In the freest of these works, the field, therefore, is created as one goes along, rather than being there *a priori*, as in the case of a canvas of certain dimensions. It is a process, and one that works from the inside out, though this should be considered merely metaphorical rather than descriptive, since there actually exists no inside. *Assemblage, Environments, & Happenings* (1966)

—Allan Kaprow

Allan Kaprow is among the most articulate of the creators of the new theatre, and this ease with words reflects the fact that since 1953 he has been by trade a teacher, first at Rutgers and now at the Stony Brook (Long Island) campus of the State University of New York, where he is Professor of Art History. Considerably older and slighter than his brown thick hair and neatly trimmed full beard make him appear, Kaprow lives with his wife Vaughan and their three children in a large old house, an oasis of antiquity in a sea of newer and smaller houses, in Glen Head, Long Island, about halfway between Stony Brook and New York City. Paradoxically, this most radical of artists
is, by environment, a suburban family man with an especial love for shopping in the supermarket and playing with his children.

Born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on August 23, 1927, Kaprow grew up primarily in Tucson, Arizona. He returned to New York City to attend the High School of Music and Art, and then went on to New York University for his B.A. (1949). After a year of graduate school in philosophy at N.Y.U., he entered Columbia, obtaining his M.A. in Art History in 1952. In the late forties, he studied painting with Hans Hofmann, and in the middle fifties attended John Cage's classes in musical composition at the New School. As a painter, he had nine one-man exhibitions; and in the middle fifties, he created the first kinetic environments in America. In the late fifties, he also composed electronic tape for dance and theatre productions.

In 1959, pursuing some revolutionary ideas he had developed in Cage's classes, Kaprow contributed to The Anthologist, a literary review published at Rutgers, an article entitled "The Demiurge," in which he described "something to take place: a happening"; and that autumn he presented 18 Happenings in 6 Parts at the Reuben Gallery in New York. Since that time he has abandoned painting to concentrate on performance pieces which he has presented in places as various as Paris, Stockholm, Miami, and Edinburgh. Kaprow's recent works include Calling (1965), a two-day event in New York City and woods in New Jersey; Self-Service (1966), which took place in three cities over a four-month period; and Gau (1966), a three-day, six-part event on eastern Long Island.

As an art historian and critic, Kaprow has published numerous essays on artists of the past, as well as on his own work and that of his contemporaries, in art journals and exhibition catalogues. His essay on "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," first published in Art News (October, 1958), was among the most influential articles of the past decade. His manuscript on the new art, first circulated among friends in 1960, was recently incorporated into a huge illustrated volume which he also designed, entitled Assemblage, Environments, & Happenings (Abrams, 1966).

Kaprow speaks firmly and distinctly, with an accent that has ringers of both Arizona and New York, and the following text hardly indicates how shrewdly he exploits variations in both vocabulary and tone. As a teacher, he wants to make everything clear, even when his mes-

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sage is that matters are ambiguous and confusing; and he so rarely searches for words and ideas that he creates the impression that he has carefully and extensively contemplated all the problems his new art raises. Among his contemporaries he has an influence that is nearly as great as John Cage's, and over the years he has come to seem less a young polemicist than an elder wise man. He exhibits an intellectual's devotion to espoused principles that makes him unwilling to compromise his artistic ambitions. At one point, he attempted vainly to stop all vulgar usage of the word "Happenings," and his rather specific conception of his present work forbid him from participating in festivals where, by reputation, his work would otherwise belong.

The interview took place in the dining room of his house, a room dominated by windows, some of his early paintings, and a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf. Kaprow wore dungarees, a denim shirt, and mocassins, and from time to time served his guests soft-ice-cream sundaes topped with freshly picked fruit. He patiently loves to explain and explore his ideas; and even at the conversation's end, at two in the morning, he gave the impression that he could have talked several hours more.

[The conversation opens with Kaprow speaking of Marcel Duchamp's discovery of art in common materials—"readymades.”]

KAPROW — When he saw all these tools lying around, he suddenly realized that at that moment he had enough material for endless one-man shows. He said in a radio interview that to do that would of course be to defeat the purpose. He really wanted to be very selective and hold his punches for where they would be most effective. His purpose in creating ready-mades in that case was obviously editorial.

KOSTELANETZ — You mean that Duchamp was more interested in the ideas than in the objects.

KAPROW — I think so. He feared the objects would be considered works of art venerated for their supposed beauty. He was aware of how easily anything can become aestheticized.

Is this tape-machine automatic?

KOSTELANETZ — Yes, its microphone is voice-operated.

KAPROW — Beautiful.

KOSTELANETZ — Let me first ask what you learned in studying with Hans Hofmann?
KAPROW — I learned a great deal. I learned about modern European art, and that was quite important as a foundation. It gave me a sense of the difference between the environment I was living in and the environment I admired—the European one.

KOSTELANETZ — Why did you admire Europe?

KAPROW — It was something taught me. There was nothing better around at the time, except the just-beginning Action Painting movement in this country, which I knew too little about; and although Hofmann was a major figure in the movement, he rarely showed us his work. Even if he had, it would have essentially seemed an outgrowth of his European ideas.

KOSTELANETZ — If you were being educated now, would you have the same feeling?

KAPROW — No, of course not. Now, I'd cut my eyeteeth on abstract expressionism or, perhaps, even more recent work.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you feel any handicaps living in America now?

KAPROW — No. It's probably the most fertile atmosphere in the world for new ideas, experiences, discoveries, cataclysms.

KOSTELANETZ — What was the subject of your M.A. thesis?

KAPROW — Mondrian. I was examining, at a time when there was practically no literature on the man, what I considered his essential point to be. I conceived of him as a philosophical artist—a painter who used painting to destroy painting, in order to arrive at an essentially mystical state of awareness.

KOSTELANETZ — Mystical through the experience of rectangular shapes?

KAPROW — No, through the destruction of all visible marks on the canvas, a purpose which his rectangular shapes served; and if you sight Mondrian as I think it is necessary to do—with a fixed eye, unblinkingly, for long periods of time, where you begin to see the pictorial cancellations operating, then you arrive at a point where finally the whole canvas seems to eliminate itself and become an oscillating cypher. You become just another relation to its ever-changing proportions, a "function." I think this is what he was after; and as I've interpreted his writing, it seems pretty clear to him too. The paradox was—it's not a contradiction—that he had to use painting to do it.

Like so many artists, he was obviously interested in the work as a

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form of investigation of reality and a testing of reality at the same
time. For him, painting was a kind of ontological tool; it wasn’t mere
aesthetics. He clarified the difference between French aesthetics,
which was more sensual—embodied in the work as work and as a
good meal to be enjoyed for itself—and northern European thinking,
which was always more philosophical.
KOSTELANETZ — Also, where the French imply that through subjec-
tive creation the painter creates subjective experience, Mondrian offers
an objective creation to induce a subjective experience.
KAPROW — Yes, he was different from German expressionism in that
respect. However, Mondrian was actually opposed to subjective states;
he regarded his mysticism as objectively universal.
KOSTELANETZ — Doesn’t this link up with tendencies in contempo-
rary American art?
KAPROW — Very much so. If you wish to follow that thread, you can
see why he was one of the most influential Europeans on our thinking
—right through de Kooning and Kline and indirectly to the work
of Barney Newman and Ad Reinhardt and other purists of our period.
I also see it in a man like Pollock, who used a body gesture to
destroy that detached measuring stance which almost all good paint-
ers are supposed to cultivate. By being inundated in his swirls of
paint and by an enormous format which he could not assess in any
one glance, he finally put the whole affair on the floor and stood in
the middle of it. He created a quasi-environment in which reiterated
pulsations of flung and dragged paint seemed to cause a trance-like,
amoible ritual loss of self, first in himself and, later, in the observer.
This is not painting any more.
KOSTELANETZ — But isn’t this a contrary tendency—through the
most subjective mechanisms he creates a highly objective field.
KAPROW — It was a frenzied counterpart to the cooler Mondrian, but
it ended up with the same kind of idea—a non-aesthetic point of
view, which is essentially self-transforming, rather than pictorial.
KOSTELANETZ — Is the serious, perceptive viewer supposed to be
removed from himself?
KAPROW — Presumably so. The difference between Mondrian and
Pollock is only apparent in this respect, merely two temperamentally
alternative ways of arriving at a loss of self, or an enlargement of
self, or self-transformation.

