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FANTASTIC IDEAS and where to find them

To stage a new perspective & Thoughts on how to alter the way we think

BFA

Avdeling Kunstakademiet 2019

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FANTASTIC IDEAS *and where to find them*

To stage a new perspective -----
& Thoughts on how to alter the way we think-----



----- *An essay by Niels Munk Plum*
oslo national academy of the arts



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Trying to put on a show is a complex thing to do. Not only because there can be many ways and methods to put on a show, but also - or maybe especially - because of the many conventions and expectations one has to deal with. How will I as an artist, manage to create in relation to the already existing rules implemented by what have been done in the past?

I believe that in order to create something *new*, ideas have to be transformed into physical notions or gestures that establishes a space for the spectator to enter. Imbedded in the artwork is the knowledge of what is normal and what is not. The point of view of the artwork, which have been moulded and objectified into *something* through the ideas in the artistic process, will thus always be sent from one subject to another, by it taking up space in the world or in time, shaped as something new or maybe even *queer* – by being shaped as a work of art.

A statement: *Art must leap into the unknown, to create new ideas.*

An artist must use his/her queer perspective, to generate change.



Allan Kaprow and participants in *Yard* 1967

But how can an artist create something new?

Allan Kaprow's¹ first rule in his text *How to Make a Happening* is to “*forget about all the standard art forms (...) The point is to make something new. Something that doesn't even remotely remind you of culture.*”² But is this easier said than done? To forget everything one already knows – all the traditions the young artist are being taught and trained to pay respect to - is not easy. Nevertheless, for Kaprow forgetting everything we already know about form, is fundamental in the process of creating something that takes us someplace new.

In his text Kaprow tells us how a happening should relate to real life, be in real-time and take place in the *real world* in order to have a shot at originality. The reason is, that it is only here the non-

¹ Allan Kaprow (1927-2006) *American artist, father figure for happenings in performance art.*

² “*How To Make a Happening*” by Allan Kaprow (1966)

rehearsed happening becomes a unique one-time event. Kaprow underlines that the happening is not a show. It's not a theatre or a discotheque. It's a *game*. It's a ritual. And a "*happening is for those who happen in this world.*"

~

I'm going to start this text with putting on a real good show, something which will thrill you as a reader, which will let you in on a ride, a rollercoaster of experience within the form of an essay. It's gonna be great. Through the staging of a fictitious art show, I'll describe the "simple" (read, the word is complex) rules of art. The plan is that I'm gonna break it down one by one, and let the pieces fall together ever so subtly that you won't even notice.

It's a pretty good idea. You might say that it "sounds easier said than done."

Well I will let you have it!

I already know where to go. I just have to come up with the right words and ideas. Ok. Let's see.

In the show there will be a curtain revealing different acts of a performance to an audience. The curtain will somehow have to be both the main character and a comment on the form because something will be revealed behind it...

~



El Helicóptero by Oscar Masotta 1966

For Kaprow it's important to mention that the happening is not a show, but a game.

Argentinian *happenista* Oscar Masotta had similar ideas with his project *El Helicóptero*. When arriving, he divided the audience in two separate busses, to let them experience *two* different trajectories of *one* planned show. One group was transported to a theatre where several performances and happenings were occurring on top of each other, the only information they were given was that they had to follow the time plan strictly and to collaborate in order to be able to make it back to the buses in time. The other group went to an abandoned train station, and were told to keep an eye out for a) the helicopter carrying famous actress Beatriz Matar and b) the other half of the audience who were meant to meet up with them later on. It was already planned that the group going to the theatre would not make it in time, and that they would be late for the helicopter's arrival.

As such one might think of this as a happening. But by splitting his audience up in two halves, creating the possibility of two very different storylines in one situation, Masotta's work becomes something completely else. Hence, the only way for the audience to fully comprehend the full scale of the work is to talk with each other. By giving account of what has been happening with those who didn't share the same experience as you, the show gathers the audience into a body, a community. In this way the entirety of the work turns out to be communicational as it takes form through a shared experience when the audience deciphers the situation in its wholesomeness together.³

The show is not what it appears to be, the things visible in front of you is not the art. It's the situation created, it's the thing that you are participating in and give life to through your understanding, translation and *your* retelling of what occurred. The substance of the artwork is both defined by the form and the material, but then it lives on through the ideas accumulated and the retelling.

~

Someone is appearing through the curtain. A performer looks at you awaitingly. A sound accompanies the entrance of the person. To start up with, it sounds like a horse galloping over a field. The performer waits for the galloping to transform into an ambient rhythm, before his/her speech begins. The words start to emerge flowingly from his/her mouth in a sequence like pearls on a string. The tone of voice is soothing and hypnotic. A fantastic narrative start to materialize. The situation is a performance, the material is obvious, a curtain and a performer, a sound and a text. Some very usual objects having to appear on a stage. The curtain reveals the spectacle, but also addresses the context of the performance. The sound underlines the staged situation. The performer, performing memorized words, words you have no chance of at all remembering, that however, in their presence, make you able to enter (by translating) a new domain of ideas.

