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Getting Up-close and Personal with Aunt May and Uncle Jim

Some thoughts on how to deal with your audience in the 1960s

PATRICK VAN ROSSEM

On Friday 28 May 1965 the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York announced that attendance had reached a record high of 1,058,700. The upward trend started in the 1950s but really took off in the 1960s. In the 1962–3 season its peak was already 730,000 (MoMA 1965). The increase in museum attendance was the result of an economic boom, better education and an increase in leisure time. It was also stimulated by a growing mediatization of the arts and the different activities of art institutions (Chase 1962: 131–2). On the whole, journalists, curators, museum educators and critics enthusiastically welcomed the increased interest in the arts. But it did take some getting used to. An education officer at MoMA was quoted saying: ‘On weekends it can get so crowded it’s miserable’ (McCandlish Philipps 1961: 32). The media also put its spotlight on the arts. It devoted attention to important purchases of artworks, new collection presentations, investments in museum education and important exhibitions. The rising attendance also caught their eye. For some critics, it even meant that the future looked bright and promising. Edward T. Chase called it a ‘revolutionary shift from economic values to noneconomic values’ in a 1962 essay in *The Atlantic* (1962: 131). The author proclaimed that a new order of society was being born, one in which self-realization and the cultivation of the mind and spirit would be of the greatest importance (1962: 134). Philipps McCandlish painted a detailed picture of the changing museum field, the investments in museum pedagogy and the rising lines on attendance graphs in a 1961 article in *The New York Times*. He, too, was optimistic when he quoted

a curator who spoke of a ‘renaissance’ of the popular appreciation of the arts (McCandlish Philipps 1961: 32). But as one face smiles, often the other face frowns. The mediatization of the museum, art and exhibitions as well as the continued growth of the public’s interest in art was met by some with scepticism, not least from the artists themselves. They realized that they were no longer working for a privileged and specialist audience but for a large, demanding anonymous crowd. And it worried some of them.

The way that artists reacted to this institutional change – their reaction, both in art and writing – has received little scholarly attention. In this essay, I will look at how some artists, living and working in New York in the 1960s, kept an eye on these changes and how it affected their work as well as their artistic identity. I have chosen as case studies the art and thoughts of Allan Kaprow and Bruce Nauman because of their diverging reactions to the evolution.¹ Both artists are often identified as artists who embraced the idea of a more present and active audience. I will look at how their concerns about the presence of the audience led them to eradicate the distance between both the work of art and the audience as well as – in particular ways – between the artist and the audience. What is interesting here is that the eradication of distance is, so it seems, a direct consequence of a distrust of audiences. The growing popularity of museum going and art viewing meant that artists were no longer producing art for a small in-crowd composed of critics, collectors, art historians, curators and other art aficionados. The unfamiliar situation created feelings of unease among many artists who suddenly felt the audience breathing down

¹ Allan Kaprow was born in Atlantic City in New Jersey, United States on 23 August 1927. He died in Encinitas, California, United States on 5 April 2006. Bruce Nauman was born on the 6 December 1941 in Fort Wayne, Indiana, United States.

their necks. This proximity – felt, imagined, real and sometimes feared – became something of a hindering presence that had to be dealt with. How could one address this new audience? What did it want? What was it able to grasp? I will argue that controlling the aesthetic process and response was the artists' guiding aim. The way they tried to control was by transforming the perceived closeness of the audience and the feelings this brought about into artistic forms that brought the audience itself in close proximity to the work and the artists themselves.

In 'Viewers as producers' Claire Bishop wrote that in the 1960s the emphasis on, as she calls it, 'proximity', was crucial in experimental theatre, the visual arts and pedagogy (2006: 11). The physical involvement of the audience, she writes, was considered to be an 'essential precursor for social change' (12). Another reason for involving the audience more physically was that it downplayed the authorial presence of the artist. According to Bishop, involving the audience was regarded by many at the time as more egalitarian and democratic (ibid.). The focus on the audience was also noticed by Henry Sayre, who wrote, in *The Object of Performance*, that by the beginning of the 1970s, 'the site of presence in art had shifted from art's object to art's audience, from the textual or plastic to the experiential' (1989: 5). The shift of course implied that the work of art was no longer considered to be an autonomic, self-contained, symbolical whole. Artists became consciously aware of the presence of the audience; many of them favoured screen-based work, time and process, interactivity, physical participation, the particularity of a site and so on. Erika Fischer-Lichte characterized these changes in the 1960s as a 'performative turn'. Texts and artefacts were no longer seen as the most important means by which cultures can create their self-image and self-understanding. Staging something rather than making artefacts – in, for example, action painting, performances, light sculptures, body art, land art, video art and video installations – became increasingly more important in the visual arts. Artists became performers and the audience was asked to move around and

