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Altering a Fixed Identity: Thinking Through Improvisation

Anne Douglas

> Replacing artist with player as if adopting an alias is a way of altering a fixed identity. And a changed identity is a principle of mobility, of going from one place to another […] 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 artists, even.
>
> (Kaprow, *Essays* 125-6)

Introduction

Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) proposes that we mobilise our relationship with the world, by "stripping bare" pre-constructed ideas of art, and that through play we open up a space that doubts, probes, and suspends disbelief as to what art is.

This essay explores the implications of Kaprow's doubting of the certainty of art in society in order to offer new understandings of improvisation. As such, it constitutes a new trajectory of inquiry in the study and practice of improvisation. Kaprow's doubting focused on the way in which works of art, particularly those that were attached to the gallery and museum, had become commodified in the postwar USA of the 1950s onwards. Within American Expressionism, for example, the monetary value of art had become dominant. Kaprow wanted to redirect art towards human, social, and cultural forms of value by sustaining within it the open-ended and unforeseen nature of experience. Although Kaprow did not use the term improvisation, his pursuit of the unforeseen in experience makes it possible to talk of his work with reference to improvisation. The Latin root of improvisation, "improvisus," consists of two components: "im," as "not," and "provisus," which stems from "provedere"—to "foresee," "to provide" (Makins 781). The "open ended" and "unforeseen" are thus acknowledged as qualities of improvisation.

Kaprow situates his questioning of art at the interstices *between* art and the everyday, bridging two quite different but interrelated contexts in which the idea of improvisation is put to work. Improvisation in everyday speech carries a temporal dimension, as in acting "on the spur of the moment" ("Improvisation" in *Oxford Dictionary*) or as in performing "from the materials and sources available without previous planning" ("Improvisation" in *Collins Dictionary*). In art, improvisation is referenced as a special form of artistic production. In *Grove's Dictionary of Music* for example, improvisation is distinguished from notions of "composition" in music: "improvisation should be spoken of only when performances based on a model *differ substantially* or when a society *distinguishes explicitly* between the performance of a pre-composed piece and an improvisation on the basis of something given" (Sadie 95, my emphasis). Kaprow's work fits this definition in the sense that he was interested in questioning institutional constructions of art by separating his work from art in order to create a different articulation of meaningful experiences in everyday life (Antin xxi). In doing so Kaprow offers a methodology that works with the contingency of everyday experiences, but that nonetheless is developed through the methodical skill and knowledge of the artist, a knowledge that is highly regulated and that works with some irony. Kaprow places in the foreground the important role of participation in the making of meaning; art is a collaborative effort between the artist and audience.

Kaprow articulates his questioning of the proper role of art through an ironic "replay" of an existing work, Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923), a work that is ambiguous and contested in its meaning (Kaprow 125-6). In Kaprow's version, challenging art's proper role as part of life—as distinct from the role that had come to be assigned to it by the institution of museum and gallery practice as commodity—creates a friction between the desire for certainty and a deep resistance to being trapped in the myths that certainty inevitably creates. "Play" is a catalysing energy that sustains "mobility." It is the antithesis of certainty. Play is a perpetual, indeterminate state of mobility that avoids the traps, the fixed points, of myth making. Nonetheless, there is a paradox: mobility is defined as "going from one place to another." It relies on a negotiation between "fixed points." The tension between a desire for mobility and its dependence on a contradictory force—determinacy—seems to get to the heart of an understanding of improvisation that is situated within paradox.

This essay analyses an art project, *Calendar Variations* (2010-12), involving a group of artists-researchers at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen, Scotland. It is an experience of improvisation. The analysis works closely with Kaprow's principle of doubting the certainty of what is art. The analysis is conducted from the position of the practising artist as researcher, entering into the work by re-making an existing piece, the score poem *Calendar* (1970) (Kaprow 120). *Calendar* is ambiguous in meaning. It was written as a relatively late work in Kaprow's output as a score poem, possibly with the intention that individuals would perform it, or at least agree how to perform it, as a way of making meaning as a shared social experience. Together with the artists-researchers of the On the Edge research programme (www.ontheedgeresearch.org), I engaged with this score some forty years after *Calendar* appeared. We

challenged ourselves to make sense of the score in relation to our own context and experience. The resulting project, *Calendar Variations* (2010-12), was in part a means of getting to know Kaprow intimately by following his "score" closely, and in part a means of critiquing current accepted forms of practice.

