

## Performing a River

Born 1927, New Jersey, USA

Died 2006, California, USA

**A**LLAN KAPROW SUMMARIZES his noteworthy contribution to Twentieth-Century art by declaring, "I separated the action of action painting from the painting part of it, and in a sense jumped into life."<sup>1</sup> Eliminating painting from art involved repudiating his training with two renowned advocates of modernist art: Hans Hofmann, a distinguished member of the abstract expressionist school of painters, and Meyer Schapiro, an eminent art historian. Kaprow's defection was initiated when he discarded paint and replaced it with straw, newspaper, and twine in a technique he termed "action collage." Kaprow explains:

The action collages then became bigger, and I introduced flashing lights and thicker hunks of matter. These parts projected further and further from the wall into the room, and included more and more audible elements: sounds of ringing buzzers, bells, toys, etc., until I had accumulated nearly all the sensory elements I was to work with during the following years. . . . I immediately saw that every visitor to the environment was part of it. And so I gave him opportunities like moving something, turning switches on — just a few things. Increasingly during 1957 and 1958, this suggested a more "scored" responsibility for the visitor. I offered him more and more to do until there developed the Happening. . . . The integration of all elements — environment, constructed sections, time, space, and people — has been my main technical problem ever since.<sup>2</sup>



## **choosing another stone there**

**Allan Kaprow | EASY (Choosing Another Stone There) | 1972** Activity booklet

PHOTO: ALVIN COMITER / COURTESY ALLAN KAPROW ESTATE AND HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY, ZURICH AND LONDON



## wetting a stone

Allan Kaprow | **EASY (Wetting a Stone)** | 1972 Activity booklet

PHOTO: ALVIN COMITER / COURTESY ALLAN KAPROW ESTATE AND HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY, ZURICH AND LONDON

Happenings are events that transpire on streets, fields, alleyways — anywhere but on a stage. While they are performed, there are no scripts, no costumes, no sets, no lighting, no roles, nor any other form of artificiality used in conventional theater. The substance and

the context of Happenings are continuous with everyday reality. This continuity applies to the performers. Happenings are enacted by people who would otherwise be viewers and observers. They retain their own personalities as they proceed according to a loose set of instructions from an artist. Allan Kaprow is acknowledged as an originator of this art form.

Everyday components converged in the 1968 Happening, *EASY*, when Kaprow gave the following instructions to students at CalArts who gathered at a dry streambed not far from campus to participate in his Happening:

*(dry stream bed)*  
*wetting a stone*  
*carrying it downstream until dry*  
*dropping it*  
*choosing another stone there*  
*wetting it*  
*carrying it upstream until dry*  
*dropping it.*

Kaprow provides a compelling description of *EASY* in the following text:

Each person walked along the stream bed until he or she selected a stone. Finding that stone was a personal matter. No one found his or her stone in the same place or at the same time as the others. The stone was moistened with a paper cup of water brought along and was carried in the hand slowly downstream. It was a clear, hot day. Periodically the stone was examined to see how much it had dried. One began to see that one had a certain amount of control over this process, depending on whether one peeked through a crack in the fingers or boldly opened the hand, exposing the stone to the sun directly. So for some, the drying happened in a few hundred yards, if they held the stone lightly or if the stone was small or nonabsorbent. For others it took a long time, their walking perhaps a mile and a half, since at least a few of the group discovered that the day's heat caused their palms to sweat and add moisture to that already on the stone. Exactly when the condition of dryness was reached was of course up to the individual to decide.

At that point the stone was dropped. It was at a place where no one else dropped his or hers. Now a second stone was required for the walk upstream. As reported in discussion afterwards, this choice was a little more difficult because the first stone had become a sort of token of the self or at least a "possession" on some dim level. The general feeling was that, as one wandered around looking, the second choice was going to be the second best. Anyway, it too, was wetted with the remaining water and the upstream meander began.

Since everybody was a lot hotter by then, the time elapsed and distance traveled until the stones were dry were as different from those of the trip downstream as they were from individual to individual. There was no correlation, no pattern. Yet the second stones had become, if not as private as the first, fond adoptions like the second car, and when they were dropped onto the dry sand of the stream bed, the satisfaction of completing the event easily was mingled with small regrets.<sup>3</sup>

*EASY* could have earned its name because it used elemental ingredients like stone and water, or because it involved the simple act of walking, or because it excluded sophisticated technologies. But stripping the Happening to such elemental phenomena cleared the way for the students to experience multifarious sensations they might otherwise ignore. For example, the work's simplicity enabled them to monitor subtle shifts in temperature, wind, and humidity. These complex and invisible environmental factors are typically engulfed by the clamor and speed of urban/industrial lifestyles. Likewise, *EASY*'s elemental conditions sensitized the participants to the subtle ways their behavior retarded or accelerated the rate of evaporation.

