Monuments on the Move: Allan Kaprow's *Fluids* (1967) and the Urban Landscape of Los Angeles

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In October 1967 strange construction sites could be seen throughout Los Angeles[1]. Huge enclosures built up from ice blocks by young people and children stood sparkling like giant white crystals under the heat of the sun. Passers-by might have caught a cool breeze and smelled a kind of winter that hardly exists in southern California. Touching the cold surface they might have accelerated the process of melting. In fact, the enclosures were gone within a few days. The clear-cut blocks turned into formless lumps, dissolving under the sun and oozing away into the dry ground simply to disappear. All that remains are documentary photographs and a poster announcing the event: "During three days, about twenty rectangular enclosures of ice blocks (measuring about 30 feet long, 10 wide and 8 high) are built throughout the city. Their walls are unbroken. They are left to melt".

Allan Kaprow, the artist who on the occasion of his retrospective at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1967[2] created this Happening called *Fluids*, has also largely disappeared from art history's memory. *Fluids* was the climax – and, in a way, the end-point – of a series of spectacular Happenings he had staged on various occasions since the early 1960s. Many of these Happenings took place outside the spatial confinement of museums and galleries in a setting of urban or natural landscapes[3]. Respectively, many of the so-called "scores" defining the plot of these Happenings deal with the collaborative building-up of an ephemeral structure – be it a pile of sand at the beach, as in A *Service for the Dead* (1962), a heap of waste-paper in the woods, as in *Sweeping* (1962), a wall made out of bundles of hay on an open field, as in *Tree* (1963), or constructions made out of junk on a dump, as in *Household* (1964).

The collaborative act of erecting/erasing ephemeral buildings in the context of a landscape combines central themes of Kaprow's work. Working together during a given amount of time creates various pragmatic and unforeseeable experiences, as in the sense of American philosopher John Dewey's "art as experience", which is also the title of Dewey's most influential book *Art as Experience*[4]. It enables the participants to literally enter the work of art – echoing what art critic Harold

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2. *Allan Kaprow*, Exhibition catalogue, Pasadena Art Museum, 1967.

3. For a list of Kaprow's Happenings, see *Allan Kaprow*, exhibition catalogue, Dortmund, Museum am Ostwall, 1986.

4. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York, Minton, Balch & Company, 1934.

Rosenberg formulated in his famous essay "The American Action Painters": "The canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act"[5]. Furthermore, the very rhythm and movement of the participants, the contrast between confined space and open landscape, between hot and cold, wet and dry, quick and slow, etc., refer to the composition method of painters such as Hans Hofmann, Kaprow's teacher in the early 1950s[6]. Finally, this procedure allows Kaprow to expose art to various non-artistic contexts – "life" as he puts it – and to articulate what happens to it when it takes place outside the prescribed perimeters of the art world.

Fluids is particularly rich in connotations. First of all, it has to be seen in the context of Kaprow's carefully planned mid-career retrospective. Trained as an art historian and highly sensitive to the changing role of the artist in society, Kaprow was, of course, fully aware of the ambivalent function of a retrospective which celebrates the importance of an artist's achievement but simultaneously historizes his work and thus prefigures his end and erasure from public memory. Therefore, it would be too narrow to consider *Fluids* merely as an early document of institutional critique. Rather I would propose to read it as an ironic enactment of traditional concepts of economic and cultural values. It can be considered as an ambivalent work of art within – and about – the retrospective.

The structure of *Fluids* obviously mimics the architecture of the museum, which itself mimics older building typologies of the representation and conservation of value, in particular, antique temples or obituary monuments. The title *Fluids*, however, suggests that something is being represented in sharp contrast to the "timeless stability" which one expects from such an institution. Whereas the object-related work of Kaprow, that is, his earlier paintings, sculptures and collages produced in the 1950s, as well as his Environments such as *Yard* (1961), were displayed inside the museum, *Fluids* occurred "outside" symbolically standing in for Kaprow's main body of work, especially his Happenings, which could be re-enacted, but not actually exhibited. The art works in Kaprow's retrospective which were framed by the museum's walls were a representation of Kaprow's past works; whereas *Fluids* referred to the non-representable nature of his future practice, its "content" veiled by the walls of ice remaining invisible until the ice melted. The "nothing" contained within the interior space of the enclosure revealed, the frame of reference itself disappears.