The essay concludes that Kaprow offers something important and different to articulations of improvisation that privilege the durational (Hallam and Ingold 1; Ingold, *Being Alive* 10, 62, 83, 162, 178, 216, 226). Kaprow breaks with convention through interventions that offer radical moments of rethinking. Although Kaprow preferred the term "experimental" as a descriptor of his approach, what he actually does as an artist offers improvisation studies a critical edge and a specificity that is particularly important now to contemporary art practice. Kaprow expands aesthetic theory from a sole focus on the art object to a practice that embraces the perceptions of the audience. He goes further and constructs artistic forms that open experience up in everyday life through the participation of individuals (artists and audiences) in shared activities that constitute a critical reflection *as* experience of the society in which they live. In other words, his critical points are not made as declamations of a position, but as embodied practices.

To "see" is to act: an epistemology of artistic endeavour

Kaprow recognised that in life we act creatively as a means of sustaining our existence. He imagined this in relation to the way that objects come to be created. In life we create new objects by way of forms or processes with which we are already familiar—computer as brain, airplane as fish, church as family—shaping the world physically and at the same time, investing it with value and meaning. There is a formal element that allows perception and thinking to play together freely, creating new possibilities that give form to existence. The analogy of an airplane to a fish in water results in a new form of transportation that in turn shapes a way of life on which that form is dependent.

In this way imaginary forms enter into living systems where they no longer exist for their own sake, encountering practicalities of competition and money, masking the creativity that brought them into existence:

> The designer of an atomic submarine doesn't think he's Jonah making a whale for himself, even though he may know that predecessors studied whales and fish and their aquadynamics […] Such discontinuity and specialisation produce a sense of separation from the whole of life and also veil the imitative activity along with the enjoyment. (Kaprow 115)

Life and art work in sequence—art imitates life, which imitates art, but the feedback loop is never exact. Something new happens. Kaprow questioned whether there could be certainty in art in a world that was at the time increasingly uncertain/unpredictable. He privileged experimental art over what he called "Art art"—art that ignored uncertainty. By "experimental art," Kaprow meant a radical questioning of the forms and contexts of artistic endeavour that could produce new kinds and qualities of activity that were shaped by a lively interaction with social processes. These in turn reflected back into the institution of art, questioning its traditions. Kaprow defined experimentation in art in a way that develops on from Cage's work and ideas: "Imagine something never done before by a method never used, whose outcome is unforeseen" (Kaprow 68). Cage had earlier constructed a simpler definition of the experimental work as "an act of which the outcome is unknown" (Cage 13). Both echo the etymology of improvisation in the "unforeseen," but radicalise the agent that produces this quality—the method never before used, the outcome that cannot be predicted or planned by breaking with established forms of practice.

"[Experimental artists] usually say they are making art, whatever anyone thinks. But they will not be sure until sometime in the future, whereas Art artists know they are making good art" (Kaprow 74). In making this differentiation, Kaprow sought to distinguish those artists who were working within recognisable artistic traditions—defined then as Cubism, Op Art, ob Art, Abstract Symbolism, Pop Art, or Assemblage—from others: "one thing that keeps them [experimental artists] from becoming barbers or ranchers is their persistent curiosity about what art might be in addition to what everyone else has made it" (Kaprow 69). The kind of certainty about art that led to being able to judge good from bad art was not interesting to him. Instead Kaprow tested apparently foundational assumptions—for example, the assumption that human beings are creative, that they then express themselves through works of art. He admired artworks that unambiguously raised doubt about what art was. Rauschenberg's black and white paintings of 1966 demonstrated "no artistry" and created a "numb devastating silence." This is not newness for its own sake. Rauschenberg did not set out to shock. He wanted to make a painting in and of his time. His paintings at the time tested cultural attitudes, resonating with the word "experiment [that] suggests among its meanings, the testing of a principle" (Kaprow 72).

