ABSTRACT

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Responding to the 1983 essay *The Real Experiment,* written by the recently

deceased artist Allan Kaprow, I discuss the "lifelike art" tradition and the lifelike

art I have created while in graduate school. This thesis also compares and

contrasts two western avant-garde art traditions. Various technological and

cultural changes are proposed as reasons for lifelike art's recent popularity. I

conclude that lifelike art is becoming vernacular, while retaining quality.

ART AND EVERYDAY

By

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"Western art actually has two avant-garde histories, one of artlike art, and the other of lifelike art…The root message of all artlike art is separateness and specialness: and the corresponding one of all lifelike art is connectedness and wide angle awareness. Artlike art's message is appropriately conveyed by the separate bound "work"; the message of lifelike art is appropriately conveyed by a process of events which has no definite outline. For each kind of art, the conveyance itself is the message, regardless of the details. Artlike art sends its message on a one way street, from the artist to us. Lifelike art's message is sent on a feedback loop: from the artist to us (including machines, animals, nature) and around again to the artist. You can't 'talk back' to, and thus change, an artlike artwork: but "conversation" is the very means of lifelike artwork, which is always changing." -Allan Kaprow

I choose to make lifelike art, in part, because it suits my individual strengths and temperament. I find the social aspects of creating performance art and collaborative photography are more enjoyable than a hermetic form of studio practice. But my personality is not the only contributing factor to my inclination to lifelike art. This is a particularly exciting moment to work in the lifelike tradition.

Technological, political and cultural paradigm shifts have made participation in lifelike art possible to an amazing degree. Like the altered perception caused by advances

Cafe Project, 2005 to present

When first arriving in graduate school, I invited everyone in my new department to tea or coffee with me. The cafe cart allowed me to have interaction with my new teachers and colleagues.

in the telescope, new forms of communication have drastically affected what people can experience. These advances have not allowed people to see farther, but to "see wider."

Artists issued an invitation to participate in greater "conversation" at least 70 years ago. Arguably, both avant-garde traditions have asked their viewers for a little work and involvement. "Minimalism, Conceptual art, and a host of other trends have validated Marcel Duchamp's 1957 statement that the artist performs only one part of the creative act – that it is up to the spectator to complete the process by becoming, in one way or another, an active participant." (Tomkins, 82) Until now, most people declined this invitation and both traditions remained relatively cloistered.

Isolation aided the survival of artlike art. When artlike art is accepted into mainstream culture, its strategies are negated. For example, when abstract paintings are very successfully marketed at IKEA, the avant-garde tradition championed by Clement Greenberg becomes living room kitsch. It's impossible to mass produce the aristo-cratic "separateness and specialness."

In contrast, lifelike art could be rejuvenated by gaining wide-scale participation. Its strategies, or "courses" as Kapro describes them, have untapped potential. Artists following the course taken by Duchamp – to place life in an art context, or the "second course"— to place art in the midst of life have not pushed far beyond The Fountain. The Third Course, to decide when to enter into art with nothing more than a shift in perception," (Kapro, 39) is a limitless strategy. One way to begin realizing the potential of these strategies is with general audience acceptance. Whenever someone new joins in, "connectedness and wide angle awareness" benefit exponentially.

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Chapter 2: Developments in lifelike art

In recent years, web-based platforms have created an array of opportunities for lifelike art production. With nominal costs, individuals can collaborate on a scale that was once impossible. The traditional roles of viewer and audience are shifting constantly.

Early performance art events, and other art forms celebrating the here and now, were always primarily documented through a kind of oral tradition. Chris Burden's Shoot, for example, was documented with photography, but its grainy black and white photographs are insignificant. The "art" of Shoot was perhaps the way it could be described by someone, whether or not that person was a witness to the event, and provoke conversation. In a sense, the piece was reborn with each conversation. Much was left to be created in the imagination of each participant.

The blog, a "feedback loop" of epic proportions, has allowed for a new version of oral tradition. A thousand collaborators can discuss their experience together. These conversations have removed the strict boundaries between author and audience. Any event can be remade and told from multiple perspectives.

