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Dada and the absurd: pedagogies of art and survival.

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DADA AND THE ABSURD: PEDAGOGIES OF ART AND SURVIVAL

Anne Douglas

Unlearning in a culture in crisis

In the early 1970s Allan Kaprow, artist, theorist and educator, wrote three essays entitled *The Education of the Un-artist I, II and III*. From the late 50s Kaprow had been instrumental in the development of what he called 'Happenings', and was part of the Fluxus movement, which had taken up the mantle of Dada. By way of example, one of his pieces took the form of a textual 'instruction' which read:

CHARITY
Buying piles of old clothes
Washing them in all-night laundromats
Giving them back to used clothes stores

With his Happenings, Kaprow suggested that artists should open up to life beyond the art establishment. Writing in 1971 he stated with some irony:

Sophistication of consciousness in the arts today is so great that it is hard not to assert as matters of fact

that the LM mooncraft is patently superior to all contemporary sculptural effort;

that the broadcast verbal exchange between Houston's Manned Spacecraft Center and the Apollo II astronauts was better than contemporary poetry

that with their sound distortions, beeps, static and communication breaks, such exchanges also surpassed the electronic music of the concert halls;

...

that...etc.,etc.,... non art is more art than Art art.

(Kaprow 1993: 97-98, original bold type)

Kaprow not only taught in art schools throughout his career but his practice, particularly in the form of Happenings, had an important pedagogical dimension and his writing continues to be recognised as a key contribution to practice and pedagogy alike.

Kaprow conceived his idea of the 'un-artist' at a moment when change was occurring in the USA at all levels: political, military, economic and educational. What he called 'Art art', in his view, was dying. It had lost its relevance and special status. It had lost audiences and had turned in on itself to the point that the art of the time only addressed the work of other artists. On the one hand artists were only too keen to preserve Art art's conventions, while also growing weary of them. On the other hand, Art artists had created such a hyperconsciousness of art in its everyday surroundings – possibly in response to Duchamp's

ready-mades¹ – that everything and anything could be admitted as a work of art. ‘As Marshall McLuhan once wrote’, Kaprow (1993: 103) continued, “‘Art is what you can get away with’”. This was a moment when artists needed to change jobs, to ‘drop out’ and open up to life, blurring the boundaries between life and art.

In his three-part essay *The Education of the Un-artist*, Kaprow drew attention to an epistemological crisis that revealed a still deeper crisis of society and culture – a crisis that was being reinforced in the educational practices of the time.

The nation’s education system must take much of the responsibility for perpetuating and championing what’s wrong with us: our values, the good and bads, the dos and don’ts... ‘Work hard and you’ll get ahead’ is a guide not only for students but for educators. ‘Ahead’ means being head man...The threat of failure and dismissal for not being strong hangs over every individual from college president to school superintendent on down. (Kaprow 1993: 119-120)

At the heart of Kaprow’s concept of the un-artist lay the need to reinstate the transformative power of education in place of a system that was designed to replicate, in the life of the child, the values and mores of an adult world mired in competition and progress.

Writing some fifty years later, a number of educational philosophers including Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, Gert Biesta and Tim Ingold, mirror Kaprow’s critique in commenting on a similar crisis of education in Europe.

The recent document of the European Commission on ‘Rethinking Education’ (EC-document 2012) does not hesitate to put the emphasis right from the start on ‘delivering the right skills for employment’ and on ‘increasing the efficiency and inclusiveness of our education and training institutions’..., the starting point being that education is about ‘boost[ing] growth and competitiveness’. (Masschelein and Simons 2015: 147)

What might an education look like that keeps social and political assumptions of progress at a distance? Masschelein and Simons (2015: 157) imagine education as a site of renewal, a place to invigorate, rethink and reconnect generations in the ongoing creation of a common world. They closely follow the thinking of political theorist Hannah Arendt, in her essay of 1954 ‘The Crisis in Education’ (Arendt 2006: 170-93), in advocating a deliberate slowing down of educational processes. Unlike Kaprow, however, they proposed a separate, protected space for education, free from the urgencies and needs of the world, in which younger generations can prepare to make themselves active and at home in the world of adults.

Today, more than ever, constructions of progress are felt in society as an existential threat. Who would have imagined even a few months ago that the hypermobility on which the whole global economy had apparently depended, could have been brought almost to a complete halt by a tiny fragment of matter invisible to the human eye in the form of a virus (Latour 2020)? Sudden upheavals such as the current climate emergency challenge not just

what we understand, but the way understanding evolves through experience, skill and the sharing of knowledge. In the current crisis we need to come to terms with the disjuncture between an education that perpetuates and champions all that is wrong with us, and an education that helps hold us together in our common but changeable world. It was this disjuncture that Kaprow wanted to inhabit through absurd art.