For Kaprow, experimentation was born of a crisis in which creativity failed. One of the instances of this was the art world itself. With the rise in the commercial value of the art object in the post-war period, by the 1950s US artists had become absorbed with making "Art art." "Art art" therefore described an unacceptable state of affairs in which,

through the commercial influence of galleries, the relationship of art to society had become entropic. It was important to intervene in this entropy. To this end, Kaprow reimagined the artist, who is positioned on the boundary between art and life, as an "unartist," whose role was to blur this boundary (Kaprow 97-147). The "unartist," i.e. the individual artist who was able to free himself from the normative practices, knowledge, and commercial interests of art in the institution/gallery, would, if he turned his attention outwards, find life more "artlike than art."

Kaprow identified moments in everyday life, moments normally consumed by the practical needs of everyday existence. He flipped these moments into a different reading by choreographing "activities." These were formal elements, often verbal "scores." Everyday objects only gained value in the context of an activity, rarely in themselves. Kaprow elevated activities that addressed practical needs to release new forms of signification.

This dynamic is explored in the following example: *Trading Dirt* (1983-6) (Kelley 212-15). The process may have been perplexing, simultaneously in and out of context, in some sense setting everyday experiences at a distance, but his approach was unambiguous in purpose: that of questioning art in its relationship with life as a new point of entry into experience. Could this questioning expand our current understandings of improvisation?

An Activity: *Trading Dirt* (1983-6)

Imagine digging up a bucketful of earth from your back yard or garden and placing it with a shovel in the back of your car. Imagine then asking a friend or an acquaintance for a bucketful of earth and offering your bucketful in exchange.

Allan Kaprow pursued this activity on and off over three years, from 1983 to 1986. The filled bucket travelled with its shovel in Kaprow's pickup truck; only the earth changed sporadically with each exchange. The moment or opportunity frequently identified itself spontaneously. For those who knew Kaprow well, the meaning of participation was clear. It was easy to "play along." Others struggled to accept what he was proposing. However, once inside the experience, it drew out different kinds of responses. The first exchange involved scrabbling for earth beneath the seat of a Zen Buddhist teacher in California—this earth was of poorer quality than the original, laced with nails and concrete rubble. It would "test its faith […] as heavy duty Buddhist dirt […] out in the material world." The artist Eleanor Antin, who was familiar with Kaprow's tactics, then picked up the rumour of trading dirt. Kaprow approached her for a bucket of dirt and after some reflection on an appropriate response, she and her husband dug soil from the grave of their much loved dog, taking the "heavy duty Buddhist dirt" in exchange. Other exchanges drew great puzzlement and the occasional spontaneous activity: a farmer threw pumpkin seeds into her "new" earth at which point Kaprow was the one to ask, "Why did you do that?" As the nutritional value of the earth reduced, its story-telling value increased (Kelley 212-15).

In what sense could this activity of *Trading Dirt* be viewed as an improvisation? A reading of this work is dependent upon an element of intervention, an apparently meaningless activity that interrupts and subverts the continuity and certainty of ongoing experience, the trading of something that is not owned in the first place. It is this interruption as a carefully constructed aesthetic tactic that draws the impulse to respond playfully from within one's own world: the farmer plants seeds, a fellow artist and friend offers an important personal experience.

"Meaningless work" first appeared as an art phrase in 1963 in a Fluxus-orientated anthology published by Jackson Mac Low and La Monte Young. It was defined as "simply work that does not make you money or accomplish a conventional purpose" (Antin in Kelley xvi). David Antin provides examples such as filling a box with wooden blocks, moving them to another box or digging a hole, then filling it up. He distinguishes the intentions of Fluxus artists to create a new artwork as a "self referential action," from Kaprow's intention. Where for Fluxus it meant privileging the form of the work with a view to releasing new content (Higgins 224), "meaningless work" for Kaprow meant work undertaken freely by volunteers for no other purpose than to be experienced and reflected upon, and through that, to be liberating (Antin in Kelley xvi).

