

ON BALANCING ARTWORKS AND 'LIFEWORKS'

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(One And No Chair II, 2018, Bergen Academy of Fine Art)

1.

In May 2018 I was installing a sculpture for a group show in Bergen. It was a piece addressing the relationship between objects, functionality and language, pointing to different modes of representation through play on the function/dysfunction of an object we all know and recognize; a chair. I had already been making these kinds of work for a while, generally referring to something outside myself rather than the person making them, and I felt confident in the direction my work was going. I worked based on the assumption that 'sculpture' is an entity in which the subject should not be present. The only trace of 'me' should be in the processing of the materials. That logic was based on the belief that my art would be more universal, and thus more credible to the viewer if I stowed away the presence of me as much as possible. When looking back it becomes clear that this also grew out of a strong need at the time to keep my art-practice separate from my life-practice, as well as the adamant belief that not only is this possible, it is also the best way towards sustaining a vocation within the arts.

However, a feeling of unease suddenly appeared while installing the piece. The day before the opening I wrote the following text, and demonstratively placed a pile of printed copies on top of the sculpture:

As long as I can remember I have been trying to hide myself. And now I am hiding here, in this text, knowing that I am probably still safe since it most likely will remain unread. (...) I see it as a huge unsolved paradox that the piece I am presenting, the sculpture I have made, claims to refer to an objective reality and an undefined timeline, bearing as few as possible signs of my own personal experiences, while at the same time being made by a person whose personal experiences the last few days have been filled with an unprecedented state of disbelief, resignation and fear. It seems like there is a Grand Canyon separating this sculpture and the life of its maker, and I cannot decide whether this represents a conflict or a potential. It portrays two widely different people; the artist making the sculpture, and the person making up the artist. I fear this split. And in the last few days I have felt it grow wider, the two sides leaning further and further away from each other in opposite directions and in the process dissolving all those frail mental constructions I have built to keep myself together, shedding all the tools I have utilized in order to be able to cope with myself. I fear being an artist is shaping me into two different actors instead of one focused being. (...) I am afraid for the lives I affect negatively by acting so duplicitously. It has made me shy of other people, drawn me closer to the conclusion that I might be better off alone, even though the rational side of me knows this is the wrong conclusion. Still I crave isolation. Two days ago, I saw my girlfriend for the first time in five and a half weeks, and all the time we were together I longed to go back, to be alone. We have become so good at being apart. It really makes me sad because it is not something you should be good at.¹

Even re-reading it now it still carries with it a sense of urgency. You get the feeling that there is something that needs to come out. It was the first violent clash where my art-practice and my life practice came into conflict, and one that made it clear that treating them exclusively separate was proving highly problematic. It was brought on by the tension that the artwork I had made, and the attitude I had towards making and presenting it, no longer made any sense. It all felt like a façade, one I was hiding behind, like wearing some sort of a mask.

¹ Excerpt from the artist's notes, May 22nd, 2018.

This forceful disruption of my up until then stable understanding that art and life should and could be treated separately, implied a radical shortening of the comforting distance between me, the maker of the art, and the artwork I had made. This brought on a whole new set of questions having to do with my role as an artist:

Do I make artworks because of the norm saying that making artworks is what the artist does? Am I exhibiting in certain ways because that is what I believe artists to do?