Along with other established artists such as Joseph Beuys, Kaprow was part of the second wave Fluxus movement that sought to draw Dada from its roots as avant-garde art into everyday life. Kaprow transposed and adapted Dada-ist methods to his project of blurring art and life, aiming to address not just artists but the crisis in education as a whole (Kaprow 1993: 110-111). This makes his work particularly relevant to the present. What can the absurd in art contribute to education and learning in cultures of crisis? In what ways does it diverge from other experiential and experimental approaches to education and the values that underpin them, such as those proposed by Arendt, Masschelein and Simons, Biesta and Ingold, among others? Can the absurd provide ways to challenge the managerialist values that overwhelm content and creativity in current pedagogy?

Knowing and the absurd

Kaprow began as an art historian and became an avant-garde artist. The push and pull between a relatively secure sense of the past from the history of art and a volatile present was rooted in Kaprow's personal experience. He was writing at the height of the Vietnam War and the Protest Movement in the USA. As both an artist and an educator, his concept of educating the un-artist points to a refusal to be trapped in past knowledge while using this history as leverage to move forward, to act in the chaos of the fast-changing life that surrounded him. Kaprow's thinking was deeply influenced by Marcel Duchamp and also John Cage, both of whom sought to embed art in everyday life through radical Dada-ist experimentation. In education, Kaprow followed the pragmatism of John Dewey, especially his 1934 essay on 'Art as Experience' (Dewey 1987), which had focused on the experiential nature of learning. However, for Kaprow the challenge of becoming an un-artist was never limited to individual experience. It could, in the right circumstances, bring individuals together to share in a process that had the potential to transform society and its institutions. The absurd offered Kaprow a clear alternative to existing pedagogical approaches and the values that underpinned them.

How do we see absurdity in Kaprow's work? *Project Other Ways* (1969) offers a clear example. In this project, Kaprow was invited – along with Herbert Kohl, a prominent figure in progressive education – to support the introduction of art into the public school system in Berkeley, California. The programme, funded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, was aimed at primary and secondary school pupils. The Berkeley Unified Schools District hosted the experiment (Allen 2016). This was a time not only of civil unrest but also when education was narrowly defined by the knowledge of reading, writing, maths and community studies. The pupils, a group of 11-12-year-old 6th graders in the final year of elementary school, were branded as 'unteachable illiterates heading for permanent

societal rejection'. They had been issued with cheap polaroid cameras for the afternoon to snap anything they liked (Kaprow 1995:152).

Kaprow wondered why these pupils were so interested in words, especially rude ones. This was not what they had been led to expect. To address this, he made a surprising and undoubtedly controversial proposal: girls would enter men's toilets and the boys, women's toilets, and they would take photos of all the rude words and drawings they found. Kohl and Kaprow then built on this first tactic by lining the shop front where the project was sited with paper, and invited the pupils to make whatever graffiti they liked. The result was a rich collection of participants' names, images and stories that were eventually expressed in full sentences. The project then entered a second phase, in response to the first, in which the group was given a set of remaindered early 'Dick and Jane' readers to rewrite and re-illustrate. The pupils' work revealed their sensitivity to the (principally racial) stereotypes of the original text and its illustrations. This opened up frank discussions and possibilities for revision, not least including the reclassification of the pupils within the school system.

'What can the un-artist do when [Art] art is left behind?' Kaprow (1993: 110) asked in the second of his three 'un-artist' essays. His answer took him back to Duchamp and his ready-mades, in which art mimicked life and life mimicked art. Duchamp had posed a riddle to a public audience that intentionally disrupted any sense of what art might be. For example, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1964) is a common snow shovel, exhibited as artwork. In a striking gesture, it draws real life into the museum, not least through the title which focuses on the everyday encounter and attendant risks of shovelling snow rather than on the object itself. If the institutional framing of a snow shovel as an artwork is absurd, it revealed an even deeper absurdity in life, drawing attention to the elaborate systems that human beings build around value. Here, Duchamp playfully confused the categories art and life, effectively questioning and reconfiguring the relevance of the one to the other.

Kaprow and Kohl copied Duchamp's method, applying it in a new way, not to material objects, but to everyday institutions, processes and operations. They worked with mimesis, in this case by encouraging the copying of graffiti as found in the public spaces of urban Berkeley. They engaged explicit forms of transgression, such as visiting public toilets to collect creative ideas and experiences. The resulting work reversed roles: the pupils had something important to say, to teach the adults, and the teachers learned what that was within a framework which supported communication between generations. Such reversals are frequent in the art of absurdity: the audience, not the artist, becomes the protagonist at the core of an activity, but under direction.

