute, lean on horns for one steady minute.

Barrels stop.

Bodies in the paper jump up, fight violently with sweepers, who succumb.

Gal twists.

- 6 ————— Barrel people get up on barrels and begin to twist.

Women begin to twist also, move toward barrel people, viciously pull them down to the ground.

The women load trash into barrels.

Truck comes in.

Gal twists.

- 7 ————— Women and truck driver load barrels and brooms onto truck, then get on themselves. They drive off gaily waving, calling, "Bye! Bye! G'Bye!"

Gal twists.

- 8 ————— One minute of silence except for twist gal.
- 9 ————— Twist gal turns up volume, glides to each fallen body, kneels, kisses it tenderly on the ups, then walks away.
- 10 ————— Cars start motors, one after the other, drive over to the bodies, put them into the cars and drive off.

March, 1964

Interruption

(A Happening sponsored by the Student Activities Board and Creative Arts Society of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, May 10th and 11th, 1967)

1st DAY

9 AM-5 PM

Marchers circle slowly, endlessly, silently carrying absolutely blank signs and placards. Masses of sit-ins everywhere, on paths, in dorms, classrooms, cafeterias ... doing, saying nothing.

12 AM-
5 P.M.

Women hang enormous quantities of clothes from lines in cafeteria.

6:30 PM

Men collect women's clothes, bury them in huge construction pit. Women cheer, rock band blasting. Two to three strobes out of phase... big party in pit.

2nd DAY

10 AM-
5 PM

Women's lie-in, bodies sprawling throughout halls and corridors of Humanities Building. Notes, crumpled newspapers, old textbooks, telephone book pages, brought by men all day, strewn around women, burying them. Women eat, stare at ceiling, say nothing. Canyons of debris. Dial-A-Prayer regularly over Public Address system. Ommm of fog horn every 60 seconds. Huge sweep-in at end, men sitting, quiet ly watching.

6:30 on

Lots of women packed into cars spread around area, blinking lights. Clusters of men zero onto each car, whisper strange things through small openings in windows. One man is invited into each car. They drive off in different directions, beeping horns, rock playing on radios, for at least a mile. Cars pull over to roadside, warning flare is lit, tire is changed. Cars proceed to shopping centers. Man goes in to buy some bit of women's clothing, women giving advice all along. Cars drive back, men bury new clothes in pit, everybody else screaming and banging on objects . . . enormous noise. After last bit is buried, sudden silence.

* * * *

Massive sit-in as before. Men and women sitting in pairs, facing. Flares burning next to each couple. Silence till flares burn out.

Spring, 1967