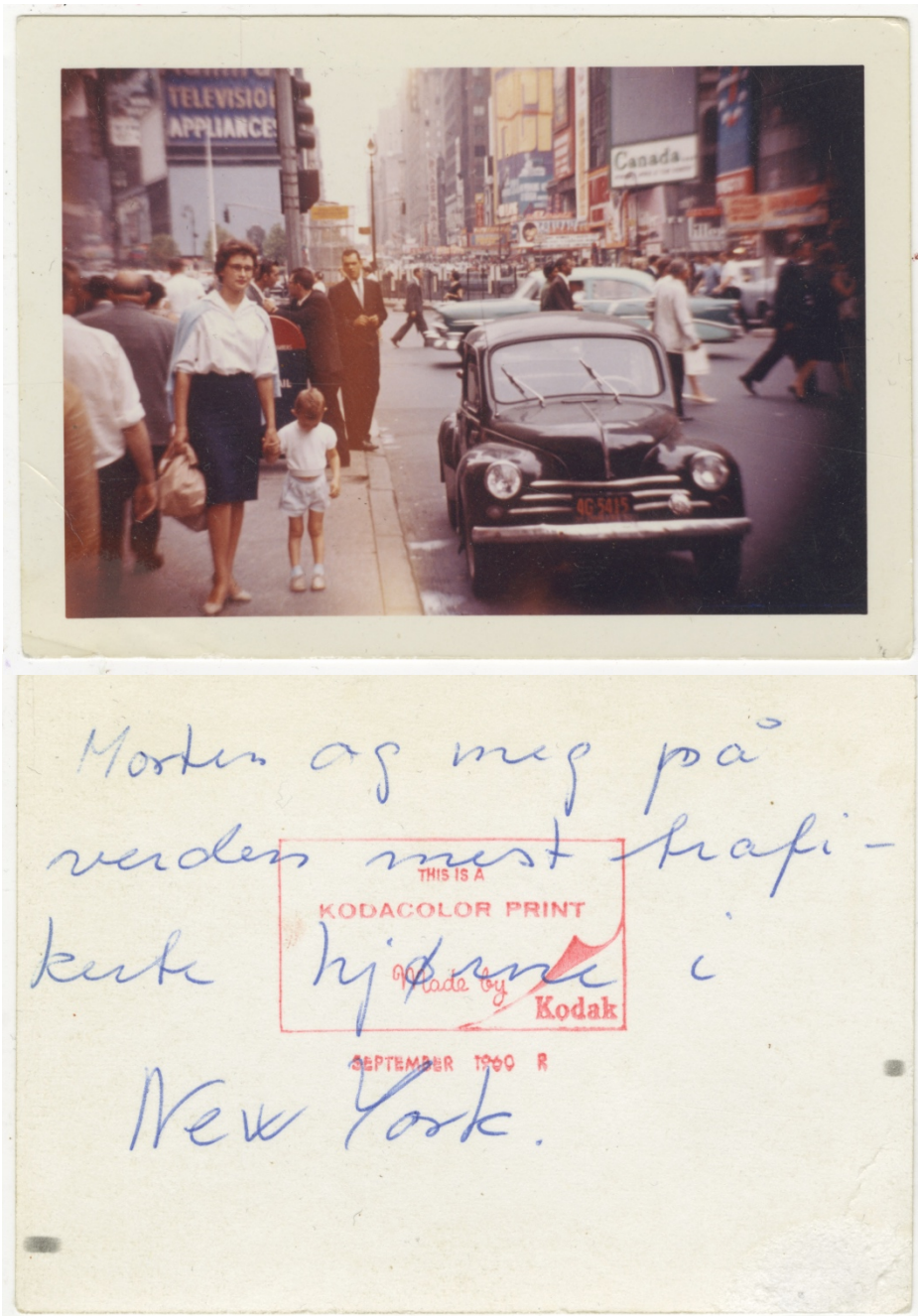
And, do I make certain kinds of artworks by imitating others calling themselves artists, to legitimize and insure that what I am doing in fact falls under the established categories of art, artworks and artistic practice?

Ever since the experience back in 2018 I have struggled with unpacking this dichotomy, trying to find balance on the often intangible borders between life and art – between my artistic practice, and of practicing my art – of art being a part of life, and life being a part of art. A central part of this has been about balancing the personal, considering how present or distant the personal should be when developing projects. But above all it has been about finding a form that can inhabit this balance, primarily sought through different modes and media of the artwork, but also by being critical and acknowledging that the modern western concept of the artwork, to which I have closely adhered, might not be the form I am searching for.

What is it that I am searching for?

Trying to name my dissatisfaction, the one that first surfaced in the text from 2018, becomes a way of attempting to figure that out. This paper being a part of that process of naming, I want to focus on two concepts that seem to run through many of my occurring problems: namely issues regarding autonomy, and more specifically, how the autonomy of the artist is affected by the presence of the artwork.

I will introduce this through the following example.



(Private photograph, Times Square, NYC, Sept. 1960. "Morten and me at the world's most congested corner in New York").

2.

I was recently presented with a box of photographs, left to my father after the death of my grandmother some twelve years ago. Since then it has been lying in storage, seemingly untouched.

