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Ecoart in action: activities, case studies and provocations for classroom and community.

GEFFEN, A., ROSENTHAL, A., FREMANTLE, C. and RAHMANI, A.

2022

Audience: artists and students

Number of Participants: 5

Duration: 1 month and 2 days

Themes: art forms (performance), fostering awareness, place-based learning, more than human (land and natural cycles)

Calendar Variations

Anne Douglas & Chris Fremantle

OVERVIEW

The Work of Allan Kaprow (1927-2006). Allan Kaprow was interested in blurring the boundaries between art and life on the premise that “Life is more artlike than art”.¹ He drew artists and participants into noticing and exploring life's spontaneous moments of sociability such as meeting a stranger through sharing a practical task. Where we commonly invest value in the completion of a task, Kaprow invested value in the quality of encounter that is created between people through shared activities.

Kaprow developed events by writing a set of instructions - a poem or riddle to be figured out through participation. The instructions allude to everyday activities in a very particular sense. David Antin, a life long friend and fellow artist, comments that Kaprow’s activities were undertaken freely by volunteers for no other purpose than to be experienced and reflected upon.² Kaprow closely followed Dewey’s ideas of art as experience, the notion that all experience carries an aesthetic quality.³ Kaprow also almost always focused on the absurd expressed with painstaking precision.⁴ His approach was based on the assumption that if the artist created the right kind of conditions, based in constraint as well as freedom, then participants would be enabled to enter into an experience as art. The written plans told participants what to do, but never how to do it.

RATIONALE

Pedagogical Significance to Art and Ecology. Kaprow’s aesthetic takes form through an encounter between people and in relation to the material world. Kaprow understood that by creating feedback between individuals, materials, time, and experience, such an encounter could potentially be transformative. *Calendar* effectively ‘scored’ the enabling conditions for us to focus minds and imagination on creating experience by paying attention and letting go of the kind of judgmentalism that denigrates one approach over another.

Kaprow’s instructions allowed us to engage in values distinct from the instrumental, and where experience is itself rather than subsumed by a future goal. The quality of experience that Kaprow sought is not dependent upon realizing the score in any particular way. It would be detrimental if our particular response in 2010 became in any sense ‘instituted’ or conventional. The group working with this activity must find their own responses. For Kaprow the point was to figure out a shared activity as an aesthetic and artistic experience. It is limited only by the imaginations of participants and their capacity to agree on a course of action that is meaningful in their experience.

METHODOLOGY

Using Kaprow’s Instructions for an Activity. In 2010 Professor Anne Douglas invited five individuals involved in research at Gray's School of Art to give their attention to *Calendar*, an activity composed in 1971 by Alan Kaprow. The group included PhDs and “associates” exploring

¹ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. ed. Jeff Kelley (California and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993/2003).

² Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004)

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1934/2002).

⁴ Jeff Kelley, *Childsplay* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), pp. xvi-xvii.

the changing place of the artist in public life.

“Calendar”

planting a square of turf
amid grass like it

planting another
amid grass a little less green

planting four more squares
in places progressively drier

planting a square of dry turf
amid grass like it

planting another
amid grass a little less dry

planting four more squares
in places progressively greener

Activity, A.K., California Institute of the Arts, November 2, 1971⁵

Anne's intention was three-fold:

1. To understand how to work together as a group.
2. To test whether and in what ways there were shared understandings.
3. To understand Kaprow's use of simple instructions as a way to enter into a shared experience.

Participants in Anne's research were invited to participate in and enact the following:

Act 1

Duration: one month

Site: Invitees/participants work at their chosen sites

Please take Kaprow's *Calendar* score and create a drawing. You may define drawing whatever way you like. You may interpret the instructions in whatever way you like, with whatever materials and sources, through sketches and/or resolved pieces.

Act 2

Duration: two days

Site: The Barn, Banchory, Scotland

We will enact the score together using turf of different degrees of green and dryness, working closely with Kaprow's ideas. Mark Hope, co founder and director of The Barn, is supporting this project with a site of 6m by 6m outside the cafe area. Our experience and preliminary findings from Act 1 will be shared and discussed on the first day in preparation for a second day of shared activity. This shared response will be arrived at through discussion, informed by our earlier explorations and discoveries from Act 1⁶.