~

Through clothing his narrative in grand gestures and seemingly fantastic titles, the Avant Garde and experimental artist Jack Smith⁴ questions our expectations to something being good or bad. He describes the 'good' performance as "*as surprising as a well operating motor after a long drive.*" Smith means that in this situation you can be satisfied, but never surprised. In this way, the form of classical theatre (read: *memorizing the words of a script*) functions as a well operating motor. In his practice Smith also underlines the importance of how to deal with the moment where the artwork is being staged and turns public. Smith finds it crucial for the performer to be thinking, improvising and acting as him- or herself whilst performing on stage.

An idol of his was the late actress Maria Montez, a figure from the 1940's Hollywood scene, infamous for her acting traits. Smith states that Montez never really was acting, she was always just being herself. Her love of being the centre of attention was overshadowing the means of being a 'good' actress, and as thus it was impossible for her to become an automatized and 'well-operating' performer. The authentic self would always emerge through her performances and give new life to the script and to the stage. 'Being' a 'bad' actress, Montez allowed for something new to happen during her performances, as she created space for real life to enter the stage.

Smith states that within the tradition of theatre and cinema, we generally rely on good technique and scripting. Smith goes in opposition to this as he states "*Images evoke feelings and ideas that are*

³ "After Pop, We Dematerialize" by Oscar Masotta (1967)

⁴ Jack Smith (1932-1989) Filmmaker and performance artist. Played an important role within the avant-garde scene in New York City of the 1960-70's.

suggested by feeling. (...) More interesting to me than discovering what is a scriptwriter's exact meaning. Images always rise to a complex of feelings, thots, conjectures, speculations."⁵ And so, in Smith's films it is clear that scripting is not as important as performing in the moment of creation. By not relying on what is traditionally understood as "good" methodology, Smith's body of work opens up to new sensibilities and creates new spaces around his art. He urges the important question of skill, which is latent in all art. A work is never better because of it being *well made*: The work is only *better* if it allows the audience to take part of a fantasy which inspires new ways of thinking and perceiving art and life around us.



~

The performer is present, speaking the monologue. You are watching the performer, whilst trying to listen to the stream of words. Images appear in front of your eyes. A forest of signs and symbols. You are currently experiencing the piece and are manoeuvring around in it's substance which creates a binder for the words which is hitting you like waves travelling through the exhibition space. The text fixates itself into meaning in your head. You have to take part. You have to somehow finish the piece and let it live on.

~

Being present as an audience is one thing, but being situated within an art context can demand more things from us. To French philosopher Jacques Rancière there is an important point in the action the

⁵ "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez" by Jack Smith (1962)

audience must take to *translate* the artwork. He mentions the situation of a lecturer teaching something new to his students. Here he creates a distance between knowledge and ignorance. The first is what the schoolmaster possesses, he must teach to the student, what they did not yet know. He must be aware of the distance there is between the knowing and the not knowing. “*The human animal learns everything as it initially learnt its mother tongue, as it learnt to venture into the forest of things and signs surrounding it, so as to take its place among human beings: by observing and comparing one thing with another, a sign with a fact, a sign with another sign.*”⁶

All must we learn through navigating within what we already know, through an associative process of validation and if something make sense or not. We as people will always be in a place of not-knowing, but we will also always be in a place of knowing-something. Our ignorance is a part of us, as no one can know everything, and as such is *learning something new* the same as acknowledging the distance there is in between *you* and the *unknown*. “*Distance is not an evil to be abolished, but the normal condition of any communication.*”

~

Ok. So I'm not totally sure about the role of the audience in my performance. Right now you guys are just standing there, with the expectation of that something will happen right in front of you. How will I as an artist be able to let you know that 'that' something will only happen by the activation of yourselves? Like, how will I know that you are listening and that you are active in the situation?

~

How can we diminish the distance in between the artwork and the audience, and *can* we turn the act of experiencing art into a form where we can communicate and be together, instead of feeling lectured and missing out on something because of us ‘not-knowing enough’?

Inspired by Jack Smith it's an urgent matter for Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica to liberate his audience through the notion of *participation*, replacing the traditional teacher-student hierarchy or the performer-viewer structures with an open-ended *participant situation*.

Where f.e.g. the situation in the work of Jack Smith is somehow clear. - Smith being the main-character and master of ceremonies and therefore the one you look at. - Oiticica situates his viewers (participants) as his main actors within the piece.⁷ In the project *Parangolés* the participant has to activate the ‘art’ through wearing it. The *Parangolés* is various banners and paintings in the shape of capes, and when dressed in one, you are no longer a spectator but you become the artist. However, if Oiticica was dressed in one, he would no longer be the artist but become a participant. The autonomy of the artwork liberates its participants from the usual given roles.