I know bits and pieces of information about that side of my family, yet even though I was very close with my grandmother, like with my father today, there was always a cloud of

mystery and secrecy looming over past events and characters on that side. Whenever asking as a kid, perhaps having picked up a person's name overhearing a conversation, I remember being met with a mild reluctance to explain further. The subject was politely brushed away. Eventually it settled itself as something I did not question, not even being curious to know for instance why I did not have a grandfather, even though he apparently was still alive and living not too far away. It was just the way it was.

Today, well into my thirties I asked my father if I could have a look at these photographs left by my grandmother, upon which he happily dug up the box. We spent hours looking through the hundreds of images, all while he openly told me the whole story, at least his experience of it; his first years growing up in America, what their lives were like, relationships, people they met, life events, some joyous, some tragic, reasons why he lost contact with his father as a young adult and why they never really reconnected.

I found the photographs and the conversation we had because of them quite remarkable. And all the while I could sense a familiar instinct pushing itself to the surface, almost like an insisting spine reflex coming from the limbic system: How can I make this into an artwork? How can these photographs and the newly acquired information be transformed into a work of art that can be presented in a gallery space? How can I give shape and form to this material so that others can experience it as an artwork in an exhibition?

It is like an endless buzz. A constant humming drone.

One might ask why this is really a problem? Many would argue that this is what artists do, that this spine reflex is what drives and motivates artists; the urge to transform ideas or material into exhibit-able experiences through the artwork.

However, one should be cautious with generalizations such as these as they are drawn from a predominately western modern and thus limited understanding of both the artist and the artwork, one that has since bred and nursed the dominance of the white cube exhibited art object. The problem with adopting such a narrow understanding of the artwork in my own practice is that the transformation of ideas and material into artworks comes to resemble itself from one project to the next: in my case, it always ends up as an exhibit-able art object, treated and given form to fit a preconceived notion of what an artwork is supposed to be, how it is supposed to look like, be talked about, be experienced as.

I tend to uncritically choose a quite specific and limited form of art object, the 2018 sculpture being an example, effectively forcing a similar form onto every project. There is no longer form growing out of the idea itself, or out of whatever sensibilities the materials voice. There are only fairly similar artworks being made based on increasingly more homogenous base of research.

I think one reason why I haven't been critical of this repeating pattern in the past is because it provides something I believe a lot of artists are looking for: consistency. What seemed like a focusing of my work over time might in fact have stemmed from a reluctance to look beyond the framework I had created for myself. Repetition provides a comfort, one that manifests itself in what you make, how and where you make it, and in the ways in which you choose to present it to the public.

I have a variety of interests and curiosities I am sensible to, ranging from ones I have spent decades cultivating, to seemingly ephemeral daily noticings, encounters or life experiences. They all have the potential to fuel my 'work of art', and to me, so-called artistic research is perhaps best characterized as the negotiation between these attentions. What to include, elaborate on and engage with – and what to discard, archive or save for later? This negotiation eventually involves choice, and making these choices is perhaps the most significant aspect of artistic process. Although this is something we deal with in vastly different ways, having autonomy, or rather experiencing yourself as autonomous in making these decisions is a virtue I find is shared among artists.

However, the experience of being autonomous can sometimes reveal itself as being nothing more than a smoky mirror, a comforting yet deceiving sentiment that rather works to conceal the pulls and nudges projected onto you by external forces, leading you in one direction or another, shaping your opinions and instrumentalizing your decision making.

Considering the forces at play: the artwork, the studio as a place of art production, exhibition practice, the artist to patron/buyer relationship, art educational institutions, galleries, museums, public and private funding initiatives, one is easily overwhelmed by the amount of politics involved in artistry, in making art, in having an artistic practice.

This realization is a disheartening one as you realize that you are not in fact an autonomous actor, merely subject to someone else's, and perhaps also your own

subconscious, decision making. It reveals that autonomy might be more about how you feel than anything else, to paraphrase the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss.

Today, an artist is measured (quantitatively), evaluated (qualitatively), praised, criticized and judged based on the performance of the artwork one has produced, presented, exhibited, nowadays also expected to promote and advertise. If there ever was a distinction between the 'artwork' and the 'work of art', the latter pointing to the artist's doings that might or might not materialize into an exhibit-able artwork, there reigns in my opinion an overemphasis on the artwork.