interact with artefacts and other members of the audience (Fischer-Lichte 2000: 3). Dorothea von Hantelmann has made similar observations. She has also pointed to the importance of considering the interrelation between presence and representation. The performative must be understood as a dramaturgic concept that realizes itself both in the act of creation and in the experience of the artwork by the audience (von Hantelmann 2001). Henry Sayre wrote in this regard: 'The shift in the accepted site of presence ... , from object to audience, has had profound effects on art generally. It has opened art to the plurality of interpretation' (1989: 6). Semantic multiplicity, diverging experiences and difference are concepts permeated with worthy emancipatory values. Today, they are often recognized as inevitable and worthwhile aspects of creative activity and its reception. Cultural theorist Mieke Bal once stated:

When we are standing before a work of art, and when we admire it, are touched, moved, or even terrified by it, when a work of art somehow seems to do something to us, the question of artistic intention loses its obviousness, for the artist is no longer there to direct our response. He disappears, gives his work over to a public he will not know. (Bal 2002: 254)

But in the 1960s not everybody was convinced that diverging experiences, the loss of authorial voice, will and control was an enviable situation. Allan Kaprow was, to a certain extent, just such a figure. And although Kaprow's work is often imagined as a part of the general move towards plural and participatory audience experience – indeed, what is identified by Jeff Kelley to be its central theme (1996: xviii) – I argue that his embrace of participatory experience also contains rather stringent forms of control that nuance ideas on participatory freedom in 1960s art.

KAPROW, A DIRECTOR IN CONTROL

On 21 and 22 August 1965, Allan Kaprow, who had been organizing and theorizing Happenings since the late 1950s, organized the Happening entitled *Calling*. As all of Kaprow's Happenings

at the time, *Calling* started from a score containing a semi-detailed script describing all the actions. It included calling, driving off, wrapping, telephoning, ripping clothes off and the order in which they had to be performed. The score also included extensive notes and guidelines specifying locations, props, duration, number of persons, how and whom to wrap and so on (Kaprow 1965:203–6). The script's content is of no great concern here. What is, is that the score, guidelines and notes, reveal a rather tightly choreographed and detailed script. The tightly controlled nature of the formal structure of the Happening was something that was typical of Kaprow's Happenings at the time (Potts 2008:25). According to Stephanie Rosenthal, Kaprow saw control as something essential in the artistic pursuit of creative freedom (2008:65). Looking at the score of *Calling*, one can only feel that the artist's own comments on the level of control that one could artistically exert in Happenings was understated. In 1961, he wrote, 'The action leads itself any way it wishes, and the artist controls it only to the degree that it keeps on "shaking" right' (Kaprow 1993a [1961]: 19). This thought, understated as it may be, ties in to what Bishop identifies as the desire among artists in the 1960s to downplay their authorship for democratic and egalitarian reasons. And Kaprow did indeed downplay his own authorship by opening up the Happening and letting chance and freedom be part of it as creative principles. But comparing his scores and Happenings with some of the contemporaneous scores – sometimes containing only one word – of Fluxus events, such as those of George Brecht, quickly shows that downplaying authorial control was something that could be done to a greater or lesser extent.² Could it be that Kaprow, who I suggest had a deep distrust of the audience, developed an art form in which he found a balance between his own desire to control and instruct as well as open up his work to the influence of others? Could it be that he eliminated the distance between himself and the audience (and the work of art for that

matter) partly because it gave him the possibility to closely instruct and guide, as a director, the participants in the Happenings? Kaprow stated: 'I try to impress everyone with the fact that I really direct a Happening inside out' (cited in Kirby 1965:47).