A third connotation of this piece lies in the manner of production. The practice of engaging volunteer collaborators can be compared to the tradition of "public" engagement, as when citizens as "volunteers" or slave-laborers erect public monuments or structures celebrating an individual. Playing a part on both sides of this relation, Kaprow himself is always one of the workers who not only builds an Allan Kaprow

5. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" (1952). In: *The Tradition of the New*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1960, p. 25.

6. Hans Hofmann, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, Sara T. Weeks, Bartlett H. Hayes Jr. (ed.). Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1986 (first published 1948).

artwork, but is, just like the other, also compensated for his commitment by the communal experience of cool ice melting on his skin.

As a Happening, *Fluids* took place at various sites throughout the Los Angeles area, although no source indicates that twenty constructions were actually realized as announced in the poster. Kaprow insists on the importance of the urban context, in particular upon the "twilight zone of indifferent architecture"[7], the suburban sprawl where storage halls and distribution centers mushroom. Such purely functional and ephemeral buildings follow the economic criteria of "planned obsolescence." Made of cheap materials and leased out under short-term rental contracts, the buildings provide maximum profit for the landowner and are doomed to be replaced after only a couple of years. *Fluids* thus re-enacts the paradoxical relationship between storage and waste. Whereas most works of art tend to sublate this contradiction and claim to create eternal value, *Fluids* performs the very act of waste – be it the waste of energy, manpower or money.

The words of Robert Smithson can be used to expose this relationship: "Probably the opposite of waste is luxury. Both waste and luxury tend to be useless. Then there's a kind of middle class notion of luxury which is often called 'quality'"[8]. Smithson's idea comes close to what Kaprow had written in his essay "The Artist as a Man of the World" (1964): "Middle-class money, both public and private, should be spent on middle-class art, not on fantasies of good taste and noble sentiment"[9]. In fact, the resulting architecture of *Fluids,* like storage halls and distribution centers, is non-descript, fragile, and short-lived. For Kaprow, these qualities are characteristic of art and architecture of the twentieth century. In his words: "Since the first decade of this century, picture and construction have more and more exhibited a short life span, betraying within a few years, or even months, signs of decay"[10].

How would art history have evolved, one might speculate, had a photograph of *Fluids* appeared on the cover of *Artforum* in 1967? However, the art world's reaction to *Fluids* was rather negative. In November 1967 *Artforum* published a short, annihilating critique of Kaprow's retrospective, but no pictures of *Fluids*. The critic Jane Livingston considered him "less an artist" than "a phenomenon"[11]. According to her, he made "his objectives not only clear but virtually transparent: he has at every opportunity talked about himself and his intentions, to the point where, if one has troubled himself to read and look, the mystery has gone out"[12]. "Transparency" was,

7. Allan Kaprow, interview with the author, San Diego, November 19, 1997.

8. Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible, Interview with Alison Sky" (1973). In: *Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings,* Jack Flam [ed.], Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996, p. 303.

9. Allan Kaprow, "The Artist as a Man of the World" (1964). In: Allan Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, Jeff Kelley [ed.], Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 57.

10. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments, and Happenings*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1966, p. 168.

11. Jane Livingston, "Review". In: *Artforum*, November 1967, p. 50.

of course, something Kaprow considered an important condition for the role of the artist in society, the very setting of *Fluids* being a clear statement of his interest to get rid of the "mystery."