I have come to realize that perhaps the main challenge to my autonomy has to do with the artwork. I have found that the norm of the artist as producer of artworks is in fact enforcing much of what I do. For the most part, my attentions are filtered, arranged and given value according to their potential of becoming art projects that can somehow be exhibited. It has functioned as the most comforting framework of all.

The consequence is not only that matters concerning the artwork becomes decisive in the day-to-day workings of the artist, it also comes to function as a funnel with a tight nozzle rather than as an open-ended medium through which attentions can flow and be treated in multiple ways.

If artistic research is the negotiation of attentions, then considerations regarding how, or whether, they have the potential to transfuse into artworks are ones that in my case pop up almost instantaneously, like in the case with my grandmothers photographs. I have come to find it increasingly annoying, as the appearance of these considerations so early in the process effectually creates a hierarchy that instructs what comes next: research that is deemed artwork-able ranking on top, while others are put aside into its shadow, underappreciated, some even forgotten entirely.

Forces such as these degenerate my sense of autonomy by feeding back into, clouding and thus effecting not only the choices I make, but also the motivations, curiosities and justifications for doing what it is that I am are doing in the first place.

It is the artwork, or rather the potential of something becoming an exhibit-able artwork, that decides what is considered significant, and insignificant, when it comes to my artistic research, process and production. Working on a prototype for a sculptural installation in the studio is considered significant and productive – it even feels good – while

listening to a piece of music or having a peculiar conversation is not. Or so the hierarchy informs.

Because of this a conflict arose – when looking and talking through the photographs with my father – between the importance of the material itself, the significance of that particular moment, and the impulsive, almost compulsive desire of somehow churning it an artwork.

3.

I find American artist Andrea Frasers four dimensions attaining to artistic autonomy helpful in navigating these waters. She describes the aesthetic dimension as “the freedom of artworks from rationalization with respect to specific use or function, whether moral, economic, political, social, material, or emotional”². Second, the economic dimension is characterized by Fraser as the potential “separation of production from the demands it meets or satisfies in the places and processes of consumption”, the art market being one example of such a place. With the political dimension she points to how artistic freedom of speech, conscience and the right to dissident opinion is central to artistic autonomy. However, what I find most relevant to the questions posed in this paper is what she terms the social dimension.

Leaning heavily on Bourdieu’s social distinctions, Fraser states that “the autonomy of any field is relative to that field’s capacity to impose ‘its own norms on both the production and consumption of its products’ and to exclude norms and criteria dominant in other fields – especially those of the economic and political fields”³

To me this translates into the ability to engage and resist, possibly even further the virtues of showing initiative and retaining integrity by refusing an intrusion that would alter that fields ‘norms and criteria’. In my opinion, this description is fitting to the external forces I have mentioned above, with the artwork being the most prominent.

While Fraser points to the inevitability that artworks become commodified, thus addressing how economic and political forces are projected onto the artist through the

² Fraser, Andrea. 2005. *What’s intangible, transitory, mediating, participatory, and rendered in the public sphere? Part II*, in “Museum Highlights. The writing of Andrea Fraser”, edited by Alexander Alberro. MIT Press: 56.

³ Fraser, Andrea. 2005: 56.

artwork, my concern is primarily on how this newly primed concept of the artwork feeds back in to affect the artist's considerations, interests and curiosities even before the artwork is made: in short, how the artwork itself becomes an intruding force upon the artist's autonomy.

Attempts have of course been made to challenge this. For example, conceptual artists in the late 1960s leaving the studio in favor of multiple site-specific works and work situations in Fraser's opinion represented "a radical shift not only of the autonomy of the art object, but the autonomy of art practice itself"⁴. French artist Daniel Buren helps to identify a split in the autonomy of the artist compared to that of the artwork by stating that it is the "autonomy of the artwork itself (...) that allows art objects to become 'what even its creator had not anticipated, serving instead (...) the greater profit of financial interest and the dominant ideology'"⁵.

But does this Heideggerian juggling of absolutes, this belief that one is either this or that, either here or there, either autonomous or a puppet, authentic or inauthentic, does this reasoning really provide any constructive momentum in my case?