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KOSTELANETZ — Do Happenings accomplish a similar purpose?
KAPROW — Well, some Happenings, not all Happenings. I would say that some of mine do that, not all. They serve different functions, some are commentaries.
KOSTELANETZ — In this respect, Cage resembles Mondrian.
KAPROW — Yes, very much, I think that is why I was attracted to him.
KOSTELANETZ — Do you consider yourself a "philosophical artist"?
KAPROW — I am vitally interested in those artists who are essentially philosophical, such as Mondrian and Duchamp; but in the end I prefer a more directly experienced sort of activity—one which only later may be examined in metaphysical terms, if one wants to do so. However, with my work, such an approach isn't necessary, while it is, I believe, essential for Mondrian and Duchamp.
KOSTELANETZ — Why did you join Cage's class?
KAPROW — It was purely accidental. Although I had known Cage's work and met him once or twice in the years before that, and although I was very interested in what he was doing, I wasn't especially interested in studying music. I was working on Environments in the mid-fifties. I was using, along with odors, many sounds. However, I wanted a richer source of sounds than gimmicked-up mechanical toys could give me. I had no background in sound whatsoever, and I didn't want to use or make music. I wanted noise, which had always interested me more.
KOSTELANETZ — What kinds of toys did you use?
KAPROW — Oh, buzzers, and these little Japanese toys where gorillas growl, and rattles—things like that, which were hidden off behind lights and behind barriers and so on. Nevertheless, the noises they produced were pretty much all of the same quality. So, I went to Cage to find out how to use tape-machines. It was a natural translation from being a visual collage to being a noise-collage. I wanted to know how to get a richer source of noise out of those tapes than I was able to do, and he explained this in a few short minutes, as I remember, and I was so intrigued by his class that I stayed. Shortly afterward, I found taped noise too abstract and needlessly detached from action; and so I returned to toys and then moved on to other sound-making activities. It was at that class that I actually did my first Happenings.
KOSTELANETZ — What did you learn there?
KAPROW — I think a point of view: to be free, to be liberated.
KOSTELANETZ — In effect, then, you felt that your background in painting—in abstract expressionism and Mondrian—still did not leave you free.
KAPROW — Oh, I dare say I would have gone to the same point without Cage, but it might have taken much longer. He was more encouraging than all of my painter friends. They began disowning me at that point, just before I went to the class. I was doing these Assemblages [pronounced the American way, with the accent on the second syllable] with noises and lights blinking.
KOSTELANETZ — Were they opposed to noise per se?
KAPROW — No, they just thought it was impure painting, which indeed it was.
KOSTELANETZ — What were you teaching throughout this period?
KAPROW — Primarily art history, but occasional painting courses, as well. I gave a course in medieval art, in which I had done some graduate work, and I have regularly taught modern art, nineteenth-century art, some eighteenth-century art, some contemporary American, a course in art criticism, one in aesthetics, and the usual humanities-type course which is soup to nuts. The studio courses, however, have never been quite comfortable since I left off painting.
KOSTELANETZ — Is your other activity—Happenings and the like—extra-curricular or part of your academic credits?
KAPROW — No, my position is largely academic, in the best sense of the word. Although I wasn’t hired because I was an artist, the fact that I could combine the scholarly and the creative gave me something of a special advantage.
KOSTELANETZ — How come, then, you don’t have a Ph.D.?
KAPROW — I was planning to get a doctorate, as a matter of fact; but on the advice of my principal teacher, Meyer Schapiro, I ducked it all. I was going to continue the Mondrian thesis—amplify it.
KOSTELANETZ — As you have developed your way out of painting, do you also feel uncomfortable teaching the history of art?
KAPROW — No, I enjoy that. What we do today does not discount what’s been done.
KOSTELANETZ — In what style were your earliest paintings?
KAPROW — The ones I did in 1946 and 1947 were very Matissean,
very deliberately so. In general, I veered between an intimate Bonnard style and a more constructivist Matissean one, at the same time that I was doing all sorts of Mondrianesque drawings and so forth. Later, I became an Action Painter.

Kostelanetz — Then, these paintings in your dining room here represent your more fully developed style.

Kaprow — Those are action collages from the last years of my painting. That one you’re looking at is called Hysteria, which seems an apt title since as all the marks are made up of the words “Ah” and “Ha” or the same letters backwards and forwards, with a few exceptions like “Ho” and “He.” They occur as a rapid dark-light pattern on pieces of loosely pasted cloth, against a very dark ground; so that the letters stand out rather starkly against the muslin. I saw them as a whole town laughing at night. When I finally finished— I had no idea at first that it was landscape—I imagined myself coming in on a plane over a town, and everybody in the town was laughing and the buildings became ha-ha-ha.

Kostelanetz — Did you do this quickly?

Kaprow — Very fast.

Kostelanetz — Because you were still working with these notions from Action Painting?

Kaprow — That’s right.

Kostelanetz — As a painter then, you emerged out of two stylistic traditions—collage and abstract expressionism.

Kaprow — From a French and sometimes northern European art basis, which was of course what Hofmann taught; but after a while, I became completely involved in abstract expressionist thinking.

Kostelanetz — I saw, on your porch, here, your last “painting,” which is a field of apples, pears, lemons, oranges, and peaches—a fruit bowl—all of which are individually pasted on a board, about eight feet high and two feet wide.

Kaprow — That was, more accurately, an Assemblage.

Kostelanetz — Why did you go from this abstract expressionist field to this three-dimensional Assemblage field?

Kaprow — Three reasons, really. I wanted more tangible reality than it was possible to suggest through painting alone. I wanted above all to be literally part of the work. I further desired something of my

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social world to be part of whatever art I did. Painting is far too abstract an art, even when it depicts recognizable images.

Kostelanetz — In other words then, your paintings acquired dimensions—a third and then a fourth; and in acquiring dimensions, they also filled in an area around the spectator—they surround you—which is very much like Pollock in the middle of his painting.

Kaprow — Exactly. His practice of being “in” his work was a metaphor, however, once the painting was finished. I wanted to keep that relationship real and constant.

Kostelanetz — Do you think that if Pollock had lived into the sixties, he would have gone this way himself?

Kaprow — I doubt it, I doubt it very much. He was matured at that point, and he had formed a crystal style. There was some sense, as we can see from the evidence, that he wasn’t sure how to go on, after he achieved that. He was floundering around, trying to go back and forward, and so I think that had he lived he probably would have continued in some synthetic way, as most of the other artists of that generation have.