Democratic access to mass communication has also made new genres of lifelike art, such as flash mobs, critical mass cycling, and mobile clubbing a possibility. At times these events are small and intimate, involving only one subway car or fast-food restaurant. Other events are astounding in scale. In London's Victoria street station, a Silent Disco involved more than 4,000 participants. They had responded "to e-bulletins urging them to dance like you've never danced before at 6.53pm. There were knowing looks and giggles among the casually dressed crowd that gathered from 6.30pm,

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wearing earphones. A deafening 10-second countdown startled station staff and commuters before the concourse erupted in whoops and cheers. MP3 players and iPods emerged and the crowd danced wildly to their soundtracks in silence - for two hours."

A "one way street" is no longer possible, even if an artist wishes to remain a sole author. Films are re-cut and songs are remixed. Images are downloaded en masse and appropriated. Everyone has become a DJ, hyper-aware of cultural signifiers, able to appreciate and "sample" as they choose.

The entertainment connotation of sampling does not imply frivolity. One can become more aware of our society of spectacle by becoming a greater participant in cultural work. It becomes difficult to sway the public with images and propaganda when the public has access to, and is its own mass media. We might be in a position to realize Guy Debord's 1955 command to "flood the market — even if for the moment merely the intellectual market — with a mass of desires whose fulfillment is not beyond the capacity of humanity's present means of action on the material world, but only beyond the capacity of the old social organization."

Democratic access to creative platforms might also remove desire for the "one way street." There is a new hyper-awareness of the human tendency to be mimetic. Artists are finding, increasingly, that similar ideas to theirs have already been posted on YouTube. How can one worry about compromising auteur status? An idea put forth by Roland Barthes might now become part of collective consciousness: "It is language which speaks, not the author…the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture; it is never original."

Inversely, there is actually a great collective desire for a state of activity that can be called lifelike art. Access to new communication technology provides an opportunity and a platform. But the need for lifelike art is independent and far greater than this platform. The standardization of activities, spaces and objects might be the primary catalyst. For example, when "a" or "b" take up all the space, it becomes very difficult to choose a life in neither a nor b. This dilemma was described by poet George Perec in 1974. He wrote those words more than 30 years ago, but he described a zeitgeist that is rather contemporary:

"We live in space, in these spaces, these towns, this countryside, these corridors, these parks. That seems obvious to us. Perhaps indeed it should be obvious. But it isn't obvious, not just a matter of course. It's real, obviously, and as a consequence most likely rational. We can touch. We can even allow ourselves to dream. There's nothing, for example, to stop us from imagining things that are neither towns nor countryside (nor suburbs), or Metro corridors…What is certain is that at a time too remote no doubt for any of us to have retained anything like a precise memory of it, there was none of this: neither corridors, nor parks, nor towns, nor countryside. The problem isn't so much to find out how we have reached this point, but simply to recognize that we have reached it, that we are here…In short, spaces have multiplied, been broken up and have diversified. There are spaces today of every kind and every size, for every use and every function. To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself." (6)

This description can act as a perfect metaphor for our contemporary cultural environment, where routine activities and standardization permeate most aspects of life.

I often ask people why they have agreed to participate in my projects. The most usual

response is simply that it was something unique, something that would be remembered. This strength of this desire is highlighted by the element of vulnerability required to participate. When enacting Synchronized Sunbathing the chance that someone might be arrested or hurt was great. Also, wearing a bathing suit in public can be traumatic. Despite these risks, more than 25 people were willing to spend the equivalent of a work day testing their boundaries with metro commuters and Washington, D.C. police officers. The element of risk involved in serving coffee or cake to strangers is relatively low, but participants are just as vulnerable to danger. After all, at BIG PICNIC, people could have been served acid cake.