Contrary to Buren, British philosopher Peter Osborne argues that "autonomous art (...) is an art that so appears (...) It does not mean that the artwork actually is 'autonomous', in some positive ontological sense, but that it appears to be so: it has the capacity to produce this illusion"⁶. By exposing the ability of the artwork to produce an illusion of being autonomous Osborne in my mind also disposes of the absoluteness of the term – the state – of autonomy.

How is this related to my practice? Well, I tend to pursue these illusory states in time and space where it all comes together, nostalgically shaping them in the image of a bygone state where autonomy supposedly once reigned, like it's something that can be possessed, both in art and in life. By exposing these as illusions, Osborne implies that they might in fact be states that does not exist, that they never have, and thus cannot be reached.

However, in keeping up the chase the illusions come to serve a purpose. Perhaps this points to what autonomy eventually is to the artist; the ability and opportunity to look for fixed idealized states to which one will never quite fully arrive, and to experience that this

⁴ Fraser. 2005: 65.

⁵ Buren, Daniel. 1971. The function of the studio. *October*, 10 (1979): 53.

⁶ Osborne, Peter. 2012. Theorem 4: Autonomy. *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain*: 3.

search is not instrumentalized by any other factors than yourself, even though that requires a pinch of self-deceptive denial. To sustain autonomy then becomes to continue the search, rather than ever actually possessing autonomy.

4.

During the Covid-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020, due partly to the loss of my studio, I found myself unable to produce artworks. Thus, the norm of the artist as producer of artworks became a problem. Putting out less work can easily make you doubt your abilities as an artist.

During the lockdown I therefore grew into a position where I exceedingly blamed the artwork, or the emphasis thereof, for my dissatisfaction, writing in my notebook that “instead of having the autonomy to make artworks, we are faced with a situation where you are supposed to make artworks to be able to claim autonomy. The artwork has become the indicator upon which the denomination ‘Artist’ not only rests, but also depends”⁷. Unaware of it at the time I was in fact only added to the hubris of the artwork by turning it into an animated creature with its own voice and agency, a certain somebody that “is forcing itself on the artist”.

However, as the acuteness of the first lockdown subsided, if only a little, it became clear that blaming the artwork for the deterioration of artistic autonomy is an argument that in my case suffers from a generalization having to do with the artwork as form. I have come to realize that my dissatisfaction with the artwork in fact has to do with a specific and now quite traditional form of artwork: predominately the western modern construct of the gallery-exhibitable art object, to which the political and economical forces mentioned above have clung to like tongue on ice for centuries, and to which the artists struggle of autonomy can easily be projected.

My point is that the dissatisfaction I am experiencing stems rather from an insensitivity to what counts as an artwork, of what an artwork can be.

In this situation I think it is important to remind oneself of the writings of an artist like Allan Kaprow, especially his thoughts on how the artwork relates to everyday experience, thus blurring the divisions of life and art. To Kaprow, the content of everyday life

⁷ Excerpt from the artist’s notebook. September 26th, 2020.

is more than merely the subject matter of art. Art is merely the convention by which the meaning of experiences are framed, intensified, and interpreted. According to Kaprow it is thus the meaning of experience itself – of what he calls ‘lifeworks’ – one should pay attention to, not the meaning of art.⁸

Even though this in many ways sounds obvious and self-evident, it is something one can easily forget and lose track of: that meaning emerges not from the content in art, but from the art in content.⁹ It is easy to follow the trajectory of the artwork, the convention, rather than the experiences it is supposed to grow out of. Instead, according to Kaprow, the act of listening to music, or smelling your armpits for that matter can become art experiences simply in their capacity as life experiences, despite whatever conventions the artwork might be inscribing at any given point in time.

I think that having this logic misconceived and often flipped on its head might be the source to a lot of my dissatisfaction.

So, my inability during the lockdown to produce artworks in the frantic manor I have in recent years, was in fact not due to the loss of my studio, but to the slowly emerging dissatisfaction with putting out the kind of work I was doing.

In the wake of writing this text I have become attentive to other works and artists dealing with these questions. Of course, performativity and performative practices quickly comes to mind. But the broadening of what counts as material in art reaches in multiple direction. One example I quite like is French artist Simon Ascencios 2017 “The Book of Rumours”¹⁰, a residency, exhibition and hypothetical book project collecting publically submitted rumours, in my mind eloquently pointing to how the so-called invisible also counts as material in visual arts.

