

Allan Kaprow, 1927-2006

On Wednesday, Apr. 5, Allan Kaprow, the Master of the Happening, the pathbreaking artist, thinker and theorist whose explosive career of more than 40 years of environments and performances, powerful and prophetic essays, and influential teaching transformed serious art-making forever, died peacefully in his home in Encinitas, Calif. He was 78 years old.

In October 1958 *Art News* published a remarkable essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock." The essay, by the 31-year-old painter Allan Kaprow, was a close analysis of Pollock's work and a meditation on the meaning of his death for the painting avant-garde. In Allan's reading, Pollock's large pour and splatter paintings of the late '40s were the culminating act of advanced painting, which finally liberated it of all the formal, relational and material constraints that had been the field of its being, leaving it nowhere to go.

"So what do we do now?" Allan asked, and he offered two alternatives. One was to continue in this vein, turning out many good "near paintings" that would be minor variations on Pollock that never went any further. The other, wrote Allan, in a passage verging on prophecy, "is to give up the making of paintings entirely" and, drawing on the energy, crudeness and naiveté of Pollock's great work,

we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sounds, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have had about us but ignored. But they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed

strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become material for this new concrete art.

Young artists of today need no longer say, "I am a painter" or "a poet" or "a dancer." They are simply "artists." All of life will be open to them.

In 1958 this was truly prophecy because it wasn't till October 1959 that Allan presented 18 *Happenings in Six Parts* in the loft-like space of the new Reuben Gallery in New York. It was this elaborate spectacle of colored lights, materials, taped and live words and sounds, smells, sculptural constructions, and live performers carrying out nondramatic but tightly scripted actions, that announced the name "Happening" to the world and set off a train of related, though much less tightly scripted, works by Allan and his contemporaries in New York, Osaka, San Francisco, Chicago, Cologne, Paris and Milan. By 1968 Allan himself had produced more than 20 *Happenings*, and the news of this work spread rapidly beyond the contemporary art world—and even the related worlds of avant-garde theater, dance, music and poetry—into the general culture, where nearly any large, freewheeling and explosive event was likely to be called a *Happening*.

But under cover of the fame surrounding the *Happenings*, Allan's pieces developed along two lines as the '60s went on—from the profuse bundle of image fragments of the early *Happenings* and environments to the concentration on a single resonant image and to the elimination of audience and its replacement by collaborating participants in a kind of freely undertaken and otherwise purposeless, liberated work. Anyone at all familiar with Allan's pieces will remember *Yard* (1961), the pile of used tires surrounding tar-paper-wrapped sculptures in the sculpture court of Martha Jackson's gallery as the garbage output of our automotive culture overrunning "high culture." But not too many know Allan's 1967 piece *Fluids*, for which he recruit-

ed teams made up mostly of art students to build with him at 15 locations scattered across the many miles of the Los Angeles-Pasadena area 15 rectangular ice structures 30 feet long, 10 feet wide and 8 feet high—15 roofless minimalist igloos that were then allowed to melt in the Southern California sun. Remarkable as the image was, it was less remarkable than the hard communal work involved in building a structure out of an uncommon and awkward building material on unlevelled ground by people not especially skilled at the task. It was a kind of barn-raising without the promise of any outcome other than the successful achievement of the doomed glistening structure.

This focus upon communal work leading to a single resonant image was even more sharply illustrated by *Sweet Wall*, his 1970 Berlin piece, in which Allan, along with a dozen or so artists and art students, constructed a 100-foot-long, 5-foot-high cinder-block wall with mortar of fresh bread and strawberry jam on an empty lot within sight of the truly menacing Berlin Wall. It must have been an even more resonant image for the Berliners in the crew, as they followed the script and knocked over the wall and cleaned away all traces of its existence. The bread and jam turned out to be a more effective mortar than expected and it required some effort, if only a few minutes, to bring the little wall down. It took 19 more years to bring the big wall down. Pieces of both walls may now be collectors' items and are very likely fakes.

In 1969 Allan took a position as associate dean of the art school of CalArts, just north of Los Angeles, and by 1970 he had relocated to Southern California. His teaching at CalArts and at the University

of California, San Diego, to which he moved as a professor in 1974, found receptive students and potential collaborators for his tasklike pieces. But by the later '70s his pieces had become less image-oriented and more tightly focused on psychological and social interactions among couples and small groups invited to interpret and realize elliptical scenarios that took on the character



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of short poems. The rich implications of the scenario pieces, and the koanlike character of the solo pieces that continued into the '90s, have been experienced only by the participants, but the scenarios will eventually be made available by the Kaprow Estate. Together with his own eloquent essays, edited by Jeff Kelley and published as *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* by the University of California Press, and Jeff Kelley's comprehensive account of Kaprow's work in *Childsplay* (also U. C. Press), they will go some way toward taking the measure of this witty and profound artist.

—David Antin

Author: David Antin is a poet, critic and performance artist. His most recent books are *I never knew what time it was* (University of California Press) and *John cage on cage is still cagey* (Singing Horse).