Like Fluxus, Kaprow developed forms of experimentation that enabled participants to see and overcome barriers between lived experience and the (then) overwhelming effects of consumer capitalism. But Fluxus did not seek so much to change the world of cultural artefacts or to attack its surrounding context, as to ignore them through alternative forms of activity (Friedman 223). An example might be George Brecht's "Ladder" from *Water Yam* series (1964):

- Paint a single straight ladder white

  Paint the bottom rung black.

> Distribute spectral colors on the rungs between. (Hendricks 202-3)

Kaprow, on the other hand, was interested in critique and its power to transform. As a student of Meyer Shapiro, the Marxist art historian, Kaprow, alongside Rauschenberg, Cage, and others, sought to find a way through the troubling contradiction that Shapiro had constructed between an instrumental and monotonous notion of labour serving an economy based on surplus and consumerism, and a notion of art that attempted to set itself aside from instrumentalism by being "non-instrumental" or seemingly "without purpose," but that nonetheless ended up as of value as commodity for audiences that could "afford" time as leisure. Shapiro called upon artists to address this contradiction by acting on the world around them. In response, artists such as Kaprow set about re-forming artistic practice in ways that mined the deep assumptions of ethics, power, aesthetics, and economics (Haywood 29). Instead of turning away from industrial production, Kaprow turned in on the spatial and temporal logic of capitalism itself, developing images that reveal the inner workings of capitalism as a polemic between labour time and life time. Unlike Expressionism and its dependence upon the traditions and "otherworldliness" of paint and canvas, Kaprow worked with industrial materials and technologies in and out of the context of the gallery, for example by piling tires and oil cans (*Yard* [1961]) or mimicking building practices (*Fluids* [1967]). By this means, he intended to generate a radical questioning of modern art, blurring the borders between art and the rest of life.

Kaprow thereby situates creative endeavour, in particular experimentation, specifically in those situations in life in which it is problematic *not* to question what is happening around us. For him, not questioning was to collude with the entropy of systems that have played themselves out. Like Fluxus, Kaprow sought to wake us up to the barriers between lived, engaged experience, and the reality of everyday experiences overwhelmed by consumer capitalism. Unlike Fluxus, he targeted the processes, materials, and qualities of human relations in industrial production and its economies (Haywood 39) and from there, gradually worked his way into more and more intimate, interpersonal experiences (Kelley 185-7).

In the example of *Trading Dirt*, Kaprow presents us with something that has some marginal utilitarian value that goes unnoticed. When acted upon in relationship to other human beings as play, the bucket of earth and shovel gathers value as meaning through forms of exchange. It generates new energy, new forms of mobility in the world that link together disparate encounters. Jeff Kelley, Kaprow's biographer, remarks that trading of all kinds is commonplace. We trade "looks, goods, affection, credit, power, words and handshakes […] In the most absolute sense, trading dirt is a metaphor for value itself; the dirt makes the trading visible" (Kelley 215).[1]

The "unforeseen" is a core quality of improvisation. Kaprow's approach to sustaining this quality was to foreground play as a form of *parrhesia,* a speaking boldly in public space, a spontaneous interruption in accepted rhetorical modes of address to offer a moment of truth (Simpson and Wiener). *Trading Dirt* works in this way. It disrupts exchange practices in trade normally mediated by monetary value, replacing them by a different form of exchange in which the value of the transaction cannot be assumed, but needs to be figured out through a new response that is meaningful to the participant—offering something of great personal value such as the earth of a much loved pet's grave, or the recognition of good earth to germinate seeds. Each time, the new response interrupts the conventions of how we would normally engage in trading as a practice.

A counterpoint: improvisation as a durational practice

In contrast to Kaprow's aesthetic of rupture and dissonance, improvisation may in some circumstances be thought of as a "keeping going" in the face of the unforeseen and unexpected. In life "there exists no script, no modus operandi" (Hallam and Ingold 1). In anthropology, Ingold defines improvisation as a way of "working things out as [life] goes along" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 10, 178). In search of an anthropology that escapes fixation on objects and images that parallels Kaprow's search for an alternative to the artwork as object, Ingold sets improvisatory modes apart from other modes of being that realise determined ends pre-conceived in advance: "Whereas the building perspective sets the maker as a bearer of prior intentions, over and against the material world, the dwelling perspective situates the weaver in amongst a world of materials, which he literally draws out in bringing forth the work" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 10). Echoing Kaprow, Ingold views improvisation as a form of resistance even in the most extreme conditions of human engagement with the world of technology, of machines that set out to replace human skill, to deskill a workforce. Such attempts at mechanical repetition are constantly foiled, Ingold believes, because of "the improvisational ability with which practitioners are able to disassemble the constructions of technology and creatively to reincorporate the pieces into their own walks of life" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 62).