Allan Kaprows own ‘happenings’ and situations, often embracing the simplicity and conventions of everyday life dates back seventy years. And it is quite paradoxical that I experience his practice and writings as so refreshing after all this time. I think that points to the fact that even though one is conscious of art historical precedence, it does not

⁸ Kaprow, Allan. 1993. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, edited by Jeff Kelley. 1st ed. Los Angeles/Berkley/London: University of California Press: Xiii

⁹ Kaprow. 1993: Xxiii

¹⁰ Asencio, Simon. 2017. *The Book of Rumours*, a residence and site specific project from March 2nd - May 5th 2017, organized by Bureau des Réalités, Brussels.

necessarily mean it is automatically integrated into one's artist practice. I had to experience a dissatisfaction with what I was doing to fully appreciate and understand the function and necessity inherent in Kaprow's work.

Recently, I had the same experience with John Cage's work. The significance of chance and participation for example, the balance between the artist as editor to elements out of the artist's control. Cage's attempt in his infamous work 4'33" of reducing the artwork to essentially nothing in favor of its environments also has a kind of renewed importance to me, and I think it resonates with a lot of basic concerns addressed in this text. Perhaps most of all the inherent impossibility in Cage's project of reaching this utopian state of nothing, as he himself ironically admits by stating that "I have nothing to say, and I am saying it" in his *Lectures On Nothing* from 1959¹¹. In my mind it voices the balancing of art and life quite profoundly.

5.

Recently I have taken an interest into mental images as material, induced and formed in the mind of a viewer or listener, one that is not necessarily dependent on the gallery exhibition space to be distributed. FM radio broadcasting is a medium, both temporally and spatially defined differently than the white cube gallery, that I believe can provide a platform for such ephemeral non-artworks, as Kaprow would call them, marked first and foremost by the act of participation¹². At least it is driven by a desire on my part to engage with the audience in a different way than with the sculpture back in 2018.

That said, I am aware that ephemeral works and media such as radio are not at all non-material and thus not a contrast to the art object or the artwork in an absolute way. I acknowledge that radio broadcasting might deal with some of my concerns while leaving others unresolved. For now.

The same can be said for the "B-flat Society", a non-profit society I have recently founded, working to promote and distribute the phenomenon that is the note B-flat through conversations, ephemeral 'happenings' and interventions, sound projections, archiving, writings and broadcasts. It is an attempt to challenge the compulsion that the artwork needs

¹¹ Cage, John. 1973. *Silence*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press: 109.

¹² Kaprow. 1993: Xxi

to be one focused thing, with a specific and unified form, exhibited exclusively in a gallery space. I am drawn to this idea not only because it invites participation, but because it extends beyond the exhibition in space and time, no longer depending on the exhibition or the exhibition space to exist or be experienced. Exhibitions can be events where parts of the society's work is presented, for example as a sound installation or a reading, yet the work of the society preexists and will continue beyond the duration of the exhibition itself. The society carries with it the possibility of existing and being distributed on multiple platforms, indefinitely.

When starting to write this paper I accused the artwork of not being able to carry what it is that I want it to carry. But I suspect the limitation lies not with the artwork itself, but rather my understanding of its possibilities. My dissatisfaction with the artwork has been bound to a quite narrow, modern western art object-centric understanding of what the artwork is, and can be. It has proven itself a hard bubble to pop, and I suspect many artists are affected by its resilience to some extent.

Instead of saying that the artwork might not be the form I am looking for, it is perhaps better to ask how the artwork can come to be what it has not been up to now. It is easy to fall into a position of rejection rather than trying to name what it is that you are actually after.

It is also bound to the continued collapse of the life and art divide. In my case that refers to the possibility of including all facets of life-experience in the process of art making, in many ways echoing Kaprow's audacity to acknowledge that "art in content" is essentially about meaning.

Yet, as Kaprow points out, one is given no direction as to how much of one element or another must be used.¹³ The balance of life and art is therefore an act of perpetual doing, of participation, what Kaprow would call "a never-ending play of changing conditions between the relatively fixed or "scored" parts of my work and the "unexpected" or undetermined parts".

¹³ Kaprow. 1993: 11

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