BIG PICNIC, 2006 Public Performance in Wyman Park Dell

Synchronized Sunbathing, 2006 Public Performance, Washington DC

My most recent projects, Suit Study and Apartment Study require an enormous amount of trust. Allowing a stranger into a home always carries risks for both guest and host. When speaking to people about this project, virtually everyone expresses a desire for me to bring a friend along or a can of pepper spray when photographing apartments. The litigious nature of our society adds another element of risk, particularly when a camera is involved. I have no written agreement, only a verbal exchange, with the Suit Study models. They are not professional models. They are often strangers. They have allowed me to photograph them in a position that is highly vulnerable, without monetary compensation. Like the 4000 "silent ravers" in Victoria Station, a desire to connect with something out of the ordinary overcomes the fear of being arrested, of getting hurt or of looking silly in front of many people.

Chapter 3: Formalism of lifelike art

"To simply recognize that we are here" is the goal of lifelike art. This recognition could also be called a formalism of performance art. Artlike art tradition is often solely linked with formalism. But lifelike art is actually just as concerned with "form." Artlike avant-garde artists concerned with form can define it quite literally, as color, shape, and other visual characteristics. Form also describes the qualities of art used to achieve what Kant described as an "experience of beauty," a heightened state of awareness linked with the senses of sight or sound. Lifelike art is also capable of creating a heightened state of awareness. Many artlike artists experience this heightened state of awareness when working, rather than viewing their finished efforts. Perhaps the best description comes from contemporary psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who coined the experience a "flow state," or "action awareness merging." Flow occurs when truly engaged in an intrinsically rewarding activity. A high level of concentration and focus results in a distorted sense of time. Feelings of self consciousness disappear in flow state. Lifelike art can also stimulate a heightened state of awareness of life. If "form" can be described as the vehicle used to achieve a heightened state of awareness, than each tradition is equally concerned with formal decisions. "For each kind of art, the conveyance itself is the message, regardless of the details."

Just as paint and stone are logical materials for creating artlike art, experience is a logical "material" for making lifelike art. A heightened awareness of life (in "realtime"), must acknowledge temporality. Happenings, situationist interventions, and all experience-as-art genres, celebrate impermanence. As worded by Holland Cotter, when describing the recent performance art biennial, Performa 08, "Everything's falling to pieces all the time, bodies quickly, sculptures and paintings slowly but just as surely.

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We build museums that look like banks or arks, but to no avail. Protect and conserve as we might, art is forever going going gone." (b31) Performance art is "a deep and exhilarating bow to we-have-only-now." (Cotter b31)

Experience-as-art is also a logical material as it is usually difficult to distinguish from everyday life experience. One of the most critically-acclaimed pieces from Performa 08 was a series of actions created by Dave McKenzie. Holland Cotter described interacting with Mr. McKenzie: "For I'll be there, he sat for three hours, alone but available for conversation, on a bench in a public plaza across from the Studio Museum of Harlem….our chat had been the only example of true audience participation I had experienced at Performa, the only time I was part of the art. And second, I realized, or remembered, that all social interactions are performance of some kind, good or bad, awkward or smooth: life into art, art into life." (Cotter, b32) This exchange could work as an illustration for achieving "wide angle awareness." One might say, "Isn't this just a man sitting on a park bench"? As Alan Kapprow wrote, "So what, everything has meaning, my lunch, your remarks, Last year's weather reports, and again that's the point! If only we paid attention, but we don't." (42) Exercises like Mr. McKenzie's make that attention possible.

The same questions can easily be applied to Suit study or Apartment study. "What is special about this Kmart track suit?" "How it is different from regular clothing?" "Aren't these just visits to apartments?" Again, that's the point. All clothing is a kind of costume. All apartments are a kind of installation art. A close resemblance to everyday life experience is needed for this realization. The choice of only "a" or "a" is not solved by including "c." But turning "a" or "b" upside down provides a true choice.