Kostelanetz — After several showings of your own paintings, when did you create a work that distinctly moved into greater dimensionality?

Kaprow — In 1957. This Environment consisted of overlapped sheets of plastic material, on which I had sewn and pasted all kinds of things; so that, as people moved amongst these rows, you would partly see them. These people became, of course, diaphanous parts of the Environment.

Kostelanetz — So it was, metaphorically, a kind of painting that looked hugely different from one point than it did from another. In that respect, it attained a kind of kinetic quality, as the images were constantly developing and disintegrating.

Kaprow — Yes, you had to brush through the curtains—sheets loosely hung from wires overhead, although it was in no sense a changeable painting.

Kostelanetz — Did you introduce sound here too?

Kaprow — Yes, but the trouble with the sound was that it had to be performed at prescribed times. I was using a tape-machine, although I wasn’t satisfied with what I could produce on it. So, I arranged in the announcement to have a performance twice a day where visitors
could come and move about these sheets of plastic film and listen to
the noise; but this disturbed me, because it was a performance—a
concert, in effect—and it wasn’t as constant as the physical parts of
the Environment. After that, I tried a random distribution of me-
chanical noise and taped sounds, which went on all the time and
drove the gallery dealer batty.
Kostelanetz — Was that last effect a part of the intention?
Kaprow — No. However, I saw no reason why there should have
been a dealer at that point; he should have come in when he wanted
like everyone else. I wanted the door left open, but there were other
artists in the gallery who wanted their pictures protected; so it was
an awkward situation. Thereafter, I left the gallery scene.
Kostelanetz — Where would you put an Environment nowadays?
Kaprow — In the garage or in the woods, in the middle of the high-
way somewhere. To be honest, I’m really not interested in Envir-
onments any more. The reason is that they tend to be, however large,
set pieces. I’m really more interested in a continually active field,
whose outlines are very, very uncertain so that they blend in and out
of daily life.

Back then, the next step was, almost instantaneously, recognizing
that the people within that situation were part of it, whether they con-
sidered it or not. Some of them didn’t like it, which was an observa-
tion that made me uncomfortable at first. Cage was very useful in
making me feel happy with it. At first, I thought, “How can I keep
these people still? If one of them has a red coat and that doesn’t
work in the composition, can I get rid of it? If during the sound
performance someone says something that I don’t like, should I shut
him up?”

Kostelanetz — Didn’t you object to some audience sounds during
the original performance of 18 Happenings in 6 Parts [1959]?
Kaprow — Those were not so much sounds but the attitude of the
person that I didn’t like. It was aggressive.
Kostelanetz — This is a moral, rather than an artistic judgment?
Kaprow — Yeah, it had nothing to do with whether the sound
worked. It was, in fact, an aggression against me; that’s what I
didn’t like. The sound sounded fine, as I look back at it. I was just
unprepared to accept it then. I now recognize that work as having a
strict nature, where the freedoms were carefully limited to certain
parameters of time and space. Random sound of any kind, even well-intentioned, wasn’t really appropriate.

KOSTELANETZ — That is, the 18 Happenings in 6 Parts existed within the space of the gallery, which you had subdivided into compartments; and every sequence of events occurred at a specific moment. Not only did the performers have precise directions, but you even gave the audience instructions too.

KAPROW — Right, everything was very tightly imposed.

KOSTELANETZ — It was a staged performance, in that respect—within a fixed time and a fixed space, everyone was doing things on cue.

KAPROW — There was no stage as such; it was a three-ring circus. I had that analogy very clearly in my mind because I had three separate rooms in which things were going on simultaneously.

The reason that the performance worked in one sense was that it was very controlled. A reason that it did not work, in another sense, was that it was too controlled, and people do not like to be controlled in that way. I had no idea how to make people happy with the situation at that time; so I floundered about for a number of years trying to find out.

KOSTELANETZ — So, one development in your own work has been the involving of the audience.

KAPROW — The way I tried it in Cage’s class, in the pieces just after at Douglass College, and then in 18 Happenings was to break up the audience into asymmetrical groups and then have them move about at prescribed times so that their size and composition would change. That is to say, group A would not just move to another spot, but it would get mixed up with segments of group B and C and so on. Members of the audience would be invited to do certain things at certain times, because of a card given to them, which also contained the information that at a certain time they should change their seats, as in musical chairs. However, this kind of moving about of people was only a physical affair, done without their comprehension of the reasons.

KOSTELANETZ — At your direction, rather than their own inspiration.

KAPROW — It was more without their willingness. It is not inspiration that counts here; for if you agree to play my game, you agree to play by my rules, just as I would by yours. It’s a question of com-

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mitment. If you slice a person into merely two parts—his body and his mind—and you neglect one for the other, then you're missing human potentials. In other words, if you have given somebody an order and crack a whip over his head, saying that he should do what I say or else, then he might do it, if he is masochistic enough, but he might resent it. He might not do it very willingly, or inspired, or happily. So, I did this sort of thing a half-dozen times, but I could see that the audience's reaction was always a standard one, a cliché; and they hit back in one fashion or another. So, I gave it up.

KOSTELANETZ — To another sense, then, you objected to the fact that people were viewing your pieces only with their eyes, which is to say only with their minds. You wanted their bodies to participate also, because, do you think, no experience is a full experience unless it affects both mind and body?

KAPROW — Unless, finally, those two words don't exist. We have a verbal hang-up all the time.... This is where I'm very sympathetic to Cage's apparent contradictions. He will use words; and if the words imply contradictions, he doesn't mean that. Rather, he doesn't know how else to say it, because the vocabulary he wants doesn't exist.

KOSTELANETZ — How did the word "Happening" come to you, and why did you use it?

KAPROW — The word came to me as just an accidental occurrence. I wrote it unconsciously and without italics or anything in an article on Jackson Pollock, where I described the ingredients of the Happenings before they took place. This was written in 1956, the year of Pollock's death, and published in 1958. Then I used it in the title of the 18 Happenings in 6 Parts because it was a neutral word that avoided reference to art. Then the press and some of the artists took up the word, and it became the name of a kind of work. Then, I tried, along with other artists like Bob Whitman and Claes Oldenburg, to get rid of the word. They didn't want to be associated with it, and I didn't blame them. We failed, and now everything under the sun is called a "Happening." For instance, I saw in The Reporter a big title on the cover, "Bobby Kennedy Is a Happening." I read the whole thing. It was an analysis of his political motives.

KOSTELANETZ — How did you solve the problem of involving people in a satisfactory way?