Ingold perceives improvisation as "anti-compositional, fluid, processional" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 226). He sees fixed points as antithetical to improvisatory modes: "To improvise is to follow the ways of the world as they open up, rather than to recover a chain of connections from end to starting point, on a route already travelled" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 216). For Ingold improvisation is a perpetual state of responsiveness through movement within a constantly shifting

world. In contrast, by reading Kaprow's experimentation as improvisation, we are confronted with a tension between determinate *and* indeterminate elements. Fixed points yield mobility as a critical response to established practices and their underlying truth. They take the form of a conscious break with the durational that establishes new goals, new ways of thinking and being that are discordant with what is accepted and that are also embodied in composed forms. In this sense Kaprow situates himself in opposition to the idea that life itself is a perpetual encounter with the new and offers us the possibility of transformation as a rupture in the flow of established truth and practice, a refusal to be fixed by establishing new points of departure that have the potential to "leap out of everything that pre-existed" (Bloch 203).

These apparently contradictory positions of improvisation inform the analysis of the art project, *Calendar Variations* (2010-12) (Coessens and Douglas).

An Activity: *Calendar Variations* (2010-12)

In July 2010 I invited the artist-researchers within the On the Edge research programme at Gray's School of Art to join me in responding to Kaprow's score poem *Calendar*. *Calendar*, composed as an activity in 1971, is a middle period score. This is a score for is an everyday activity—that of planting turf.

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, 1971
(Kaprow 120)

Motivation

This project constituted a new point of departure in an ongoing body of research that sought to develop new forms of artistic practice situated directly in social cultural life (arguably the desired consequence of Kaprow's approach). In 2006-9 the On the Edge research programme undertook two research projects running in parallel.[2]

One of the insights that emerged from this research was the sense that a new kind of entropy was emerging in the relationship of artist to society in Britain, in which at the time there was some significant investment in projects that sought artistic interventions in social issues. This entropy manifested itself as a hardening of differences across styles of practice, territories, and techniques in response to the emergence of new forms of relations between artist/audience in and beyond the institutions of museum and gallery. Curators and critical theorists, including Grant Kester (art historian), Nicolas Bourriaud (curator), and Claire Bishop (curator), have theorised these emergent practices within a new aesthetics of process-based work. Despite these articulations and frequently without knowledge of their key critical perspectives, artists themselves have struggled to find critical distance between the pressure to respond to the demands of public funding that frequently instrumentalise the arts and the pressure to deliver work that is interesting and challenging (Caust 53).

The reverse image of Kaprow's circumstances had, arguably, taken us to entropy in a different sense. What once had been a radical approach was becoming "Art art," a new theology of artistic practice in which creative freedom and aesthetic judgement were becoming absorbed into other non art discourses (social, political, or ethical) without room to negotiate the implications for arts practice. As artists we were rapidly forgetting the pleasure of play and the challenge of uncertainty in an increasingly entropic arts economy. By focusing outwards, perhaps artists themselves had forgotten Kaprow's recommendation: in the blurring of art and life, it is important to renegotiate the meaning of the work back in the artworld. Perhaps artists needed to question themselves alongside questioning society.

Arguably *Calendar Variations* did not begin as an improvisation but more as a reflective break in assumptions of ongoing research and practice. In setting up the project I hoped that we might recover new creative energy by tracking back to a point of origin in contemporary art practice in which artists began working directly in social life. I identified Kaprow as one such artist. However, following Kaprow's score led us to an understanding of what we were doing as improvisation in this particular sense of being open to doubt.

To begin with, we identified a host and a site at Woodend Barn Arts Centre, Banchory, Aberdeenshire. As instigator of the work, I laid out four stages.