Neither was there anything easy about the conceptual implications of this Happening. The task of moistening a stone in an arid streambed led the students to interrogate their lack of familiarity with water beyond spigots and faucets; the construction and land development in the vicinity that diverted the water from the stream; the possibility that the drying of the stream was a normal seasonal phenomenon; the correlation between the rocks/water/riverbed with the stone/sweat/palm; that lack of flowing liquid indicated the absence of a habitat for many living entities. Kaprow explains, "Needless to say, on the natural side of things, the group was imitating in condensed time some typical geological changes of the earth's surface: the land rises, and water erodes it, carrying up what was down and down what was up."<sup>4</sup>

There was also nothing simplistic about the pooling of creative inputs to generate *EASY*. The students were fully implicated in the Happening's unfolding narrative. Kaprow established the work's parameters, but it was the participants whose movements constituted its composition, whose tempos determined its duration, and whose experiences constructed its meaning. Furthermore, Kaprow allowed the

processes and interactions that drive ecosystems to play formative roles in his work. The porosity of stone, the angle of the sun, and the strength of the wind determined his work's duration. In this manner participants who were accustomed to think of intervals in social terms — three-act play, eight-hour workday, two-week vacation, one-year membership, and twenty-year mortgage — became tuned to temporal units inherent to ecosystems.

The final disposition of *EASY* is ultimately disruptive to art conventions. Kaprow insisted that Happenings only endure as “unplanned gossip” told by the participants.<sup>5</sup> The photographs and text that present *EASY* are not documentation of the event with the students. They were shot later as a score enabling people to construct the Happening at some future date, as musicians write scores of music. Furthermore, Kaprow presented these visuals as instruction manuals, not art. In this manner the Happening never becomes congealed into an iconic instance. Instead, it remains embedded in the flow of real-life occurrences.

Happenings diverged in so many ways from convention that Kaprow frequently referred to this new art form as “unart.” He explains, “It means casting our values (our habits) over the edge of great heights, smiling as we hear them clatter to pieces down below like so much crockery — because now we must get up and invent something again.”<sup>6</sup> The radical parameters of “un-artist” welcomed the messy unpredictability of ordinary life that had long been banished from art. At the same time, they discarded art’s look-but-don’t-touch protocols. By activating the body’s full capacity for sensual interaction with the material world, Happenings incorporated visual, aural, olfactory, tactile, taste, temperature, and kinesthetic experiences as they occurred in real time.

In sum, the apparent absurdity of Happenings barely camouflages the sophisticated examination of the prevailing cultural attitudes they convey. Kaprow comments, “I have taken my cue from those rare screwballs that emerge every once in a while in unexpected places, who are crazy to transform themselves into the Essential Absolute of each moment that passes through them and who are perhaps in that manner the purest living forms of art. . . . They leave no monuments (and I am tired of monuments, those tokens to eternity), no testimonials, but they know more about renewal than the rest of us. . . . I am convinced that the only human ‘virtue’ is the continuous rebirth of the Self. And this is what a new art is.”<sup>7</sup>

### Pioneering Contribution to Eco Art

By welcoming life into his creative practice, Kaprow eliminated art-ifice and art-ificiality from art. As he was digging this fissure into the edifice of Western art conventions, he was constructing the footing upon which much environmental art now stands. From the scientific perspective, Happenings are amalgamations of multiple art forms just as ecology is a composite of individual scientific disciplines. Both embrace the ever-changing, multifaceted complexity of real time and space events. From a philosophic perspective, *EASY* reestablishes intimate human/nonhuman connections that deep ecology also promotes. In both instances these intimacies are cultivated as a means to suppress the human tendency to disrupt viable ecosystems through, for example, irresponsible damming, irrigation, farming, and manufacturing that can cause rivers to run dry. This theme has grown in significance and urgency since Kaprow helped introduce it into eco art.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Allan Kaprow interview at the Dallas Public Library Cable Access Studio (1988).

<http://www.mailartist.com/johnheldjr/InterviewWithAllanKaprow.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Kaprow (1965). <http://www.lichtensteinfoundation.org/allankaprow.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Allan Kaprow, “Easy,” *Art in America*, July/August, 1974, 73.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

