



Reiterating Allan Kaprow's *Yard*

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN



Opposite: William Pope.L, *Yard (To Harrow)*, 1961/2009. Tires and mixed media, installation view. This page, left: Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1961. Tires and tar paper, dimensions variable. View of work at the Martha Jackson Gallery, NY. Right: Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1998. Tires and tar paper, reinvention at MOCA, LA.

For Allan Kaprow, prodigious artist, theorist, and inventor of Happenings in the late '50s, art and life were not separate. He wanted art to reflect life directly. While his Happenings did not always rise to the level of his intentions, when they did, the experience could prove exhilarating. One might say the same about Pollock, an influence on Kaprow, who admitted that not every painting during his breakthrough period was successful. Putting art within a course of action, and thereby presenting it as a mirror of life, can be precarious. Because Kaprow's Happenings and Environments relied on people who were willing to perform, often self-consciously, within a given space or place, over a designated period of time, their success was never guaranteed. A great deal was left to chance, indeterminate interactions between people and materials, a lesson that Kaprow learned from another mentor, John Cage. Despite the risk, a certain element of chance is necessary not only for the survival of art, but also for the survival of human beings on this planet. The persistence of culture often depends on risking what we love.

Although Kaprow began as an abstract painter and student of Hans Hofmann, early on, he turned his attention to working in a neo-Dada assemblage style. By the late '50s, these two modes of working—one formal, the other avant-garde—were implicitly in

competition. While Hofmann influenced the former, the latter developed in the wake of Rauschenberg and, to some extent, Jasper Johns. Kaprow respected Hofmann immensely (and for a while tried to combine the two approaches), but he saw more options in relation to Pollock. One might say that the true point of departure for the Happenings was Kaprow's essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," published in *Artnews* (1958) two years after the painter's untimely death. While Kaprow recognized the importance of Pollock's paintings, he was most interested in the choreographed process and movement revealed in Hans Namuth's photographs of the painter at work. This is what took Kaprow out of the frame and into the everyday world of popular culture—a place where he was free to move at will and observe everything that had been excluded from art.

When an artist is no longer around to defend his or her ideas, it becomes difficult to ascertain the intention behind the work. Not that the artist's intention is necessarily the last word—as Duchamp made clear in his famous lecture in Houston, titled "The Creative Act" (1957)—but it does serve as an indicator or pointer to establish the course that one might follow to order to arrive at an accurate understanding. This is particularly evident if the work has a conceptual or, shall we say, allegorical intention. Kaprow's



Above: Josiah McElheny, *Yard (Junkyard)*, 1961/2009. Photograph, 90 x 30 ft. Left: Sharon Hayes, *Yard (Sign)*, 1961/2009. Signs, dimensions variable.



Yard (1961) has both. Its premise is conceptual, meaning that it is anti-aesthetic (against form), interactive (against the separation of the perceiver and the perceived), and performative (against the viewer having a static relationship with the work). By challenging the venerated notion of beauty, *Yard* implicitly attacked the established notion of formalism. Art did not have to be separated into mediumistic categories, such as painting and sculpture, in order to pursue a resolution through abstract form; instead, it could exist somewhere in

between, namely in the space of the everyday world. By encouraging an interactive relationship with the work, people were allowed to touch, feel, smell, hold, and rearrange the materials, in this case, used tires. Viewers were not relegated to standing outside or remaining distant from the work but were given license to transform themselves into participants.

The allegorical intention is more complex, but something that Kaprow was always willing to engage. In other words, the work might remind the artist (or viewer) of another place or time. One might associate it with a Zen rock garden in Kyoto or a blackened coal cellar. Either comparison would be acceptable. In 1982, Kaprow was invited to do a re-installation of *Yard* for the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin—two decades after its inaugural setting in the rear courtyard of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Even at that time, he still referred to the work as an “Environment”—not as an installation. The term “Environment” was closer to what he had in mind when he conceived the work. He wanted it to exist as a place where people could come and go and participate in the space. When asked to “reinvent” *Yard*, he wrote a statement reflecting on

his intention: "Put into the backyard, the heaps of old tires and tar paper felt somewhat cut off from the aesthetic of the inside gallery, and from the other art works exhibited there. It reminded you less of art (in those days) than of an industrial dump. I was pleased... I wanted to develop an art which would depart radically from the art history and contexts we traditionally associate with art."

In *Yard's* recent posthumous reincarnation, it moved back to its original location, to the same building that once housed the Martha Jackson Gallery, now occupied by Hauser & Wirth. Given that the interior has changed over the years, and that the courtyard is no longer on the premises of the gallery, curator Helen Molesworth decided to restage *Yard* as a series of three reinventions. In addition to installing a new version of *Yard* at the gallery, she wanted to make use of two additional outlying sites. Thus, she invited three artists to reinvent the famous work from their respective points of view—a technique that Kaprow himself employed throughout his career whenever he was asked to do a piece in another setting. William Pope.L was chosen to do an installation for the ground floor of the gallery, while Josiah McElheny developed a time-based project based on images taken of the "Iron Triangle" at Willets Point in Queens and ultimately displayed as an enormous 30-by-90-foot photograph in the Panorama room at the Queens Museum of Art. Sharon Hayes produced *Yard (Sign)*, a temporary intervention for the New York Marble Cemetery on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Each of these works was dated 1961/2009, thereby acknowledging the structural—though not necessarily the visual or even conceptual—connection to Kaprow's work. (The absence of any overt visual or conceptual connection is particularly evident in Hayes's work.)

I recall reading a short statement written by Kaprow in the early '90s, around the time of his "retrospective" at the Fondazione Mudima in Milan, in which he makes a historical distinction between his earlier notion of Environment and Happenings and what was being called "installation" and "performance" by a younger generation of artists, critics, and curators. His concept was about viewers being inside the work, whereas much of the newer work (at the time) was about distancing viewers by relegating them to an outside, more theatrical position. What for Kaprow had been tactile, a later generation returned to the virtual.

In the case of William Pope.L's installation, which comes closest to Kaprow's tactile and material concept, the accumulation of old tires is roughly the same. On entering the gallery, viewers were confronted with old tires piled throughout the space. Specially constructed rafters at the back supported piles of body bags. Pope.L recalled that tar paper was used to cover classical stat-



Allan Kaprow, *Yard*, 1961/1991. Tires and tar paper, reinvention at the Fondazione Mudima, Milan.

uary in the courtyard garden during the original installation of *Yard* so as not to divert attention from the transformation of the site into an industrial dump. Pope.L's body bags served a similar function, deflecting earlier anti-aesthetic notions into something more ambiguously political. The aesthetic/anti-aesthetic tension of the piece was further enhanced with Pollock-like cables overhead, flashing white and red lights at various intervals.

The primary ingredient that the three artists appropriated from Kaprow was aggregation: Pope.L transformed the gallery by accumulating tires, hanging lights, and piling body bags; McElheny built up a panoramic view of a well-known industrial site in Queens via a complex, virtual means of transcription; and Hayes replaced Kaprow's *Yard* with yard signs, thus designating a continuance of the "life-line." Each reinvention of Kaprow's Environment was radically different from the others, yet somehow a common structural thread wove through them. The detritus of time—the past history of culture—is not about an ideal state of being. The legacy of *Yard* is about how materials and ideas reveal themselves on a structural level and, by doing so, become engaged with life. From another perspective, *Yard* and its reiterations may reveal how life is perpetually given new focus through the discovery and reinvention of art.

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