Play and the Absurd

At first [children] enjoy school, often beg to go...But by the first or second grade, Dick and Jane discover that learning and winning a place in the world are not child's play at all but hard, often dreadfully dull work. (Kaprow 1993: 120)

Kaprow focused on the importance of play. If art was a practice of imitating a world that is continuously imitating itself, as Duchamp's example of the snow shovel suggests, then it would not be enough for artists to simply create art, thus collapsing the tension. The real challenge lay in artists leading others in experiences that touch a deeper sense of what it might mean to be human, and feeding this back to energise the institution of art. The copy is never the same. A gap opens up in which something new emerges: new knowledge, wellbeing or surprise. In *Project Other Ways* the pupils copied what they had found, but the work did not stop there. The interplay between the activity that Kaprow and Kohl had set, the pupils' responses and the context in which all the participants were working, opened up new understandings and social potential. It was this kind of gap that Kaprow increasingly exploited to create a shift from art as a revered object or artefact to art as a form of action and experience that could be liberating. It was important not to take the process too seriously, to engage 'with gusto, wit, fun; it's to be play' (Kaprow 1993: 113).

Kaprow set about designing quite particular, carefully constructed opportunities for participation. He created scores for activities that often framed a kind of riddle in Duchamp's sense. These were apparently pointless activities. His unique contribution to *Project Other Ways* was *Six Ordinary Happenings*, scores for activities staged between 7th March and 23rd May, 1969. *Charity* invited participants to buy second hand clothes and wash them before returning them to the original store. *Fine!* involved leaving cars in public spaces until the police, who became unwitting participants in the experiment, started to issue fines. The pupils mimicked the actions of the police, writing reports and taking photos of the tickets and sending these with the fine to the authorities. *Giveaway* left piles of crockery in the streets and documented what was left the next day. Each instruction took the form of a 'score poem', beautifully arranged within a poster, with an open invitation to meet to anyone wishing to participate (Figure 9.1).

Figure 9.1: Allan Kaprow, *Six Ordinary Happenings*, 7th March – 23rd May, 1969. (Permission to use this image has not been obtained, but the image can be found at https://web.archive.org/web/20240329104059/https://specificobject.com/objects/info.cfm?object_id=20774 archived 29.03.2024)

Kaprow's activities were part of everyday life, but stripped of their purpose and use they became disruptive and even farcical. Kaprow imagined education through absurd art as a way of playing at life in preparation for participating in it, both imaginatively and with humour.

In a discussion of Kaprow's work, poet and fellow artist David Antin commented:

Absurdity is not a formal characteristic and is not part of a self-referential reading. It derives from the way a given action, situation or utterance fits, or more precisely fails to fit, dislocates or disrupts some conventional stable cultural or social understandings. (Antin 2004: xvi – xvii)

Antin addresses here the wider question of what the absurd in art can contribute to education and learning. Human systems of value shape our lives and beliefs. Even though such systems have no inherent meaning, we hold onto them. Kaprow's activities confront the futility embedded in everyday life, but not in a destructive, nihilistic way. Play and humour reassert the joy, pleasure and spontaneity of life. Consciously echoing Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915-23), Kaprow concluded his second essay on the education of the un-artist with a word on play: 'As a four letter word in a society given to games, *play* does what all dirty words do: it strips bare the myth of culture by its artists, even' (Kaprow 1993: 126).

Kaprow got to the heart of the pedagogical intention and function of absurd art by building on Duchamp, acknowledging the past and teasing open the gap between past and present in ways that were vivid and unexpected. Irony and the absurd offer a safe space in which to face reality so that our deep attachment to particular habits of thought and action can be perceived in new ways. In appreciating that these habits are relative to other alternatives, and in attempting to see what matters, we may relax our hold on one set of values over another, and their hold on us, thus opening up to new possibilities.

Distinctive pedagogies for cultures in crisis: Kaprow and Arendt

It is instructive to compare Kaprow's perspective on the crisis in education with the apparently contradictory perspective put forward some fifteen years previously by Arendt. Arendt (2006: 91) attributed the crisis specifically to an absence of authority – of those authentic and indisputable experiences common to all. Yet in Kaprow's approach, authority – in the literal sense of civic responsibility – is exposed not just to question but to a degree of subversion, as for example in his *Happening, Fine!* Arendt sought through education to protect new life in a space (the school) that is detached from everyday life, whereas Kaprow wanted to harness everyday life as an educational opportunity. Arendt was particularly critical of child-centred approaches in the progressive education of 1950s America, and her criticism extended to the very idea of play that was so central to Kaprow's project.

These differences are important for understanding the place of absurdity in pedagogy. Pivotal to Arendt's perspective was the idea of natality. We are born 'unmasked' into the world and, unlike individuals of other species, we are ill-equipped at the beginning of life to survive. We depend on culture. We need education to reconcile ourselves to reality and to make ourselves at home in the world (Arendt 1994: 308). It is adults' responsibility to prepare children for the world into which they have been brought. To be able to assume this responsibility, they need – besides confidence, skill and bearing – a degree of authority in the form of knowledge and understanding from the past. Authority in this sense has nothing to do with authoritarianism or power. The relationship between adult and child is dynamic, open to complexity and misunderstanding, and constantly changing. Arendt sought to protect the child and his or her education from the world and interestingly, the world from the child, in order for both to be free to come to terms with and to renew the past in the present.