KAPROW — It has since become very, very clear to me how to do this:

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You invite people to play a game, in which the rules are explained
and the expressive nature is clear. If they want to play, they will re-
spond. Once they’ve made that commitment, you can play your game
to your heart’s content. That’s why I gave up the audience.
KOSTELANETZ — Let’s say I’m a friend of yours, and you are planning
to have an Event. What do you tell me?
KAPROW — I spend my time thinking of the game. Let’s call it a game,
although the analogy should not be pushed too far. I simply write
down the nature of the game and send you a copy of it. If you are
interested, you will come to my meeting, where we will discuss this
game.
KOSTELANETZ — For example?
KAPROW — Hop-scotch, kick-the-can, stealing cars. Or it might say
we’ll do the following things: draw some lines on the ground, and
we’re going to jump in the following way. Then we’ll kick the can
across the street and hide while somebody tries to find it and find us
in turn. After this, we’ll steal cars on such and such a street. If you’re
interested in playing my game, then come and talk it over, and we’ll
decide who’s going to do what at that time. After that, we’ll do it.
KOSTELANETZ — When, historically, did you formulate this concep-
tion of a Happening?
KAPROW — By November, 1962, just after I did Courtyard, the piece
that signs off my section of Michael Kirby’s book on Happenings
[1965].
KOSTELANETZ — I think of Courtyard as a “staged performance”
because you had a fairly fixed script, that was closely adhered to, and
a fixed space. In your pieces nowadays, the actions of the primary
participants may be planned well in advance, but they involve so
many other people, often passers-by who don’t know what’s going
on, that the secondary actions remain unfixed. Who is to predict, as
in your Calling [1965], how people inadvertently in the vicinity will
respond?
KAPROW — That’s because of the elimination of fixed space. When
you have an outline around your space, in which all of your activity
takes place, then you are responsible for everything that happens
within it. The minute you break your space, a lot of dimensions
become unpredictable.
KOSTELANETZ — How did you conceive a more recent work such as

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Self-Service [1966] which took place in three cities—Los Angeles, Boston, New York—over a period of four months?

KAPROW — I generally work pretty much off the top of my head, as things come to me. In Self-Service, I had three ways of building up the material. One source was simply things that came to my mind, which I jotted down in a notebook over a period of eight months.

KOSTELANETZ — By "things," what do you mean?

KAPROW — Images, situations, activities.

The second source of material was things observed over the course of that eight months, such as some little kid putting flowers that she had picked outside in between the canned goods in a supermarket. They were daisies; and since I thought her action was very beautiful, I used that image, in connection with a number of others, in the piece.

The third source I very often use when my mind doesn't pour out sufficiently is the Yellow Pages of the phone book. I've used them for many, many years. I go about it this way: Either I'll flip the book open to some arbitrary point and point my finger down rapidly, and I'll write down what I find—it might say Vacuum Cleaners or something like that. Or else I'll use a chance method of some kind, such as pieces of paper with numbers on them, which in turn tell me what pages to go to. One way or another it makes no difference actually. I fill up page after page with these services and products, and they in turn may completely suggest the activity. Or I may start thinking about what I could do with one item on the list, such as vacuum cleaners.

KOSTELANETZ — At this point, however, you exercise some choice, which is to say some taste. You go to the Yellow Pages to find possibilities; then, you choose from the examples you pick up.

KAPROW — Either I choose or I subject these to chance choices, which I do not select but simply accept.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you use the I Ching, as Cage does?

KAPROW — No, that's too complicated. Now, I used to be an Action Painter; I can't waste time. I find the I Ching a beautiful book, but it is not a fast enough method for me, whereas Cage is inordinately bound up with careful procedures. I have seen his preparations for a very short piece that were just exquisitely done—descriptions of how he worked, the time he spent, the operations necessary to draw all the graphs. It was to me more of a Happening than the music itself. This is his most comfortable way of working; but it's not mine.

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In any case, I use as quick a bunch of methods as I can, to pull the choices out of my head; and some of these are, indeed, chosen by chance at the end. The thirty-one activities of Self-Service were chosen from several hundreds in my notebooks by chance methods. I threw a lot of numbers into a sack, enumerated the events in my book, and pulled out numbers one after the other; it was fast that way. These, in turn, were subjected to one further consideration; that was practicality. Those three cities were chosen simply because sponsorship was available in those places; they could have been any others. A winter-time event, for instance, was scratched, because those cities lack snow in the summer. I wanted to use laser beams in one thing; but after checking out the possibilities, I had to scratch that.

In composing lately, I freely combine my own ideas with suggestions made by somebody else or by certain chance methods. These are usually mixed up in some fashion so that the result turns out to be a give-and-take between my preference and what’s given to me by my environment. I don’t mean to be pure in these things; if I suddenly decide I don’t like something, I’ll chuck the whole chance method; if I feel chance is working for me, I’ll follow it all the way.

KOSTELANETZ — Are the days on which events can occur chosen in advance?

KAPROW — They are chosen by the participants to suit their convenience.

KOSTELANETZ — Why do you want a Happening to take place in three cities at once?

KAPROW — If I could have, I would have liked more. It’s a way of being in touch.

KOSTELANETZ — Why have a Happening in which each set of participants cannot see all the others?

KAPROW — Well, they all know the whole scheme. There’s no need for them to watch each other.

KOSTELANETZ — Do the people in Boston know what the New York people are doing?

KAPROW — Sure.

KOSTELANETZ — Because they are doing the same thing.

KAPROW — About one-fourth of the total activities overlap in all cities, but everyone knows from the over-all scheme what’s available to each city.

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KOSTELANETZ — Let me put it this way: How is the participant’s response in this piece different from that, say, instilled by Calling, particularly because the new event takes place in several cities?

KAPROW — Calling was a sequential affair, involving a fixed group. It was relatively closed therefore, at least in its events, if not in its physical nature, whereas this is conceived as a vacation-time Happening. Like many summertime events, which are often interrupted by other events—as a picnic is interrupted by rain—the activities in Self-Service are sometimes scotched, postponed, substituted for; so this is a relatively free and easy work. You notice that I made only the requirement, quite unlike Calling, that to participate in this work it was necessary to be involved in only one activity, although more are preferable. If it turned out that despite your best intentions your family needed you on the day you arranged for that activity and you couldn’t make it, you would still have served your purpose well. I think that the openness and flexibility here, as well as the permissiveness of it, really are clarified by the title, Self-Service.

KOSTELANETZ — These Happenings, then, are solely for their participants. They have no large effect upon their innocently bystand ing observers.

KAPROW — They may, although the observers may not know what they’ve gotten into.

KOSTELANETZ — Given my awareness of the development of your art, this would strike me as a distinct step beyond, say, Calling, which took place in the city and in the country on two successive days. You once wrote, “I try to plan for different degrees of flexibility within parameters,” which is a musical term you use as an analogy for aspects “of otherwise strictly controlled imagery.” This haunts me, so I wonder if you could please explain it with reference to, say, Calling.

KAPROW — It’s clearer, since I was referring to earlier works, if you go to such a thing as 18 Happenings; there, for example, I gave each performer a certain number of steps to do, while certain tape-machines were making noise, and while, in other rooms, other activities such as squeezing an orange or the showing of slides were going on.

KOSTELANETZ — Weren’t these strictly controlled images?

KAPROW — Right, but I did not say that these steps should be done rapidly or slowly; rather, they should be done flexibly within the time

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allotted. I did not say that you should squeeze oranges rapidly within so many seconds, but that when a bell rang you stopped. Flexibility was already built into my pieces, but looking back on it I can see it was a very slight flexibility.

Kostelanetz — The sequence had a beginning and an end, for one thing.

Kaprow — Yes, it was terminated by an external signal, even though the nature of the activity had no beginning and end.

In Calling, there was roughly the same kind of idea—that certain things have to meet up with certain things, that certain connections must be made, because certain sequences are necessary. However, here I allowed so much time between events to make sure there would be no hang-ups if, for example, there was a lot of traffic. In fact, I learned afterwards, some people had a soda between Events, and others went around the block five times to take up time and saw lots of amused passers-by reacting to the packages of wrapped-up people. This kind of freedom, therefore, I would like to amplify, and I think I'm beginning to do more of that now.

Kostelanetz — Speaking of that piece, I've always wondered why you had a sequence take place in Grand Central Station's information plaza.