First we would respond to the score through drawing as individuals, interpreting drawing in whatever way we chose. "Drawing" can be imagined as movement through the material world (Ingold, *Lines* 194-5), as the tracing of a line of where we have been, as an object or complete image that triggers a new form of encounter with a whole as viewer (Arnheim 27). In addition drawing can be imagined as a commonly shared "lay" method of communication as well as a highly specialised, artistic skill. Drawing was consciously selected as a medium that would contain within itself many of the tensions that the project set out to encounter across art and life such as the tension between end product and process, between creative intention and experience, between the power of authorial control and the power of participation.

Secondly we would share what we had done within our individual explorations.

Thirdly we would attempt to reach agreement on how we might respond as a group and carry out whatever we had agreed to do.

Finally we would reflect on the meaning of the experience for new understandings of our artistic practices.

In the spring of 2010 we negotiated a physical site, 6 metres by 6 metres, at Woodend Barn, a rural arts centre in Banchory.[3] The invitation to participate was distributed to the artists-researchers via email at the beginning of July. We had approximately a month to work on our responses as individuals. We gathered together at the beginning of August and through the discussion, agreed to perform the score together by walking.

Calendar Variations initially invited participation only from a small group of artist-researchers, without involving members of the public or a particular constituency or community, with the possibility (not the imperative) of public engagement further down the line. The project was open-ended in so far as the outcomes could not be foreseen. Whatever resulted needed to emerge out of the experience of being involved rather than from a prior set of intentions linked to a determined set of results. However, the project had a clear goal to secure an element of internal self-reflection and criticism as a counterpoint to an external positioning of effort in relation to a set of social issues/problems/imperatives (such as Suzanne Lacy's focus on youth and race in the Oakland projects 1999-2009, its underpinning questions, and its pragmatic implications).[4] The project was lightly programmed and lightly scripted. Both Kaprow's score and the programme of events that contained it offered a set of parameters that contained a shared space and time for quite different individuals to inhabit. By foregrounding drawing, we invited each person to define the meaning of drawing as an individual.

I will trace these qualities through an example of one of the seven participating artists who echoes Kaprow's interest in power but from a different cultural perspective, working at a different moment in time.

Chu Yuan is a Chinese Malaysian artist whose research is concerned with understandings of negotiation as a concept and practice in socially engaged art. She works with her partner, Jay Koh, in places such as Burma and Mongolia (International forum for Intermedia Art http://www.ifima.net). Her artistic work in the field creates the conditions for individuals to explore personal freedom and agency in socio-political circumstances in which concepts and practices in and around individual freedom are limited, culturally or politically. Chu "saw" a reading of the score in terms of social and political pattern, power, and subservience.

Let's pause for a moment and think about the meaning of power in this context. We think about power as the organizational force behind roles and hierarchies (Arendt 27-8): power as object. We can alternatively imagine power as a metaphor for relationship defined in terms of inclusion/exclusion (Arendt 201-4). Imagined this way, power is fluid. It does not exist other than in relation to something else. Activism asks questions about what sort of relations are in action at any given moment. Producing the *Calendar* score through the metaphor of power focuses the kind of relationships we shared within the group. Our day jobs were defined by roles such as independent artist, producer, professor, and research student. Our engagement within the project worked best when that hierarchy was dissolved. This was achieved in the programming: each artist shared the same brief, working initially from their own centres as individuals and then participating in reaching an agreement of how to perform the score together. *Calendar Variations* enabled us to reconfigure our pattern of social relations in terms of the differences we held as individuals about the meanings of "artist," threading this back into life in the form of accommodating or not other individual's perspectives. We could imagine human relations as functioning in multiple registers. The one (power as object/as role), is not displaced by the other (power as relationship).