Conservatism, in the sense of conservation, is the essence of educational activity, whose task is always to cherish and protect something – the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new. (Arendt 2006: 188)

Arendt proposed that history, following Herodotus, is our way of saving ourselves from the futility that comes with oblivion – quite unlike Kaprow, for whom confronting a sense of futility is fundamental to the absurd in art. It is the task of the historiographer and poet, says Arendt, to make something lasting out of what we remember (Arendt 2006: 41, 44). Education in society is a function of our living together in groups, a way of keeping life going in part through handing on such tradition or historical knowledge and in part through active, critical engagement with thinking and understanding. To understand in the Greek world meant to look at the same world from another's standpoint, 'to see the same in very different and frequently opposing aspects' (Arendt 2006: 51-52). It is not easy to navigate the tension between communicating knowledge of the past and supporting a plurality of perspectives in lived experience. It depends on our capacity to think or imagine a world that is not an outcome of our manipulations and interpretations but exists in its own right and in dialogue with us.

In education human parents assume responsibility for both ... the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world. These two responsibilities do not by any means coincide; they may indeed come into conflict with each other. (Arendt 2006: 182)

Arendt's critique of child-centred learning extended to the importance of play that pragmatism had championed. This critique pivots around three key points. Firstly, a world in which children are autonomous either throws the individual child back on himself or subjects him to an even more tyrannical authority, that of the majority or a peer group of other children. This situation renders the child helpless and out of contact with the adult, and vice versa: the adult, Arendt (2006: 177) laments, 'can only tell him to do what he likes and then prevent the worst from happening'.² Secondly, in a learning-oriented culture a teacher is actively discouraged from passing on the particular knowledge of a subject. And thirdly, a literal interpretation of the basic tenet of pragmatism – that you can only really know what you have done and experienced yourself – would reduce teaching to the inculcation of skills, learning how to do things at the cost of acquiring the rudiments of the standard curriculum. Substituting doing for learning, playing for working, would undermine childhood as a preparation for adulthood. Focusing entirely on the private world of the individual child, it would make it impossible for the school to serve as a conduit between private and public domains, and to prepare the child to contribute to life in common.

Kaprow and Arendt appear to agree on the importance, in education, of developing curiosity in the individual and on its generative potential to give form to a common world. Both acknowledge the importance for understanding of encountering a plurality of different experiences and points of view. Both open up the philosophical question of the function of education in society and stress the importance of learning from the past. They do so however through quite different idioms and modes of address: Kaprow through art and

Arendt through discourse. Kaprow creates a form: a score for an activity and the opportunity to work with this score in life. It is a frame that suspends the chaos of life just long enough for us to be struck by what is at stake. Arendt works within a rhetorical tradition, which arrived at positions through the dynamic of argument and counter-argument. It is important to acknowledge that as a political theorist, Arendt was concerned not to offer a different form of pedagogy, but to address the question of what education means to public life, to survival.

Far from isolating the individual child, Kaprow developed activities that intentionally mimicked life as a social experience. They functioned as a structured and critical tool which worked in the immediate space of uncertainty while nonetheless creating an interval that enables an individual, whether child or adult, to function in society, not by fitting into the given circumstances but through an altogether different quality of awareness, namely a sense of irony. Kaprow's activities confronted the arbitrary and ambiguous in human life, opening this up to scrutiny, facing the inherent absurdity of social and cultural institutions. This was clearly evident in his questioning of the status of the Berkeley pupils as members of an 'underclass'.

On reflection, Arendt is criticising the way children become isolated in pragmatism's particular construction of play; she is not criticising play *itself* as a pedagogical tool. Indeed Masschelein and Simons (2013: 40), who closely follow Arendt's thinking, argue that the school is the playground of society in so far as something from society is 'brought into play' or 'made into play' as an object of study, so that it can be explored, engaged with but not put to use in any literal sense. Without play, there is arguably no room for creativity nor any possibility for the renewal that both Arendt and Kaprow regarded as the core function of education. Yet in contrast to Arendt's insistence on school as a separate space, Kaprow worked directly from the spaces of everyday life, albeit while involving himself in the Berkeley School System. The *Six Ordinary Happenings* created a tension between normal life in the street, laundromat and parking lot, and its transgressive disruption by means of purposeless activities. Once one's eyes are opened to the absurd in life, one can take responsibility for what has gone wrong and try to change direction.

Facing a double crisis in art and art education

The specific character and dynamic of absurd art within pedagogy raises important questions. Who or what teaches in absurd art? How might such teaching be carried out?

Gert Biesta is an educational theorist whose thinking is quite closely aligned with that of Masschelein and Simons and, like them, he also draws on the writings of Arendt. One of his points of reference is an early performance work by the artist Joseph Beuys (Biesta 2017). Beuys's work entitled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965) addresses the difficulty of explaining things, a key function of education.

Figure 9.2: Joseph Beuys *Die Eröffnung. How to explain pictures to a dead hare.*
November 1965.