Kaprow — Because that's a place that everybody calls for information. There was calling throughout the whole thing. My titles, you see, tend to be pretty descriptive; they are not abstract or arbitrary at all. They usually hinge upon a central point of the thing, and they are usually chosen after the composition.

Kostelanetz — The activity of calling, then, united all the events. In Self-Service, all the activities involve ...

Kaprow — ... not only self-service in the shops and the supermarket, but one serves oneself throughout. It is a self service, and also the word service is double in meaning, both in its ritual implication, as a church service, and the physical implication of serving oneself.

Kostelanetz — Do you still consider your pieces part of theatre?

Kaprow — No.

Kostelanetz — Do you object to my title of The Theatre of Mixed Meals?

Kaprow — I shouldn't object to it, but I don't consider myself part of any art. I'm really interested in a unique art; that's why I fight
like hell to eliminate all conventional resemblances, when I can observe them.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you mind your interview being included in a book with the word “theatre” in the title?

KAPROW — Ordinarily, I would have said no. I agreed because you said you have a liberal conception of “theatre.”

KOSTELANETZ — I prefer the most general definition of theatre I can devise—it involves people who are doing and people who are observing, whether intentional or not. On the other hand, I don’t object to Cage’s definition of anything that strikes the eye and the ear.

KAPROW — Well, for example, a Pentagon meeting is theatre. A guy digging a great tunnel underneath the river is a form of theatre. If we go into it that way, then of course my own pieces are theatre.

KOSTELANETZ — Didn’t you write somewhere that you would attempt to excise from your own pieces anything that had to do with art in the museums?

KAPROW — I would try to; I can’t succeed all the time. References to culture tend to set up a contrast, and often a conflict, with the other elements of the work which are not artistic; and rather than being at war with our cultural past, I’m more interested in something quite distant from the conventional arts.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you prefer the connection with games because you object to the categories of art?

KAPROW — Except that nobody wins in my pieces.

KOSTELANETZ — I mean Easter egg hunts, where everybody who participates has a good time.

KAPROW — Yes, with that post-natal type of game. It is not that I object to painting or theatre or music or dance or anything like that. It is that I do not wish to be compared with them, because it sets up all kinds of unnecessary discussions. People say that you’re not doing this right, that you’re not doing that right.

KOSTELANETZ — What distinctly separates your present work from theatrical situations is precisely that you have no intentional audience.

KAPROW — Incidentally, in what I call the normal environment, there are audiences all the time. If we get out and dig up a manhole cover in the street somewhere, as I gather some practical jokers do all the time, and if some people stand around and watch, as they do normally when people are working or something unusual is going on, then that
group is a part of the normal environment. They are not audiences coming to watch a performance; they may just pass on very shortly to whatever they have to do. Whereas if we go to the theatre or the rodeo or the circus, we are sitting there not just to watch a show but to judge it with a whole battery of standards.

KOSTELANETZ — Still, you and I have encountered people who saw certain events that happened in the streets, which they reported were great. "Let me tell you what I saw on Forty-second Street; there were these guys digging up the road." Those guys have, in effect, created an audience.

KAPROW — After the fact and unintentionally. Playwrights begin with this fact as a necessary condition.

KOSTELANETZ — In Calling, for instance, you created a theatre out of the main hall of Grand Central Station and an audience out of all the innocent bystanders.

KAPROW — There's a difference—they were innocent of the fact that it could be considered theatre. However, their recounting of what happened there is the theatre . . .

KOSTELANETZ — Maybe a theatre at second remove from the work—a theatre that arises whenever one person dramatically tells a story to another.

KAPROW — That's what I call the myth-making aspect of a work—the gossip-mongering that goes on. If you hear about a Happening but weren't actually involved, it takes on a reality composed of what you imagine, what you brought from your own experience, and what you've heard. If it moves you or if enough people engage in this kind of reportage or gossiping, be they stimulated by Vortex and these other magazines or just a friend's report, it is always the sort of thing that can begin to spread. If it catches on—if for some strange reason it has its finger on the pulse of everybody's needs—then there is some kind of magic attached to that. It's a tempo that vibrates through the daytimes of everybody and perhaps the nighttimes.

KOSTELANETZ — It becomes an event which cannot be repeated but which can be retold.

KAPROW — It is like the story of the ten men who sat around the campfire, and one of them said, "George, tell us a story," and George said, "Ten men were seated around the campfire, and one of them spoke up and said, Mike, tell us a story. And so Mike began . . ."
It goes on like that; as it is retold, there is a kind of hallucination that takes place that gives it a sense of suspension, a sense of magnitude, an aura of mystery that initially it did not have.

KOSTELANETZ — So, what you are creating is a situation opposite that of a book. If the function of a book is to take hearsay and make it permanent and duplicable, as we are doing now of as the thousand and one tales of the Arabian Nights are now fixed for eternity, what you want to do is create an entity that will in turn stimulate a variety of stories.

KAPROW — To push that idea further, it is a much more direct and participational art than the sort of indirect experience literature permits.

KOSTELANETZ — What do you mean by “direct”? A page of prose is certainly direct to me.

KAPROW — It is a direct visual experience, but the ideational side of it is not. It has to go through your head, and you have to translate the words back into felt experience; however quickly that may take place, it is still indirect.

KOSTELANETZ — If I see a body wrapped in tin foil being taken through Grand Central Station, isn’t that a visual experience too?

KAPROW — It’s more immediately felt, though. In other words, I’m listening to you tell me about those bodies wrapped in tin foil. Let’s carry it one step further: You’re reading about it on a page, and then you look at the phonograph that happens to be near it and then you think to yourself, “Gee, I could have seen that myself, perhaps, if I had been there at that time.”

However, right now, I remember wrapping that figure myself and putting it in one of those cars. I also remember passing by a group of construction workers on a street, who were trying to back a great big cement truck into position to drop a load of cement down underneath the street there. The driver couldn’t see much at that point; so one of the guys was standing out in the middle of the street, directing traffic in order to permit this truck to back in. He took one look at us and forgot to gesture; since he froze, the truck kept coming on until it almost fell into the hole.

KOSTELANETZ — So you created another myth — through your own actions, you created another extraordinary event. That fellow must have gone home and said, “Look . . .”

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KAPROW — I'm sure he did. His face was absolutely aghast.

KOSTELANETZ — All that you say implies that the more people that are involved, the more pleased you are.

KAPROW — If you mean inadvertently — on the gossip side — yes, of course; but in terms of a really conscious, willing participation, it doesn't make any difference to me whether it's a small or large number.

KOSTELANETZ — May I return to an earlier concern? What is the difference between the original situation of the little girl who picks flowers and brings them into a supermarket and the same event as it happens in your piece?

KAPROW — There's a big difference — the context. This is one event amidst thirty others, which constitute its ground; and the thirty-one events all together have been designated a Happening. A selecting and focusing process has taken place, and that fact gives that single action a different meaning. I observed the event and willfully made it part of the mesh of my experience, and then I used it in another context.

For example, Marisse was accused of doing things any child could do, and he answered, very cheerfully, "Yes, but not what you could do." Of course, the difference is that he is doing things that might be called childlike but not childish, in the sense that he has forty or fifty years of experience and knowledge. A vertical mark, you see, made by one man and a vertical mark made by another exactly the same might have a whole host of different meanings; and we are, unfortunately or fortunately, given to attaching meanings to things; therefore, when I ask or suggest that people put flowers into supermarkets and surround that gesture with a whole host of others to follow or precede it, the meaning cluster becomes very different.