Producing the score through power as a metaphor yielded a different understanding for Chu. She used her drawn response to the score to think through her preoccupations with power. The two stanzas of Kaprow's poem score become two movements. The first movement is a trajectory towards collaboration and the second, a trajectory towards taking over. Her body gestures, keeping her hand steady over an extended period of time to produce even marks, recreate those circumstances in which control is deemed necessary to produce the conditions of growth (see Figure 1): "the repetitive dipping movement […] felt akin to planting something grain by grain" (Coessens and Douglas 40). The result in graphic terms is a subtle variation of tone that re-presented the green to green, green to dry, dry to dry, dry to green, green to green as marking the differences between hierarchies. By imitating the score through drawing that imitates planting (art imitating art imitating life), Chu enacts and unveils qualities of power in action. In doing so, she provokes the thought that power insinuates itself in circumstances without our necessarily being aware of it or its implications: "In what way does it grow? Does it grow below others, alongside others, or above others? Does it grow noticed or unnoticed? Does it grow being suppressed by or equal with or in dominance over others?" (Coessens and Douglas 41). The metaphor creates a transition in her imagination from a fixed idea of "power as object" to a more fluid idea of "power as relational."

Figure 1: Chu Chu Yuan Stanza 1 in response to *Calendar*

The process of drawing, an activity that Chu engages in habitually as a private individual, had up to this point been positioned outside of her collaborative work with Jay Koh. In an important way the project forced a kind of break with habit in the way that she had worked with the issue of power in Burma, Mongolia, and Ireland.

In *Calendar Variations* Chu was presented with the opportunity of exploring the score through her own authored drawings. My reading of Chu's involvement was that she resisted this authoring as an undesirable expression of autonomy. This resistance was particularly evident when we attempted to frame and present her drawings within the exhibition of *Calendar Variations* April 2011. In discussion Chu stated a preference to value the drawings as means to an end, towards her writing on power, rather than as ends, as exhibited works, in their own right.[5] Normally in her practice any such production would have either remained in the privacy of her studio or acted as a means of clarifying and representing thoughts and impressions of her participants, not her own.

Arguably, (and this is my own interpretation of the events) Kaprow's experimental tactic of doubting the certainty of art comes into play in Chu's re-visiting of the importance of drawing as an embodied, individual practice and its collision with her belief in the notion of the artist as facilitator, a position in which the individual's creative ego should not be foregrounded. The project destabilised her values and practices of authorial control and artistic autonomy. In some sense she had to confront an unresolved echo of an artistic tradition in which the maker, as author, needs to be acknowledged as a formative presence, whether or not this presence results in works of art as object or as process. Chu sought to make sense of the conflict by re-creating the score as a kind of visual/verbal discourse on power. Since this event, Chu has also reflected in writing on the implications of the project for a new reading of autonomy:

> While some artists and thinkers prefer to depart from the concept of autonomy, others like Anne Douglas and the On the Edge Research have tried to re-position the concept of autonomy itself as the autonomy of art (not the artist) within interaction, arguing that art has something quite specific to offer. I would argue for how and why autonomy could/should be modified to take on a negotiative dimension. (Chu 2013)

Ingold presents drawing as "anti-compositional, fluid, processional" as an alternative to totalisation as "fragmentation, rupture and discontinuity" (Ingold, *Being Alive* 226). His notion of drawing as the key descriptive practice of improvisation comes into play, in my view, in Chu's work in the form of an embodied practice. At the same time Chu holds two conflicted meanings of holism in tension: totalisation as the power to overwhelm (green to green, dry to dry) and totalisation as "an indivisible continuity" (226) through transitional, fluctuating patterns of growth described through marks that are dark/ light, dense/ less dense.

Figure 2: Walking the score as a shared response to *Calendar*, Woodend Barn 2011.

Similar dilemmas between received positions on aesthetics and the demands of the project also emerged in the shared aspects of *Calendar Variations*. In deciding to walk the score, we had explored a variety of options, initially interpreting quite literally its visual imperatives of ranges of tones from green to dry. We wondered whether to use chemicals to create different appearances of green to dry or to cut grass with mechanical power tools to different depths, growing different qualities of turf. The material methods, while capable of producing the visual effects implied in the score, missed the point of its meaning. We sensed that this literalness failed to uncover underlying content that needed to be uncovered. This failure pushed us further into reflecting and questioning. At the outset, we could not have imagined that our solution would be to carefully choreograph a walk. With time, this presented itself as an option that would do least harm to the environment, an emerging and deeper imperative than simply constructing the visual "look" of *Calendar*. We had noticed how the long grass of the summer folded over as we tramped across it. The trace of the shared "drawing" was constructed upon this observation, itself highly situated in the growing conditions for grass in northeast Scotland. This observation itself was contingent upon us being in that place of Woodend Barn at that particular time of year with the vexing but apparently meaningless challenge of performing *Calendar* as a group in one day.