Oiticica's robes were made out of a desire to transform social status, identity and also the logic of things. Being a white intellectual from the upper middle class, Oiticica ventured into the favelas⁸ of Rio de Janeiro to de-intellectualize his practice by learning to dance samba. As such, dancing became a method for Oiticica to unfix himself from his place in the world.

With *Parangolés* Oiticica creates a form, which transgresses the already existing forms of fitting in to a society or art context. The work both dissolves the existing identities and communities to then create a new one within the context of the artwork. Somehow the capes place the situation *in between*. The work is both extrovert - giving an experience to an audience but also introvert as it reshapes the identity of the participant for a while. The piece places itself in between culture and

⁶ “*The Emancipated Spectator*” by Jacques Rancière (2009) p 10.

⁷ “*Toward a Deliberate Cinema*” by Irene V. Small (2008) p.10

⁸ *The slum areas of Rio de Janeiro are called the favelas, mainly inhabited of people by afro-american descent. It is zones claimed by poverty and crime, but also areas which somehow exist outside of the law, as the system is not able to enforce it's power and control over the many people living here.*

reality, using the culture of samba, carnivals and the system of the favela to create a new reality. Furthermore, it also places the body of the participant in sudden expansion through mediating a work of art. *Parangolés* creates a negotiation of the body being besides masculine and feminine while inhabiting the work. “*The Parangolé – together with the Rio de Janeiro carnival – dealt with a “transvestism” which was also a way of ‘travesty’ social and cultural norms. The proposition was not only focused on the symbolic realm but also on the real, aiming at the transformation of specific conflicts. As a result of the systematic use of this procedure, Oiticica’s Parangolé uncovered many controversial problems of the modern Brazilian society.*”⁹



Hélio Oiticica and Nininha Chochoba rehearsing in Mangueira, 1965

⁹ ”*Hélio Oiticica’s Parangolé of the art of transgression*” by Renato Rodrigues da Silva (2005)

the *Parangolés* points questions in several directions through unfixing both participants from their identities and from reality by placing them in a new context. This method shows that an artwork can exist in the interplay of shifting modes and positions. Especially when having a queer gaze at the settled positions, the artist can evoke change and new ideas. The strength of *Parangolés* also lies within act of dancing. That everybody can participate in the performance, without any pre-existing knowledge, position or skill. The work de-intellectualizes the situation by creating the need of activation. Oiticica thus repositions the understanding of what art is and how people should to interact with it.



Jack Smith works with the same notions of activation in his performances. Creating visual narratives, placing themselves outside of logical thinking, in an exotic world of faded Hollywood glamour and trash aesthetics. He lets his spectators in on a journey, where they themselves also have to think and translate in new ways, to take part in the situation.

We can look at the work by creating a focus on the subjective experience, but we can also frame it through the perspective of being a part of a crowd, who can interpret the work and situation collectively. Nevertheless, the viewer should be in dialogue with the work to make an opinion about it before discussing it with the other members in the audience, who *will* have had a different experience.

The two forces, - the subject in relation to the collective or the introvert experience in relation to the extrovert, - gives us a nuanced place from which we can gaze at the artwork. What is the role of the work, where does it come from, and where does it want to go?

~

The rhythm is still playing. The performer has been moving around in the space for a while. He/she moves in between you guests, and as a member of the audience you react to the unsettling activation of the space. You thought you were safe here in the periphery of the room, but now you're not so

sure. The text is still coming out of his/her mouth. You are not sure if you have understood everything completely, as it seems like you have been drifting off for a while. I'm not sure, maybe I should have planned something differently. Some more objects which could have kept your attention? Should I have had more performers? Is the narrative in the text clear enough? The words are there, I hope at least that you are trying to follow along. Or maybe it would also be okay to lose some people? I guess I cannot control the work within the minds of people. It must root itself, as Rancière said, within the system and experience of the given viewer, for them to navigate within the new unknown system. How can I unfix this situation and remodel the expectations of the people present?

~

Does an artwork have to *change* the way we experience life? Not really, it does not *have to* change anything. However, art has the potential of commenting, giving critique to and uprooting manners and habits within our society. As an artist I somehow find myself next to the norm, through having chosen a path that is illogical to a capitalistic worldview. The 'profession' of being an artist is probably neither going to make me rich and is in its nature risky and unsafe. This position I perceive as naturally queer, because of its illogicality when contrasting the norm. Working awarely from this perspective, an artwork will always somehow end up as commenting on the time in which it is created - from a subjective point of view.

Queerness can deconstruct our given normative ways, and cast a light on the decisions we as people take both as individuals and through our society.