KOSTELANETZ — In that case, how lifelike are your Happenings? Would you accept McLuhan's or Cage's implication that a good Happening is just like life?

KAPROW — No, I don't. If they were, then I wouldn't do them. I'd be terribly thrilled with life just as it is and would, as they used to say in the old hipster days, simply "dig the scene" and that would be it.

There are things which occur that I could never possibly imagine doing or succeed in doing so well. For example, that great Alaska
earthquake was fabulous, and the other day on a color TV I watched the launching of a rocket. It was a fabulous thing. Now here you have a nature-made and a man-made event, both of which are extraordinary to me. Yet they are not things that happen every day—they aren’t “just like life”—and even if they did, I would still feel I had to do something myself just to shake hands with reality—just to respond. Here is where McLuhan and Cage present a different argument. Theirs is a more passive position, presuming a greater and greater acuity of response; while I feel I’ve got to say, “Gee, that was pretty good. Now, watch my trick!” not so much to put it down but to join in the dance. The context, in this case, is life rather than art; and so we come back to the conclusion that it is lifelike but no substitute for life.

KOSTELANETZ — Then, what is it?

KAPROW — It’s a more attentive participation.

KOSTELANETZ — It’s a heightened game-like participational activity.

KAPROW — As lifelike as it may be, it is also primitive, simple, uncomplicated.

KOSTELANETZ — In the sense that in the primitive man’s life, the ritual in which he participates at night to bring down the rain tomorrow was quite different from his daily activities but was still very much an intimate part; and the telling of the events—the oral gossip dimension—is also a primitive thing, a kind of building up of oral folklore.

Why are all the painters involved in the new theatre so articulate?

KAPROW — They went to school.

KOSTELANETZ — Where their predecessors didn’t.

KAPROW — Not as much. It is a fact that though the older artists were often quite intelligent and privately well-read, the style of the time was to suppress that. It was a time of silent alienation and a growing resentment against the environment and against the glibness that seemed to bring success to everyone else. Muteness was seen as proof of one’s determination to find another solution to the problem of self-realization. My generation, which is post-war, had the G. I. Bill, where everyone went to school for free. To get through it, you had to learn how to speak up.

KOSTELANETZ — Would you say that the new art and the new theatre demand conceptions that are characteristic of more articulate people?

KAPROW — This may be a cause, but I would say that the most simple
explanation is that art is now part of a booming economy. Rather than being alienated, the artist is welcomed; even if for dubious reasons, he is still welcomed. His public presence is an ingredient of the times.
KOSTELANETZ — Do you feel at all alienated yourself?
KAPROW — No, of course not. I pay taxes. I own a house.
KOSTELANETZ — Do you mind living in what the sociologists would call a suburban environment?
KAPROW — No. I might have some reservations about living on this particular corner, because it is noisy. I might not like all my neighbors, but if I changed at all, it would only be to another place pretty similar, merely better in details.
KOSTELANETZ — Why, in addition to teaching and creating Happenings, do you write—articles and your book?
KAPROW — Because I like to live on more than one level. I enjoy writing.
KOSTELANETZ — Do you consider these elements in conflict?
KAPROW — No, not at all.
KOSTELANETZ — To return to your work, may I ask why you do not allow spectators—I mean, official, ticket-carrying spectators—into your pieces, and why you don’t allow cameramen to film them?
KAPROW — I do break my rules, always, for no other reason than to find out how to do something—how to allow those who have a capacity other than participation to be part of a piece, and I haven’t yet licked that problem. For example, wish the CBS piece [Gas, performed August, 1966] I’m trying to make the cameramen a functioning part.
KOSTELANETZ — So that the man who is carrying the camera becomes a performer while he is carrying the camera.
KAPROW — In other words, being watched becomes an element in the work. This still isn’t satisfactory, real enough. It is kind of a rationalization so far. I’ll beat it; it’s a matter of time. The solution will be a natural one; it won’t be artificial.
KOSTELANETZ — This broaches the question of how you record one of your Events for history.
KAPROW — Well, I’ve given that up. How you create gossip for history is the question.
KOSTELANETZ — Then gossip, in other words, is the way you wish to be recorded. But, what’s the cameraman doing in Gas?
KAPROW — Creating a perfectly arbitrary image that he alone can make.
KOSTELANETZ — His arbitrariness lies in the fact that he sees the event only from one point of view and with a rather narrow, somewhat clumsy focus, while at the same time actively participating in the Happening. Isn't it also impossible for him to do both at once?
KAPROW — Of course, the time that he is in one place and the time that something else is in another place, even if you have crews all over, will not allow the final editing to do more than approximate the memory of the event.
KOSTELANETZ — Why not split the screen, as when, recently, they showed a space shot and an important football game simultaneously.
KAPROW — They did something like that at Bob Rauschenberg's performance in Washington recently. They zig-zagged the screen with saw-teeth, superimposing continuously; but I've seen enough of his works, although not that particular one, to know that the sense of space that separates his events was probably destroyed by this technique. In fact, a film hardly resembles the thing photographed, to come back to what we said before. I don't believe it is a record of reality. It is another thing, a picture.
KOSTELANETZ — Also, the person who is watching the film is not participating in the Happening. He is watching the film.
KAPROW — He is participating in images which are on a silver screen, a frame, by the way, which doesn't exist out there in the street; and although it might look very good, it would still be a kind of gossip . . .
KOSTELANETZ — . . . as seen by only one of the participants, rather than someone who observed the total field.
KAPROW — And who can? Even I can't, although I might plan the whole Happening.
KOSTELANETZ — What attracts you, here, then, is that no observer can grasp the whole thing and that your piece is impermanent. The first theme is in contrast to the Western tradition of art, which presumes that I should be able to contemplate a painting that doesn't move.
KAPROW — Well, I've always been impressed by the fact that I wasn't able to experience anything completely, only indirectly or in part. For example, I might be walking down the street one day, looking in the shops; and out of the side of my eye, I see a pretty girl.
I get distracted. Now I’ve stopped concentrating on the shops so that my mind at least is split in its attractions, and then I hear, two or three streets away, the whistle of the fire engine. Then I imagine to myself, “Boy, what a fire that is. If I could get over there fast, I might see it.” But I can’t. Maybe, too, because it is a hot day, I have a desire for an ice cream cone. All these things have suddenly separated my attention, and the girl meanwhile has passed and I’ve walked beyond the window of the store that interested me before. So I have in mind now only the ice cream and the fleeting desire to go run after the fire. This sense of multiple choices has always intrigued me, partly because it is mysterious, partly because I know I cannot satisfy everything at once.

KOSTELANETZ — As a matter of personal taste, sooner than look at one thing for a long time you would rather look at many things for a short time.

KAPROW — Yes, and have the choice of where to concentrate my attention, knowing that I’ll never get everything out of it.

KOSTELANETZ — And also knowing that you cannot concentrate your attention on one thing.

KAPROW — Yes, because I get fatigued.

KOSTELANETZ — Isn’t there a close resemblance between what happens in a Happening and what you have just described as life?

KAPROW — Of course, that’s the way the world is, as I see it.

KOSTELANETZ — So, the art of Happenings does bring us closer to life, even if it is not duplicating it.

KAPROW — Yes, its model is life; but as a painting is not a model, so a Happening is not life.