(Permission to use this image has not been obtained, but the image can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20231203112634/https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/434.1997.9/> archived 03.12.2023)

Imagine a small gallery in Düsseldorf, Germany, filled with framed pictures. Beuys locks the gallery doors from the inside leaving the audience on the outside to experience the performance only through the windows. His bald head is covered in gold leaf and honey. One foot is covered in felt, the other in lead. He holds a dead hare, with whom he appears to be in conversation, moving first across the floor of the gallery and then from picture to picture (Figure 9.2). What he actually says is inaudible to the audience outside. The space is quite confined and from time to time, Beuys stops in the centre and steps over a dead fir tree lying on the floor. The performance lasts for three hours, at which point the public are let into the room. Beuys sits at the entrance cradling the dead hare with his back to the onlookers.³

Why has Biesta drawn on this particular work to rethink education? It is worth remembering that Beuys conceived of his practice as a way of teaching. Writing half a century after Beuys's performance, Biesta explains that the current crisis in education is double, marked by both the disappearance of art from society and the disappearance of education from the theory and practice of art. On the one hand, art is valued only for its instrumental importance, such as to develop skills of empathy and sociability. On the other hand, the emphasis on art's 'expressivism', the valuing of unique voice and identity, has undermined its educational function in imparting existing knowledge and experience and in nurturing a world in common. Biesta (2017: 37) draws on Arendt's idea that education is a process of bringing children 'into dialogue with the world', a process of turning their attention towards the world and arousing their desire to be both in and with it, but not at its centre. This moment, he argues, kindles the desire in us to learn.

The process is gentle, an act of care. Biesta is particularly concerned with the process of teaching, of drawing attention to something important, and he sees in Beuys's work this particular characteristic. Beuys's performance aligns with Rudolf Arnheim's (1986: 17) analysis of the difference between a performance and an everyday act: the cyclist and trapeze artist share the same task and exercise similar skills of balancing the body in relation to gravity and movement, but the artist does this in a way that makes manifest what is important to understand, enabling us to 'watch intuition at work' through a different kind of skill – the skill to communicate affectively. Is this particular work, then, a simple mirroring of life in art, in Arnheim's sense, or is there more to it? What of Beuys's strange choice of materials, felt on one foot, lead on another; the honey and gold illuminating and transforming his head? What is the meaning of his upending of the ritual of a gallery opening, leaving the audience outside the gallery for three hours on a cold November night to peer through the windows onto a scene that they can experience only minimally?

For Beuys, performance was an intentionally transformative, sociopolitical act. While the gallery is full of pictures in the time-honoured manner of an exhibition, there is something bizarre in the way Beuys walks the dead hare like a puppet across the gallery floor, and holds it up to each picture, whispering inaudibly. Dialogue is normally dependent upon an exchange between two living beings. Education is about life, about growth through participation and instilling a degree of trust in established mores and protocols. Here one interlocutor is dead, but treated as if alive. The whole thing is more like a shamanic ritual than a conventional lesson, while consciously mimicking the latter. It is deliberately obscure and disruptive, reminiscent of Kaprow's use of graffiti-strewn toilets as sites of learning, and reversing the roles of teachers and learners.

The element of the absurd in this performance is barely acknowledged in Biesta's analysis. Yet it is crucial, I believe, to the quality of experience and provocation that Beuys intended with the work – that is, to question by transgressing normal behaviours, in this of case gallery going.

Dada and Absurd Art, then and now

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to draw more deeply on the history of the absurd in Dada. The writer and poet André Breton, a champion of Dada, described it as 'the marvellous faculty of attaining two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience, drawing them together and drawing a spark from their contact' (cited in Adès 1974: 30). Dada is a very particular form of art. Not all art functions in this way. In the early twentieth century Dada took the form of unlikely material combinations such as Duchamp's ready-mades. It introduced an anti-aesthetic out of a need to disorient art and public alike. Meaning emerges in Dada through the chance juxtapositions of fragments of sentences, materials and objects drawn from everyday life. The museum and gallery also played roles that were far from neutral, to the point that the process of a work's creation and the context in which it was experienced conspired in the disruption together with the work itself. Echoing the thoughts of the contemporary artist John Newling (2003: 9), that 'location is a repository of agreement and it governs the way we view things', it was as if Dada and its later developments in Fluxus (from the 1950s to the present), including Beuys's performance and Kaprow's *Six Ordinary Happenings*, had confronted a fundamental paradox: human beings seek purpose and meaning in life while life confounds such efforts.

Dada and Fluxus are not the only manifestations of the absurd in art. It has been present in western culture ever since Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, through the Renaissance, to the twentieth century work of Antonin Artaud, Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionescu, among others. By the mid-twentieth century, Albert Camus was working with the absurd through literature such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947). The absurd artist (in this case responding to the trauma of the Second World War) faces a life devoid of intrinsic meaning, but does not despair. Instead, Camus used this insight to open up to experience, surrendering himself to the joy of sensory, bodily experience in the physical world.