Figure 3: Folding of the grass within the drawing as walk, Woodend Barn 2011.

Calendar gave us the opportunity in various ways to alter the fixed identity of our artistic /research personalities as social/political/ecological artists and to play—to engage in the apparently meaningless riddle of the *Calendar* score poem. To the participating artists, *Calendar Variations* as a project made explicit the aesthetic nature of shared experience. Importantly these revelations came through an experience, not by imposing a theory/genre of art.

Conclusion

Calendar Variations offers rich iterations of the paradox of different temporal modes and ways of being within improvisation. Our shared point of departure was "scripted," determined through the *Calendar* score. In intervening in the continuity of our everyday lives and assumptions, we created a break, freeing us up to work differently, in response to our diverse pasts and pre-existing knowledge and to the immediate and contingent within a new shared space. The project resulted in many different "objects"—a walk, a set of drawings, and a new insight into power. We produced an exhibition (9-29 April 2011, Lang Byre Gallery, Woodend Barn) as a means of disseminating the work to others. Viewers to the exhibition were in some sense required to become participants, who needed to use their imaginations to work with the puzzle we had set ourselves as a means to experiencing the work.

Ingold, in anthropology, imagines improvisation as continuous, as a positioning in life that predisposes us to encounter experience as unscripted and open-ended, in which every moment has the potential to offer something that is continually different. This predisposition in some important way captures energy as a perpetual state of movement. In contrast, Kaprow imagines experimentation as discontinuous. He addresses those moments in life that demand that we stop, reflect, rethink, and recreate—moments of rupture or failure in which it is necessary to distance ourselves from what went before. Kaprow, in the domain of the visual arts, presents a notion of experimentation that is useful for understanding improvisation in a new sense. Within improvisatory practices, by questioning the certainty of art, by breaking with continuity, a new potential emerges to establish something radically different from what went before.

Notes

[1] *Trading Dirt* now exists as a narrative of experience and not as an object but nonetheless it is recognised as a powerful artwork. In discussing *Trading Dirt* in the foreword to Kelley's *Childsplay*, Antin remarks, " I know that Allan sees his work as 'unart' and wants to see its separation from art, envisioning it as simply an articulation of meaningful experiences from ordinary life. I'm sympathetic to this intention but I find it hard to distinguish the existential power of this piece, which now exists only in the telling, from that of any other great work of art I've encountered" (Antin xxi).

[2] The one, *The Artist as Leader*, explored the relationship between the arts and cultural organisations in order to grasp the sense in which art could be considered to be influential in society, and to understand what kinds of formal approaches and supporting infrastructure could secure development (Douglas and Fremantle). The second, *Working in Public Seminars*, mined the practice of a single artist, Suzanne Lacy, as a radical feminist and student and lifelong friend of Allan Kaprow. *Working in Public* focused on a suite of projects in Oakland, California (1990-2000), in which Lacy had explored the image of young people of colour in the public media through educational processes and public art performances that sought to represent new understandings/experiences of race. We established the *Working in Public* platform in Scotland in order to learn from this high level practice, and clustered together twelve core group practitioners whose practices were concerned with the relationship of art to society within Britain: (http://ontheedgeresearch.org/working-in-public/).

[3] The directors of the organisation, Mark and Fiona Hope, warmly embraced the experimental nature of the work.

[4] This was not a critique of Lacy's approach, but a critique of the way in which policy and funding in Britain had absorbed the radical edge of such practices in ways that instrumentalised artistic endeavour.

[5] Informal discussions took place between the artists throughout the period from July 2010 to the exhibition in April 2011 in an attempt to agree upon a form of exhibition that would do justice to the exploration *and* make sense to a public who had not participated in the project's development.

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