KOSTELANETZ — Its formal model—the pattern of life — rather than its content model.

KAPROW — Right.

KOSTELANETZ — May I ask why you are so predisposed to impermanent art?

KAPROW — That’s America. It’s what is called “planned obsolescence,” an extension of the economy.

KOSTELANETZ — Are not most of us opposed to planned obsolescence? I would prefer more permanent cars. Is it bad for me to want things that would last longer?

KAPROW — I suggest that this is a myth of the wrong kind—that you
really don’t want a permanent car; for if you and the public did you wouldn’t buy cars that are made impermanently. Planned obsolescence may have its bad sides; and I’m sympathetic to the quarrel with it. It also is a very clear indication of America’s springrine philosophy—

make it new is renew; and that’s why we have a cult of youth in this country. Just like we can’t have an old car, we can’t have an old person; and it all has a great deal to do with that economy, or vice versa.

I don’t think that one is separate from the other, as cause and effect.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you then react against permanent art, even though you teach courses in it?

KAPROW — No, I simply react by making the kind of art which is more alive in my time. I can’t make permanent art, because it is false to me to make permanent art. It’s not real.

I’m not talking about the medium of painting. I’m talking about the fact that even in pop art—in, say, a painting by Roy Lichtenstein—

you have an ironic reference to a moment in the forties by the style used. It represents a kind of half-humorous nostalgia for the Boston Pops Orchestra era or the snap-crackle-pop era, the whole time of soda pop that was the childhood of Lichtenstein and almost every other pop artist. At the same moment, you have an indulgence in a holocaust of commercial attention and publicity that is bound to enervate everybody very shortly, so pop art acquires a built-in obsolescence from this very faddist attraction. I don’t mean that it was generated for fad reasons, but the way that it has been caught up in everybody’s sensibility is bound to bring on its end.

KOSTELANETZ — America uses up its favorites very quickly.

KAPROW — So, since everybody participates willy-nilly in this kind of rat race, let’s enjoy the rat race. Let’s take it right by the tail and play it to the full.

KOSTELANETZ — Therefore, create a work of art that will make news today and be dead tomorrow. . .

KAPROW — . . . so that it can make more news in another form. As gossip, it is continually renewable by virtue of its uneasiness.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you look upon the new theatre as something that will grow and eventually affect the whole course of America’s cultural existence, if not the world’s?

KAPROW — Not an individual work, but the idea of it may.

KOSTELANETZ — Would you want it to do so?

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KAPROW — I suppose I would be flattered; on the other hand, I would feel less free, if I saw something liberating become ingrown.

KOSTELANETZ — That’s a personal feeling. As an artist and critic, do you feel this is a good direction for art to take?

KAPROW — That’s too difficult to answer. I don’t know. Let’s put it this way: Everyone else is trying to make monuments, whether they are succeeding or not; and there are very few, like myself, who, just as a contrast to it—to keep a balance—to toss their stuff into the drink, come what may.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you get paid for doing a Happening?

KAPROW — Sure—not always, but usually.

KOSTELANETZ — Could you make a living from your performances?

KAPROW — I could, perhaps in a few years.

KOSTELANETZ — Would you like to do so?

KAPROW — Yes, but at the moment I can’t.

KOSTELANETZ — How many Happenings do you do in a year?

KAPROW — I usually will do nothing unless I am either commissioned, or I have the time to do it on my own. The average number of works that I have been doing for the past seven or eight years is perhaps three to five a year. One year was very busy; I did about ten.

KOSTELANETZ — Could you do twenty a year?

KAPROW — I doubt it, because it takes me two to three months just to work out the circumstances.

KOSTELANETZ — I know you won’t do any of your pieces more than once, but will you let someone else do it?

KAPROW — I wouldn’t stop a person, if he wanted to try it; but I prefer not. The plan is available.

KOSTELANETZ — Have any of your pieces been done by other people?

KAPROW — Once, yes; and I found it discouraging. It was cheaply done, in my estimation.

KOSTELANETZ — Aesthetically or economically?

KAPROW — Humanly. It resulted in a near-riot, which has never happened to me, although some of my events are pretty dangerous both emotionally and physically; and I thought the way it was conducted was full of clichés, self-consciousness, and cute-pie-ing; and these were the reasons for the riotous reaction.

KOSTELANETZ — In the audience or among the performers?

KAPROW — Everybody participated. It was done in a theatrical situa-

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tion, and perhaps that was also one of the reasons for the trouble. If my work is interpreted in a traditional context, it always seems to conflict with that setting.

KOSTELANETZ — Are Happenings necessarily the most propitious art of our time?

KAPROW — Not necessarily.

KOSTELANETZ — Why did they arise at this point in history?

KAPROW — The current media are too full of information now for us to be stuck with one way of doing things. We’re deluged by information—not merely daily information but cultural information, past and present, through our schooling and in magazines and television. These constitute such an abundance of possibilities that to stick to any one thing or any one discipline or any one developmental idea would be very hard to do; it reveals almost an obsessive discipline. That’s why those who paint in certain obsessive ways are so interesting, because it is not merely painting; it is a philosophical holding on—a desperation, a concentration against all odds. An example is these four weeks at a time. Artists who paint one dot in the center of the picture for three or four weeks at a time.

KAPROW — Well, Happenings are a medium, let’s face it; they’ve become an art form. Fundamentally, what a Happening does, which the other historic arts don’t do, is permit you a number of moves through different media and, moreover, through times and places that you would have to filter through another medium in the other arts. Even the movies, which are an analogue to Happenings in that the camera can swing from place to place and from past to present in one pan or just a cut, are confined to a screen. Now, we can actually do it and say, “Okay, this Happening is going to last three years.” In that sense, it achieves a liberation that no other art form has yet been able to do. I’m not saying that it is a better art form. However, I believe that because of all the complex needs of our time, this is more appropriate for many of us, where it wasn’t fifty years ago.

KOSTELANETZ — The new electronic media—movies and television

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—have made you aware of leaps through space whose structure or
form you would like to emulate.

KAPROW — Yes. You can see a movie and empathize, as you can
read a book and empathize; but you can’t actually do it—jump out of
your seat and into the Vista-Vision screen and fight with the guys in
the O.K. Corral.

KOSTELANETZ — Are you attracted by the notion that anybody can
do a Happening?

KAPROW — Anybody may do a Happening. The difference is whether
they want to and whether they are willing to devote themselves to
working at it, whether they’re willing to flop. I believe in things
called talents; but I’m not sure that I can recognize them all the time.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you know any unintentional creators of Hap-
penings, whose works you find excellent?

KAPROW — Yes, I see them all the time. For example, there is the
man who manages the Shop-Rite up there on Route 23A. He, along
with many others, studies how to be a good manager of a super-
market; but by the ways he has them arrange the products, the dis-
plays, the check-out counters, and the particular lighting effects, he
promotes, in fact, an unconscious ritual every Thursday night—a
ritual of buying and exchanging. I think these are perhaps magnificent
quasi-Happenings. The only difference is his lack of attention to the
fact that it might be something other than a means for making a lot
of money.

KOSTELANETZ — Why is it a “quasi-Happening”; because it is dif-
ferent from the ordinary run of things?

KAPROW — The difference lies in the kind and amount of attention
given to it. I can look at it more poetically than economically, and they
look at it more economically than poetically. When I’m there, I not
only have a shopping list and a certain amount of money, beyond
which I may not go; but also I have a sense of the spectacle, which
arises partly from a detachment at the same moment that I am in-
volved in it.