...it is indeed my life I am staking here, a life that tastes of warm stone, that is full of the signs of sea and the rising song of the crickets. The breeze is cool and the sky blue. I love this life with abandon and wish to speak of it... (from *Nuptials at Tipasa* [1938], in Camus 1968: 69)

Dada and the absurd in contemporary art: three examples

The spirit of Dada and the absurd lives on in the art of our century. What is it asking of us in the present? What might that mean for our understanding of education in our time?

Figure 9.3: Francis Alÿs. *When Faith Moves Mountains*, Lima, 2002, in collaboration with Cuauhtemoc Medina and Rafael Ortega. Courtesy of the artist. © David Zwirner, New York

(Permission to use this image has not been obtained, but the image can be found at <https://web.archive.org/web/20240524115214/https://arthur.io/art/francis-aly/when-faith-moves-mountains>, archived 24.05.2024)

In 2002 the Chilean artist Francis Alÿs engaged a number of volunteers, mainly students, in shifting a sand dune situated just outside Lima, Peru, by a few centimetres (Figure 9.3, Alÿs 2002). He wanted to draw attention to the intense forms of effort he had experienced in Latin American society – effort, he believed, that was disproportionate to its meagre outcomes in achieving reform. The apparently futile activity of moving a sand dune consciously set aside normal social expectations around labour (for example, that it should be remunerated). Alÿs evoked Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which the effort of rolling a large stone uphill only to see it roll down again epitomised the need to confront a grim truth while refusing to be destroyed by it. By working with students, the myth and its enactment became a learning experience.

Figure 9.4: One of nine works by John Newling from the exhibition *Currency and Belief*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park 2002-03. Courtesy of the Artist.

(Permission to use this image has not been obtained.)

While Alÿs was exploring the meaning of labour without wealth, the artist John Newling – in a series of nine works entitled *Currency and Belief*, exhibited at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park in 2002-03 – offered an equally ironic reflection on the meaning of wealth without labour (Newling 2003). One of these works presented the material culture of gambling, in

particular the National Lottery, by placing the machine used to randomise numbers (the lottery balls) directly in front of a large-scale reproduction of a work by the sixteenth century Flemish painter Quentin Metsys, *The Money Changer and his Wife* (Figure 9.4). In this painting the money changer evokes forms of material wealth that can be counted like the numbers in the National Lottery, and his wife evokes the spiritual wealth suggested by the Bible in her hands. The story of Camelot and the Holy Grail, like the Bible, also holds the promise of everlasting life, and it is no accident that the original franchise holders of the National Lottery were known as the 'Camelot Group'.

Through this juxtaposition Newling draws together monetary wealth and the wealth that comes from love, both present and familiar to experience but generally felt to belong to different realities. Monetary wealth is not only countable; it can also be counted *on* to provide a degree of material security. But the wealth that comes from love, healing and restoration, as in the story of the Holy Grail, is unquantifiable. Other works in *Currency and Belief* offered similarly playful juxtapositions: oversized scratch cards, partially exposed; large-scale light boxes depicting images of ancient coinage; a pair of scales like those in the Metsys painting, showing that one chocolate Mars Bar is equal in weight (but not value) to a considerably greater number of coins and notes. Both Newling's and Alÿs's works compose forms of transaction based in common agreements. Without the element of exchange and tacit agreement that bind us into social frames and conventional regimes of value, such transactions would be meaningless. These works expose this fragility, and encourage us to confront it.



Figure 9.5: Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, *Survival Piece II, Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Saltworks with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp*, site

courtyard of the museum of the of the Pyrenees (Les Abattoirs) commissioned from the original drawing 1971 – remade 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

In *Notations on the Ecosystem of the Western Saltworks with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp* (Figure 9.5), artists Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison (2016) recreated the simplest known ecosystem involving algae and a particular species of brine shrimp in four rectangular tanks of seawater placed outside the Los Angeles County Museum. By varying the salinity of the water, they simultaneously created a colour field as artwork from green (least salty) to coral (most salty).

The *Brine Shrimp* work is cited in Kaprow's third essay on *The Education of the Un-artist*, in which he explores five different experimental models for blurring art and life (Kaprow 1993: 130). These 'five root types' were defined as *situational* (everyday environments, occurrences and customs), *operational* (how things and customs work, what they do), *structural* (related to ecologies, natural cycles and the forms of human activities, places and things), *self-referring* (reflecting or talking back) and *learning* (through philosophical inquiry, educational demonstrations and awareness training rituals). The Harrisons' work is classified in these terms as a structural model. Both Kaprow and Newton Harrison himself acknowledged its absurdist, Dada-ist underpinnings.

The indoor exhibition at the LA County Museum was prestigious, expensive, technologically sophisticated and had attracted considerable media attention. It included iconic works such as Claus Oldenburg's *Ice bag* (1971) and David Smith's *Cubi* (1961-5), alongside Newton Harrison's own *Artificial Aurora Borealis* (1971). The senior curator, Maurice Tuchman, had commissioned the Harrisons to make an outdoor piece that was 'inexpensive'. He had clearly underestimated the critical focus that resulted from the invitation!