The aggressive tone of the article and the lack of any other reference to *Fluids* is especially noteworthy. *Fluids* appeared at the peak of a vivid debate on sculpture in American art which *Artforum* covered in 1966 and 1967. A boom of sculpture exhibitions and exhibitions in public spaces all over the United States had triggered the controversy. At stake was nothing less then the return of sculpture as the leading medium of American art, triumphant after two decades of a predominance of painting. Two sides confronted one another. On the one hand, the Modernist side, with critics such as Michael Fried who defended sculpture in the tradition of High Modernism, namely Cubism. The sculptures by David Smith or Antony Caro which Fried propagated followed their own specific logic of spatial autonomy. On the other hand, there was the literalist or Minimalist side, with artists such as Donald Judd or Robert Morris who aimed to literally remove sculpture from its base, abandon spatial autonomy and let the viewer partake in the sculptural space. The Minimalists produced three-dimensional artefacts which functioned like a stage. In fact, "theatricality" was the term Fried used to critizise this new art.

In retrospect, most art historians consider this debate a decisive battle between Modernism and Minimalism. What hardly anyone remarked upon during the controversy (and what is rarely seen by historians) is the fact that the differences between the two camps were smaller then their similarities. Among the few artists who considered the debate a mere sham fight were Robert Smithson and Allan Kaprow. They both wrote letters to the editor to this end[13]. Both Smithson and Kaprow regarded the triumph of Minimalism and the return to monolithic sculpture in the mid- 1960s as a revisionist move after the wave of ephemeral art forms such as the Happenings, performance, and Body Art of the early 1960s. In their view the playful atmosphere at the beginning of the decade was gradually being replaced by the search for more static values. The pleasure of the moment was replaced by the longing for the monument. As if the art world was afraid of its own ever-expanding growth – Kaprow's Happening *Gas* (1966) had paid tribute to this euphoric expansionism – a complicated process of cultural protectionism had started. The process of institutionalization, or, in other words, the competition to define and thus control "meaning" in the cultural realm, was not only motivated by museums but also by the artists themselves. It took another five years until Robert Smithson should explicitly address the topic in his essay "Cultural Confinement" (1972)[14]. Seen in this light *Fluids* can be interpreted as an early articulation of the then largely latent controversy on the control of cultural values.

12. *Idem, ibidem.*

13. Robert Smithson, "Letter to the Editor" (1967). In: Smithson, *op cit.*, pp. 66–67; Allan Kaprow, "Letter to the Editor". In: *Artforum*, January 1968, p. 4.

14. Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement" (1972). In: Smithson, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–156.

In *Fluids* Kaprow introduced architecture as a metaphor for the limitation of artistic possibility through cultural norms. *Fluids* was neither architecture nor sculpture, but it used references to both in order to deal metaphorically with the construction of cultural norms. It thus prefigured comparable approaches such as Smithson's term of "de-architecturization" or, in the early 1970s, Matta-Clark's idea of "anarchitecture."

By building a monument that literally melted away, Kaprow criticized the ideology of a "timeless" art cherished by Modernist *and* Minimalist sculpture in the 1960s. In having money invested in something self-consuming, he signalled that there was a problem with the idea of "priceless" art and its "presence" in the dominant economic flow. In the case of *Fluids* the idea of presence as a supreme value in American art was revealed to be problematic. Confronted with a work of art which gradually shifted from a construction site to a ruin, the question of its presence did not make sense. Furthermore, Kaprow's work provided an ironic comment to the Modernist search for the "essence" by literally reducing sculpture to its essence – namely to nothing. Kaprow ironically "solved" the debate. For him, this was "a way to make minimalism more minimal"[15].

And finally, his calling for active participation in the work of art served as a comment in the debate about the participation of the beholder. And in fact, the Minimalst ideology of participatory aesthetics is limited to visual perception. Participation thus takes place on a symbolic level. No Minimalist sculpture is meant to be touched or moved.