KOSTELANETZ — Here, however, you are seeing things that other
people might not see.

KAPROW — Right. So, if the artist has a special function, I’m not at
all sure that it is better than the manager’s or the car salesman’s . . .
It is simply that, yes, there are differences between us human beings—
between men and women, between artists and physicists and poets and
ditch-diggers and all—but each of us does the best he can at his task.
My job as an artist is to make dreams real.
KOSTELANETZ — This suggests the question of evaluation. In what
sense is one Happening "better" than another?
KAPROW — I've often wondered, because I really know that some of
them flop, that some of them read better than they actually perform,
that some of them that read badly turn out magnificently in enact-
ment, and some are just as interesting when read as they were in
performance. Even within those cases where there is an equal interest
in both means of communication, some are better than others. I can
usually seize on what was wrong in a particular piece; but as for
making a generalization, I confess that I really don't know enough
about the situation yet.
KOSTELANETZ — Can we say that realization of the elements is a
criterion; and in this respect, can we use words like tasteful as opposed
to vulgar? Can we judge that one conception is considerably more
imaginative than another?
KAPROW — "Tasteful" and "vulgar" are no longer relevant evalua-
tive terms to me. I prefer, among others, "revealing," "appropriate,"
and "realized."
KOSTELANETZ — How do you evaluate your own work in retrospect?
KAPROW — I naturally think over what occurred in each piece; and
I'm aware that sometimes things just don't come off right, while at
other times they do. The "failures" I find more easily analyzed than
the realizations. Often the former lack a sense of practicality—in
other words, they are poorly prepared, which is to say that details
haven't been thoroughly thought through; sometimes, however, the
conceptual center of the Happening is corny or sentimental. Tree
[1965], for example, I derived too easily from a rebirth ritual vaguely
remembered from some readings in anthropology, so parts of the work
felt like an illustration for a college lecture.
KOSTELANETZ — What's wrong with having too simple a ritual
base?
KAPROW — Rather than having a presence that is blinding, it betrayed
its source. You may later analyze and appreciate all the sources of this
and that; but while it is going on and being conceived, it must seem
overwhelmingly present—be itself, not about something else.

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KOSTELANETZ — Is your "conception-censor" more efficient today?
KAPROW — Yes.
KOSTELANETZ — Where do you think your pieces fail nowadays?
KAPROW — They fail, if they do, in expecting too much out of people—too much devotion. For example, in allowing so much freedom and in not checking up on anybody—not even communicating with them—and in going around the world and working with groups I'll never meet again, the assumption on my part is that they are great—great with self, great with invention, with response and with responsibility. The fact is that they are lazy, just like me and everybody else. Without me, very often, their devotion, which at first was genuine, flags; and the next thing you know, they forget all about it and don't show up. These are the elements which are still dissatisfying.
KOSTELANETZ — Perhaps because your script presumes too optimistic a conception of human nature, I'm struck by your insistence that people who participate in the Happening have to be really sincerely and honestly committed, or else it doesn't work.
KAPROW — I think they should be, but sometimes they're not. If they find themselves caught up in something which then turns them on, then they really go at it, so I'm sold. I don't check up, because I'm just another participant. This has happened, as it does in many other things. The reverse, however, is sometimes the case. Participants will develop a great idea of what it is going to be, and then when they find out what degree of commitment is required, they turn off, because they find it too much work, or have something better to do, or they think it is embarrassing when they finally get into it.
KOSTELANETZ — What are your politics?
KAPROW — They are, I guess, a little bit of a hold-over from the old days—somewhat apolitical, essentially anarchistic in leaning rather than in action. I see the irony in politics too much; politics is all a matter of ambition and, yet, terribly necessary. There are no new great ideologies today, as far as I can see. Surely you have local causes, such as civil rights and peace movements and things like that; but these are not essential philosophical problems, it seems to me. I will support, in whatever way I can, local causes. I once considered doing a "in-from" as a Happening, but I decided not to, because I thought it would be bad politics, if it were good art. I believe educational and
economic reforms—sometimes even guns—to be a lot more effective.

KOSTELANETZ — Would you like to see more Happenings in America?

KAPROW — No, I think there are just enough—sufficient opportunity for everyone interested to work when he wants.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you think the movement might become too much of a fad, as they say?

KAPROW — It’s possible.

KOSTELANETZ — Does this frighten you?

KAPROW — Yes, because I’d just have to run faster away from it. That’s all. I’d have to think of new ways to obscure my presence and yet make it felt.

KOSTELANETZ — Why obscure yourself?

KAPROW — For the sake of the freedom to work as playfully as possible. Public attention makes one too “serious”—creates a false sense of public responsibility.

KOSTELANETZ — Do you now think of yourself as too famous?

KAPROW — No. There’s just enough ambiguity and nonsense written about me. It’s the kind of “fame” I can endure, because I can’t recognize myself in it.

KOSTELANETZ — Does the impetus of the Happenings movement lie in America?

KAPROW — I’m not sure that it does. According to writings I’ve read from overseas, they are probably more active there than here, because there is much more support for them there and publicity about them. I’m not quite sure whether it is true, but I think the best works, to my knowledge, are being done in this country. Aggregately, there is more talent here—more adventurous work; the real vitality of the movement seems to be here.

KOSTELANETZ — What characteristic would you describe as peculiar to the American stream of the movement?

KAPROW — Its lack of theatricality, in the traditional sense. It’s free-wheeling, like hot-rod races. That’s perhaps overly simple. The explosion of shopping centers seems to me very characteristically American—that sense of big space, of the time that is involved in getting from one place to another (that we don’t seem to pay any attention to), and the sense of vast scale, to me, is a very American experience.

KOSTELANETZ — That sense of unbounded space.

ALLAN KAPROW — 131
KAPROW — Now some of my colleagues—in South America and Germany and elsewhere—are very interested in the possibility of what would be a world-wide Happening; yet I'm almost positive that the idea was stimulated here.

KOSTELANETZ — Aren't you now involved in a smaller version of this—a Happening to take place in three countries?

KAPROW — This one will be, unlike my Self-Service, so coordinated that we will actually synchronize our watches. We will each prepare one activity, a copy of which will be sent to the other two; so that each of us will perform three activities by clockwork. Hopefully, we'll be joined by Telstar and other such media so that we can be at once in touch with one another.

KOSTELANETZ — If Telstar has the power to make a historical event happen at once around the world, so you want to create an artistic event that can happen simultaneously around the world.

KAPROW — Right. We don't think of California as impossibly far away, and the fact that, in Self-Service, prescribed events happen in three cities brings our distances closer; yet of course we are actually far away. So we experience at once the paradox of separation—the fact that people are not in literal touch with one another—and the fact that we are all in imaginary touch.

KOSTELANETZ — Are those themes the content, as we say, of a three-city or three-country piece?

KAPROW — They are part of the content.

KOSTELANETZ — The other part being the events themselves.

KAPROW — Yes. As for the three-country Happening, so far, I haven't convinced Telstar to cooperate.

KOSTELANETZ — Does one learn anything from participating in your events?

KAPROW — One becomes more attentive.

KOSTELANETZ — Omniscient, as Cage says.

KAPROW — Oh, no. This is impossible; that is presumptuous. Besides, you'd go crazy paying attention to everything. One becomes more attentive to the things that might engage one thereafter. So many things we don't pay attention to just go on. As such, both you and the world are better for it.

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