By 1971 the Harrisons' commitment only to make work that served environmental wellbeing was evolving as a counterpoint to the conventions of the art institution. Influenced by their reading of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the Harrisons were concerned about the Museum's practice of using algacide to maintain its supply of clean water. Their harnessing of solar energy to create the outdoor work contrasted vividly with the energy requirements of the indoor exhibits. Confounding the current values of a successful artwork, the Harrisons allowed the work to emerge, live and then be recycled within a natural system. One pattern, the life system of the brine shrimp, interacted with another, the aesthetics of the art institution, to expose the gap in values – or to ignite what Breton had called a 'spark' – between the two realities, of the ecosystem and the artworld. Viewers acted as witnesses, though ultimately, in the culmination of the work, they were drawn in as participants, helping to distribute the salt and brine shrimp as foodstuffs.

All three works described above – of Alÿs, Newling and the Harrisons – share characteristics with those of Kaprow and Beuys. They have emerged in a moment of existential crisis. For Kaprow this was the height of the Vietnam War; for Beuys the aftermath of the Second World War alongside the early emergence of environmental concerns. For Alÿs, Newling and the Harrisons the latter crisis had escalated into a combination of catastrophic

environmental degradation and economic collapse. These artists are confronting life experiences that appear to run counter to dominant values: rendering labour pointless, enacting revered systems of 'value' that are in fact devoid of real value, exposing how institutions such as those of the artworld have turned in on themselves. Their artworks engage with life by imitating or mimicking life in a way that is apparently absurd: moving a mountain of sand, presenting a lottery mechanism as a work of art, creating a colour field through living organisms. Absurd art enables us to confront the absurd in experience, often with humour, through lightness and play, opening up the possibility to alter fixed positions, identities and perspectives. All the works I have discussed act from within this space of uncertainty and ambiguity, but retain a crucial distance sufficient for us to grasp the point of the work, to reflect on it and to move on, somehow transformed. The artworks offer a positive orientation to the world that neither succumbs to, nor seeks to rationalise, the strangeness in what is at hand. They are not nihilistic but generative of future courses of action.

Absurd art and the postmodern academy

We have still to address the third question raised in the introduction to this chapter: Can the absurd provide ways to challenge the managerialist values – the two crises in education and art identified by Biesta – that overwhelm content and creativity in current pedagogy?

Writing on pedagogy in the postmodern university, David Wolken, Cultural Foundations of Education Scholar at Syracuse University, describes postmodernism as a crisis in which we have become disconnected from any sense of history, with the result that we are now profoundly disoriented, subjected to 'pure randomness, heterogeneity and undecidability' (Wolken 2016: 70). Following Fredric Jameson (1991), he argues that this is not a new state, but a continuation and exacerbation of the modernist neo-colonising tendencies of late capitalism. Fragmentation leads to an inability, in the context of the postmodern university, to locate oneself critically and take action on issues of social justice. Such fragmentation, indeed, serves the financial and managerial systems that now drive the current university and education at all levels. In postmodernism, Wolken (2016: 69) suggests, we face a 'disconnect between a longing for meaning and the cruel irrational silence of the world'. Echoing Camus, he suggests there is no escape. We need to face the trouble, to embrace our condition with passion, to live its contradictions with vitality. To do otherwise would imply giving credence to the cultural logic of late capitalism, not to break with it. The absurd, for Wolken (2016: 73) 'holds value because of its ambiguity, impurity and disruptive capacities'. The act of recognising absurdity in the postmodern academy, in this case through the work of Camus, opens up the potential for something different.

However Tim Ingold, in his considered exploration of the relationship between anthropology, art and education, puts forward the apparently contrasting view that education is an experience of joining *with* others, bringing young and old together, in the furthering of life – a form of renewal he calls 'commoning' (derived from the medieval verb, 'to common'). Through commoning, knowledge is shared, and 'for sharing to be educative',

Ingold writes, 'I have to make an imaginative effort to cast my experience in ways that can join with yours' (Ingold 2018: 4). Here, Ingold follows Dewey (1966: 11) in insisting that existing knowledge cannot be 'hammered in' to novice minds. Imitation, Dewey argued, is a misnomer for what is in fact a way of being with others in 'a use of things which leads to consequences of common interest' (Dewey 1966: 34). This is a way of coming to know through what Ingold (2018: 26) calls 'correspondence'. As a concept, correspondence broadly resonates with Kaprow's exercises that play at life by mimicking its processes in order to function better within it. Nonetheless Ingold suggests that only certain forms of art are truly correspondent, and therefore anthropological, in his sense. They include, for him, instrumental music, walking, drawing, calligraphy and dance, but they explicitly *exclude* art that is conceptual or transgressive.