For example, one function of an apartment complex, and a single apartment, is to keep people apart. The function of a building like this one is to keep one separate. The entire complex is built as a place to keep "trespassers" out. Non-residents would have no reason to enter as no café, no bookstore, no shop of any kind exists within the compound. Even neighbors would have a tough time meeting. Aside from the laundry room, there would be no reason to exist in the same room. The lawn exists, but someone is paid to mow it. There's very little chance to meet others.

When I am invited into the house and allowed to display a photograph of their interior, the function of the apartment is changed, subverted. The apartment is no longer so apart. Similarly, the function of a uniform is to make the team appear as one. Individual differences are diminished. But when the team wears exactly the same suit, individual differences become the focus. Slight, or extreme, differences in fit become blatant. Levels of comfort also become ever more apparent. Gestures and slight differences in stance are exaggerated.

In addition to experience-as-art genres, certain uses of photography are also particularly effective materials for lifelike art. The modern camera is light, often waterproof, and easy to transport. It can be brought into most of life without a declaration that "the art" has arrived. The cell-phone camera has made taking a picture very casual, and further altered notions of privacy. Before the advent of YouTube and MySpace, Susan Sontag articulated the sociological affect of the medium. "Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing." (5)
In addition to being so present in everyday life, photography is always intrinsically linked to experience. As described by Sontag, "photographs really are experience

captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood…
To collect photographs is to collect the world. Movies and television programs light up
walls, flicker, and go out; but with still photographs the image is also an object, light-
weight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store."

I agree in part. Every photograph is an attempt at bottling experience, but every
photograph is also an absolute failure at this endeavor. Unlike video and film, still, or
"object photographs" are very honest about this failure. Sound and moving image
happen to a viewer, there is little time to reflect on what one is experiencing. The
viewer has less choice, less intellectual distance. Any one that has watched video
footage of a deceased loved one can attest to the magical feeling that a resurrection
has occurred, but also to the absolute inadequacy of media. A far less dramatic aware-
ness of film's effects can occur when one watches a favorite film first as a child, and
then as an adult. Even the experience of watching media cannot truly be captured. In
contrast, a photographic object allows time for reflection. A viewer decides to start and
stop looking through an act of will. With a still photograph, there is no confusion
between actual experience and recorded information. Through its honest failure to
capture experience, a photograph can affirm the importance of experience.

The very active and interactive strategies of lifelike art make it inherently aggressive.
An invitation to become a participant, even an invitation to sit still, is more provocative
than a "separate, bound work." Photography is also, like experience-as-art genres,
naturally aggressive and interactive. "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photo-
graphed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like
knowledge -- and, therefore, like power... Images which idealize (like most fashion and
animal photography) are no less aggressive than work which makes a virtue of plain-
ness (like class pictures, still lifes of the bleaker sort, and mug shots)"

(above) Apartment Study, 2008 Digital Photography
(below) Suit Study, 2008 Digital Photography, *from the red suit series, a collaboration with Aniko Macranczy

There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera." (Sontag, 4)

"Most Arbus pictures have the subjects looking straight into the camera. This often makes them look even odder, almost deranged…In the normal rhetoric of the photographic portrait, facing the camera signifies solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject's essence. That is why frontality seems right for ceremonial pictures (like weddings, graduations) but less apt for photographs used on billboards to advertise political candidates. (For politicians the three-quarter gaze is more common: a gaze that soars rather than confronts, suggesting instead of the relation to the viewer, to the present, the more ennobling abstract relation to the future.) What makes Arbus's use of the frontal pose so arresting is that her subjects are often people one would not expect to surrender themselves so amiably and ingenuously to the camera. Thus, in Arbus's photographs, frontality also implies in the most vivid way the subject's coop-eration. To get these people to pose, the photographer has had to gain their confidence, has to become "friends" with them." (Sontag, 38)   12

I am currently choosing to work with experience and photography, but I do not imply that experience and photography are the only forms for lifelike art. Lifelike art can happen with virtually anything, anywhere. It is happening, right now, en masse. Something revolutionary could occur very soon, if it has not occurred already. A Western avant-garde art tradition might maintain what can be called quality and become populist.

"We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly— from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one."

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