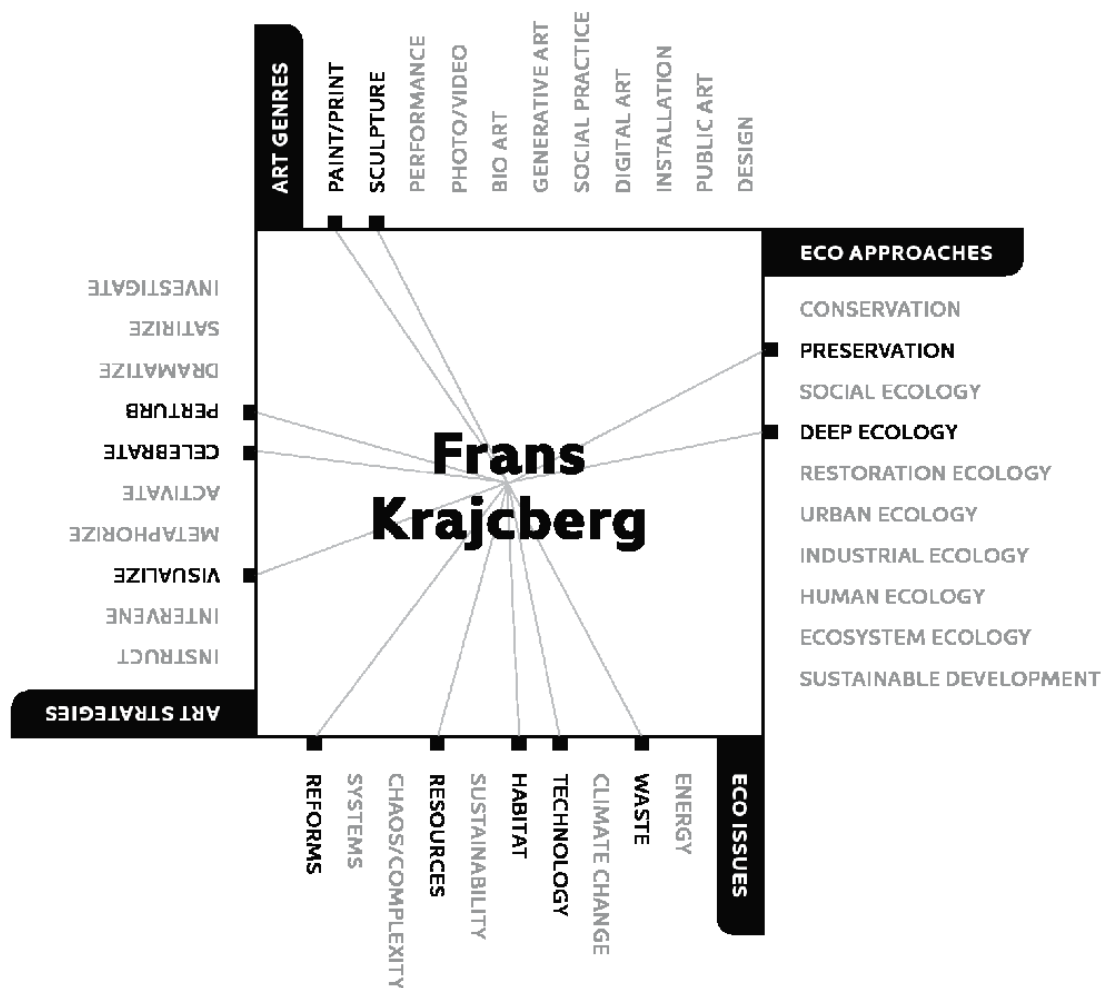
<sup>5</sup> Allan Kaprow interview with Robert C. Morgan, *Journal of Contemporary Art*. <http://www.jca-online.com/kaprow.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Allan Kaprow, *Untitled Essay and Other Works Allan Kaprow* (1958), originally published as a Great Bear Pamphlet (New Brunswick: Something Else Press, 1967), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

**LINKS** [Printed interview with Allan Kaprow by John Held, Jr. in 1988](#)

[Recreation of 1968 Happening by Allan Kaprow entitled “Fluids” in 2008](#)



## Integral Naturalism

Born 1921, Kozenice, Poland

**I**F YOU FLIP THROUGH ANY SURVEY of art history book, you will encounter landscapes depicted in realistic, expressionistic, romantic, abstract, pointillist, surreal, pop, neoclassical, and many more styles of artistic expression. Physically, however, they are not varied. All of these stylistic interpretations of landscape appear as two-dimensional paintings. Why not sculpture?

The answer might be traced to the fact that painting a landscape resembles perceiving a landscape. When a scene is perceived, information about it is received by the eye and then transmitted to the brain, where it is deciphered as a flat picture. In similar manner, painters render multidimensional mountains, sunsets, streams, and other elements of landscape as two-dimensional depictions. Vision and painting are formal and emotional experiences. They do not engage the material components of the setting: weight, texture, moisture, pliability, and temperature. However, these are precisely the qualities that account for ecosystems' ability to function, which is why physical conditions, not images, are of principal importance to ecologists, environmentalists, and many eco artists.

Frans Krajcberg is credited with a succession of innovative techniques that expand the artist's interaction with landscape beyond a visual presentation of colors and forms. He explains, "I do not seek the landscape but the matter of which it is made."<sup>1</sup> And again, "For the first time I felt the need to feel the matter, not the painting."<sup>2</sup> Since existing traditions of art lacked precedents for capturing the materiality of earth, forests, and beaches, Krajcberg invented them.

One of his signature techniques involved printing directly from slabs of wood and trunks of trees found in the forest. Unlike traditional