Art that is anthropological... is inquisitive rather than interrogative, offering a line of questioning rather than demanding answers; it is attentional, rather than fronted by prior intentions, modestly experimental rather than brazenly transgressive, critical but not given over to critique. Joining with the forces that give birth to ideas and things, rather than seeking to express what is already there, art that is anthropological conceives without being conceptual. Such art rekindles care and longing, allowing knowledge to grow from the inside of being in the correspondences of life. (Ingold 2018: 65)

As noted throughout this chapter, absurd art is both highly conceptual (following Duchamp) and frequently transgressive (as manifest in *Project Other Ways*), and would therefore fall outside of Ingold's sense of correspondence.

Perhaps however the contrast between Ingold's and Kaprow's respective approaches to art is more apparent than real. If we accept that absurd art reveals absurdity in life as a step towards reflection and the transformation of ourselves as living beings, and if we also accept that absurdity appears in moments of existential crisis such as our current situation, then it should be possible to open up Ingold's notion of correspondence to include the absurd, along with its conceptual, transgressive and, importantly, humorous tendencies. Cultures create forms of art that support survival, adapting to changing circumstances. Art is a site and activity of renewal, like education. We appear to have a particular need in the present to destabilise common understandings, and to unpack systems that are deeply damaging to planetary survival. As artists have demonstrated over many decades, being open to the absurd, embracing it not just with generosity but (as Camus advocated) with passion, being reflective and critical of its forms and manifestations, could open up new ways of to face the future to act in it.

Coda

Commenting on an earlier draft of this chapter, a colleague⁴ asked how he might teach art students about 'absurd art', in particular the work of Kaprow, in a way that might be meaningful to them today. If the absurd is important pedagogically, he commented, it has to mesh with the 'crises' identified by Masschelein, Biesta, Ingold and others, who critique

the instrumental harnessing of education to employability and of art to expressivity. The absurd implies a rejection of both. Our discussion took us to an experience that we had shared some years before. In 2010-11, as a group of artist-researchers, we undertook to explore one of Kaprow's scores for an activity, *Calendar* (Kaprow 1993: 120). The score sets up a riddle in the form of twelve stages of planting squares of turf, varying in quality from green to dry and then reversing these, dry to green. Kaprow's writings had been formative in our shared inquiry into the role of art in public life. He had created an opening in terms of new ways of working in the visual arts that were public-facing in content as well as process, while at the same time developing a clear if playful theoretical underpinning to such experimentation.

We understood, or thought we understood, Kaprow's thinking, until we explored the *Calendar* score over a period of a few months. The score invites performers to 'figure out' the riddle, through an activity that seemed to lack purpose but was nonetheless intriguing. In the first stage we set out to interpret the score individually through drawing, in whatever way drawing was meaningful to each of us. In the second stage we planned to share the results of two months' work with a view to developing a way to interpret the score together. Kaprow had indicated that for him, arriving at shared social experience was the point of art. We explored many possible responses: planting and 'maintaining' turf in the pattern Kaprow had proposed, or cutting grass at different heights to portray the transition from green to dry. The focus of our attention gradually shifted from achieving a result to sharing an endeavour that required us to co-operate, to co-create. After much deliberation we chose to walk the score through long grass, tramping the grass with different intensities to vary its 'colour'. Finding the moment of agreeing on a way forward, trying out and improving our tactic for walking squares within squares, freed us to enjoy the walking, to be held inside the rhythm of movement, led by the desire to create form as process (Douglas and Coessens 2017). The inherent absurdity of *Calendar* had in this way eliminated any obvious criteria of success, such as usefulness or expressivity. As part of the work, we found that we needed to figure out new ways of valuing experience. We developed insights that have become threaded into our various practices, influencing their direction.

On reflection, reading Kaprow had helped us develop our intellectual understanding. Living the score took us deeper into our experience, creating connections, working through our intuition. In response to the question of pedagogy, it is a truism to say that artists learn from other artists, but the more important question might be: what is learned when as artists, we set about trying out the way of working of another artist? Not all artists have shifted the foundations of what we understand art to be in the way that Kaprow did, and before him, Duchamp, Cage and others. Their work hovers on the threshold between meaning and meaninglessness, the threshold in art where the absurd comes into its own. Kaprow gave us the opportunity to work with that threshold, looping or feeding back in ways that have proved transformative. This way of teaching and learning is not an accumulation or acquisition but a process of encountering life in all its messiness.

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¹ Marcel Duchamp conceived the 'readymade' as an ordinary mass-produced object of everyday use, sometimes slightly altered, and declared to be a work of art by the artist (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/marcel-duchamp-1036>).

² Following the conventions of the time, Arendt uses the masculine pronoun here. Strictly speaking, it should of course be 'he or she'.

³ See <https://uk.phaidon.com/agenda/art/articles/2014/march/03/why-joseph-beuys-and-his-dead-hare-live-on/>

⁴ I am grateful to Chris Fremantle for posing this question and commenting on earlier drafts of this chapter.