"The queer narrative" according to filmmaker and writer Jerry Tartaglia is easier to define through what it is not. "*It is a cinema that stands in contradistinction to the mainstream production of moving image media.*"¹⁰ Cinema is an art form that reflects the human condition through narratives and images, similar to Jack Smith's methods earlier. Queer and experimental cinema is often created very closely to the human who makes the work, and as such it's hard to separate the work from the artist. Tartaglia argues that queer cinema separates itself from other genres of cinema because its author has been rejected in the pre-existing systems of society.

One could argue that queer cinema is created in the same way as Oiticica created *Parangolés*, through alienation, which drives the artist to translate his experiences into forms that challenge the existing ways. Especially by challenging the fixed form of narrating, and challenging notions that makes a work seem *right, well made or successful*.

Both Oiticica and Smith were flaming homosexuals, whose ways and lifestyle stood in opposition to the norms of their respective societies. Their queerness was a driving factor in their process of creating works. Queerness will enable you to see systems, categories, societies from the outside, and give you the motivation to challenge the existing frameworks and conventions. Both Smith and Oiticica seem to unfix the systems of logical thinking, by underlining the importance of letting people experience things in new ways. For Smith it was important to let the images speak for themselves or to let the actor define the moment through thinking and performing as him- or herself. Oiticica's works does the same when it lets its participator act as with a new body inhabiting a new terrain. The moment the artwork is put into action is also the beginning of a transformation, as the subject navigates through the context with new eyes.

Smith, Oiticica and Masotta all work with destabilizing the traditional relationship between the spectator and the work of art. The audience must somehow step outside of the *normal* to grasp the

¹⁰ "Notes from the Homo, Underground" by Jerry Tartaglia (2003)

situation and the underlying message. Even though the works have different messages and themes, their sense of working with the unfixd form is comparable. To challenge the *modus operandi* and the conventions of the art context, the issue is extended to addressing the means of our logic and how we believe something is right, or done in the way that “its meant to be”.

This logical consensus that give viewers a certain expectation to art, is the same exact thing, which Kaprow challenges us to forget, when letting us in on *how to make a happening*. It is somehow to throw all the rehearsed rules away to make space for the *new*.



Jack Smith preparing for Rome, Cologne 1974

Having an artistic process is to break up with the default of our society, and with the notions that *things* have to make sense; that you are born in a system being heterosexual or that science serves the truth and is the only way to explain the phenomena appearing in this world.

With logic we will remain heterosexual, conventional and trapped. When logic isn't there, new things can happen. When being unknowing, we can venture into the new, feel queer, but okay about it, because there's no mirror in which we can reflect if something is right or wrong. We will not have to worry if it makes sense. Nothing makes sense without logic, everything is allowed, and as such, everything makes sense without logic.

When the artwork serves us an illogical narrative we must translate it without our own understanding. We must experience it differently from what common consensus has taught us, and therefore we must travel off-road in our internal forest of signs and symbols - we must rely on ourselves being able to do the job of translating sufficiently.

Jerry Tartaglia states that sexuality does make a difference in art. From my point of view queerness will give you a distinct direction. I would state though, that becoming an artist is enough as an alienating factor by itself, as people have a hard time understanding the terms on which artists work, and “the rules” to which our lives are lived – “*how do you make money?*” “*when are you off*

work?” is frequently asked questions. Relatives and friends of mine can have a hard time understanding how I can live a life, which is not fitting into the standard template of living. This position as an artist, as a queer perspective, might be enough for your art to cast a new light on different agendas.

Is it queer to make art? Is the form of art queer in this world? Queering up the thought process and distorting the expectations to art is one way to go around it. Masotta made *El Helicóptero* with his focus on the vocal account afterwards and how the work only was able to become whole when activated through the spectators’ retelling. Oiticica relied on the spectator being able to activate the *Parangolés* through wearing it. For me these two works underline the importance of the queer social situations art creates, by making the audience feel alienated as a group, and not as individuals, but together in doing something they are not used to be doing.

Somehow the form of art is queer, even though it exists as a part of everything as well. Yes, the form of art has to somehow be unfixing to generate something new. Putting on a show should not just be a display of skill. It is generated in the real world, happens real time and the receivers are real people. Art has to be generous and keep giving to the viewer. It’s important to never take a moment for granted, as we as artists have the opportunity to create works that can function as tools, which can make the receivers, understand things anew, and take all of us in new directions. There’s many ways of doing it, however there’s only one person with your unique point of view.

Let’s use it!



The curtain is installed and is hanging from the ceiling in the exhibition space. The performer is not speaking anymore, the monologue has come to and end. The rhythm is slowly fading away. The horse is galloping off into the distance. Your hands automatically start to give applause. As a group you and the other people in the room are recognizing the work through the sound you create together.

Words and ideas on display. The situation is over. But is this the end of the work?

No, the ideas have just been sent out, this is where the journey begins.





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