These questions, of course, transgress a purely aesthetic discussion of sculpture. Whereas Kaprow's Happening *Fluids* is largely forgotten, James Turrell's *Projection Pieces* such as *Afrum-Proto* (1966) or *Munson* (1967) developed in Los Angeles in the same year are still popular, even though Turrell's light projections are also not tangible objects. However, they are not unique and ephemeral like *Fluids*. Largely relying on a naturalistic conception of art, they use space and light as natural givens to be articulated and transformed by the means of art. *Fluids*, on the contrary, relied on its context more than on aesthetic perception as such. Kaprow wasn't interested in Modernist self-referentiality but rather in questions of its functioning. Instead of asking "What is art?", he asked the questions "Where is art?", "What are art's effects?", "How long does art last?", "Who are its audiences?", and "How much does it cost?". Kaprow tried to operate beyond the Modernist logic of l'art pour l'art, but not by mysteriously declaring that everything was art, as did Marcel Duchamp (whose retrospective was, in fact, held at the same museum in 1964 three years prior to Kaprow's) or Joseph Beuys. Kaprow didn't want to improve life by transforming it into art, but rather he wanted to improve art by exposing it to the complexity and contradiction of life. If Beuys said, "Every human is an artist," Kaprow could have answered, "Every artist is human."

15. Allan Kaprow, interview with the Author, San Diego, November 19, 1997.

Again, the formal analogies to contemporary work by artists such as Robert Morris is striking. However, Kaprow insisted on the difference separating him from Morris. In an article criticizing Morris's essay "Anti-Form" he recalls the fact that Morris', Pollock's and Oldenburg's work always function in relation to a rectangular frame – be it the studio, the gallery, the page of the art journal or the open land:

> Most humans, it seems, still put up fences around their acts and thoughts - even when these are piles of shit - for they have no other way of delimiting them. [...] When some of us have worked in natural settings, say in a meadow, woods, or mountain range, our cultural training has been so deeply ingrained that we have simply carried a mental rectangle with us to drop around whatever we were doing. This made us feel at home.[16]

In contrast, his own Environments and Happenings constantly produced their own referential system. His resume reads like a prophecy of the artistic practice of the late 1970s and 1980s: "It may be proposed that the social context and surrounding of art are more potent, more meaningful, more demanding of an artist's attention than the art itself! Put differently, it's not what artists touch that counts most. It's what they don't touch"[17].

This wasn't, of course, what the booming art world wanted to hear. Kaprow was hardly included in important exhibitions after the mid-1960s. In fact, Kaprow himself slowly retired from the busy scene. The very act of drawing limits became a *leitmotiv* of his artistic practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Overtime (For Walter De Maria)* (1968) consisted in advancing along a marked line with a sixty-meter moveable fence which was re-positioned during the Happening at regular intervals. The participants, students again, were free to decide when the Happening was over. *Overtime* went on all night long and the advance wasn't broken off until the participants reached the shore of the Pacific Ocean. In *Transfer, A Happening for Christo* (1968), stacks of empty barrels found near an old factory were transferred to various sites and sprayed in different colors. After every transplant the participants posed on the stacked barrels for a "triumphal photo." And, in 1970, Kaprow once more referred to the motif of the wall used in *Fluids. Sweet Wall* was performed in West-Berlin. Near the real Berlin Wall Kaprow built a symbolic wall[18]. The bricks were connected with bread and marmalade. Immediately after completion, the wall was destroyed.

The shift of visual art toward architecture and urbanism in the early 1960s is characteristic of a broad historical shift in art, namely from a concern with the nature of art to an interest in its location. While during the 1940s and 1950s, the heyday of late Modernism, art discourse centered around the issue of historicity and the autonomy

16. Allan Kaprow, "The Shape of the Art Environment. How Anti-Form is 'Anti Form?'" (1968). In: Kaprow, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

17. *Idem*, p. 94.

18. Allan Kaprow, *Sweet Wall, Testimonials*, Berlin, Edition Rene Block and Berliner Künstlerprogramm DAAD, 1976.

of art, in the 1960s and 1970s the discussion turned to its function and position. This is certainly one of the reasons for the rising interest in landscape in the broadest sense in this period. To put it very simply, the old question "What is art?" was replaced by the question "Where is art?" As very few other artists of his generation, Allan Kaprow reflected and formulated this shift. For the history of art and architecture, he remains a challenge.