Calendar presented us with degrees of freedom and of constraint. On the one hand, we understood

⁵ Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. ed. Jeff Kelley (California and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993/2003), 120

⁶ Kathleen Coessens and Anne Douglas, *Calendar Variations* (Banchory, Scotland: Woodend Barn Publishing, 2011).

that there was no correct procedure for interpreting the instructions. Nonetheless our initial default position involved discussions with turf farmers and gardeners about how to vary the conditions and appearance of turf. On the other hand, the instructions within *Calendar* are very precise and to many of us, they formed a kind of riddle that we needed to decode.

We slowly came to understand the freedom that the score offered to interpret “turf”, “green to dry” and “dry to green” in relation to our own physical, cultural, and individual circumstances in Scotland. We sustained a wavering belief that it was worthwhile to do so.

Our initial efforts as individuals (Act 1) resulted in a wide range of approaches to drawing.

- Georgina rewrote the score in terms of drawing as mark making with pencil and paper rather than turf and shovel, interpreting material shifts of green to dry in tonal shifts of light to dark.
- Anne followed this new score creating a set of drawings that explored how ‘squares’ might emerge and dissolve to the rhythm of the original work: one, two then four more and then reversed, allowing the score to come alive in a different register, a process of deeply reading the original.
- Reiko pursued the time and event structure of a calendar, forging connections between the score and her previous work in ecology, articulated as a process of redrawing. The states from green to dry to green represented the nature of temporality in the growth of living things. Her redrawing enabled her to reach new insights and a new ecological proposal.
- Chris made two drawings of a square of turf, one dug up from his garden in Scotland and another from his father’s garden in the United States. Both involved taking the turf out of its normal context. At the end of each drawing he returned the turf to the ground.
- Yuan created a series of six pen and ink drawings that followed her own movement. These became meditations on the politics of growth. In what way does something grow, she asked, below, above, or alongside others? Does it grow noticed or unnoticed, suppressed or dominated by competing lives and interests?

These results exposed considerable differences in aesthetic approach. It came as a surprise that a group of individuals who shared a field of research, could so radically differ in their understandings of art and aesthetics. In some sense this revelation left us exposed as people, confronting our differences as a small social group. We had unwittingly formed a microcosm of life itself: a group of individuals undertaking a joint venture with no sense of how to bridge the distances between them. Our approaches to drawing were material, visceral evidence of this distance.

To perform Act 2, we met together at the Barn. As a semi-rural, multi-arts centre in North East Scotland surrounded by fields, allotments and a wild garden, the Barn communities are mindful of human relations with the environment. Moving back through Kaprow’s instructions again, we started to feel the inappropriateness of imposing a work of art on the site, either by digging or planting. In exploring our surroundings, one of us noticed that the long grass in one of the adjacent fields changed colour as we walked through it. We quickly arrived at the decision to perform the instructions by walking, treading single lines folding the grass down or sometimes walking two, three, and four abreast to thicken our imprint. This felt good, a way of developing a work that not only depended upon our collaboration to exist, but one that was afforded by the site’s particular conditions. It would be a temporary intervention.

We focused on how to create a square precisely by walking as well as how to register degrees of “green” to “dry”. After a couple of trial attempts, achieving the “squares” felt effortless, freeing us in a remarkable and totally unanticipated way.

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Reiko Goto, Chu Chu Yuan, Janet McEwan, Georgina Barney, Jono Hope, Fiona Hope, Anne

Douglas, Chris Fremantle, *Calendar Variations*, 2010. Grass; Photo credit: On the Edge research

CONCLUSION

What did we learn and how? We realized that the true purpose underpinning Kaprow's activity was not to rationalize or homogenize difference but to acknowledge that multiple potentially contradictory experiences are integral to, and in fact formative of, social experience. We had benefited from extending Kaprow's instructions by creating two stages: the first stage gave individuals the opportunity to become familiar with Kaprow's thinking, to play with possible meanings of their own. We needed to become familiar individually with the instructions without losing its inherent provocation and absurdity. In this way we built confidence and prepared for the challenge of negotiating a shared response without competing and/or withdrawing. We felt any shared response needed to emerge thoughtfully between us. This pace was a process of sensitizing, enabling us to recognize Kaprow's aesthetic in our own experience.

BIOs

Anne Douglas is an artist researcher exploring the changing nature of art in public life through a program of work, On the Edge research that has evolved over two decades. Douglas' recent publications focus on issues such as artistic leadership, participation in the arts and the poetics of public art practices. www.ontheedgeresearch.org

Chris Fremantle is a researcher and producer in art, ecology and health. He and Anne Douglas collaborated over 20 years in research and critical writing. He established ecoartscotland as a platform for research and practice in 2010. <http://chris.fremantle.org>