In his 1964 essay 'The artist as a man of the world', Kaprow asked himself how artists could effectively position their art in 'the contemporary department-store milieu' (Kaprow 1993 [1964]: 51). The above-mentioned growth in attendance led him to wonder, with concern, about this new audience – characterized by Kaprow as 'The People Out There' (54). Artists, he observed, no longer have a 'select, small group of people' as their audience. The days of small art communities were over. The audience was now a large diffused mass comprised among others of 'readers of the weeklies, viewers of television, charitable organisations, political campaigners, schools and universities, collectors and the average person' (ibid.). For Kaprow, the problem was not that these groups may come to art for many different reasons – indeed, he believed that a pluralistic aesthetic could develop and produce more art in the public domain (55) – rather, the real problem with the popularization of art, as Kaprow saw it, was the public's lack of knowledge and its false expectations. One of the first observations that Kaprow made was that the desire to encounter art was not so much intrinsic but that it was artificially created. He wrote:

Aunt May and Uncle Jim do not always fit the philistine costume history has assigned them. Attracted to art by its promotion in mass media, they come to an artist enthusiastically but with little grasp of what that artist is doing. (Kaprow 1993 [1964]: 49)

This can easily be connected to Brian O'Doherty's observation that 'we seem to have ended up with the wrong audience' (1999:82). According to the artist and critic, people who look at art are not really looking at art, but at the idea of art they have adopted. For O'Doherty, much of the art from the 1960s and 1970s was really about how to find a different

² George Brecht was an American conceptual artist and composer. He was born on 26 August 1926 in New York, United States. He died on 5 December 2008 in Cologne, Germany.

audience so that the artist would 'not be forced to witness its own cooptation' (1999:95). The latter was also something Kaprow feared. The artist, thinking about the new role he could play, wrote:

Essentially, the task is an educational one. Artists are faced with an involved public, willy-nilly.... Their job is to place at the disposal of a receptive audience those new thoughts, new words, new stances even, that will enable their work to be better understood. If they do not, the public's alternative is its old thoughts and attitudes, loaded with stereotyped hostilities and misunderstanding. (Kaprow 1993 [1964]: 55)

Kaprow's attitude towards the audience was, in other words, not a product of artistic arrogance or disdain. On the contrary. Kaprow set out to empower audience members so they could withstand the mass deception that was going on. However, his emancipatory attitude was not without self-interest. The quotes also show that being understood was an important part for Kaprow's, for it would be 'disturbing to be appreciated for naïve or wrong reasons' or to be 'vilified for reasons equally invalid' (1993 [1964]: 49). And although Kaprow clearly stated that he did not believe he could control the public's reception of his vision, he also did not believe that leaving it up to luck would have a positive outcome (53). Among the many reasons why Kaprow developed the Happening as a semi-controlled script wherein instruction, direction and guidance were of great importance, this must surely be one of them: his doubt (or fear?) of not being able to control the perception and experience of the audience. The artist observed early on that the divide between the modern artistic experiment and the general public's thoughts about art was so great that it was almost impossible to actually come to an appreciation of the arts. 'Things became very confused for the art audience,' Kaprow said. He noticed that the reaction was often one of aggression; 'it was not uncommon for somebody to begin poking things with an umbrella' (1999:75). He realized that he 'had to make a choice between cowing people into submission or devising a situation that contains

within it its own obvious, simple signals' – something he tried to put into practice (ibid.).

These thoughts, obviously, are far removed from the ways in which the audience is often conceptualized today. One can think of the much-cited idea of the 'emancipated spectator', conceived by French philosopher Jacques Rancière. According to him we should stop seeing the spectator as a philistine in need of an education. Barriers and hierarchies between those who are presumed to know (experts) and those of whom one thinks that they do not know, should be broken down. Rancière argues that audiences today know and recognize visual codes and that they are active critical readers that know how to find realities behind appearances. Everybody possesses intelligence and everybody is an actor in his or her own story and can bring valuable knowledge to new situations that are encountered (Rancière 2009: 17). Audiences, in other words, are already knowledgeable and to acknowledge this is an emancipatory act. But, for Kaprow, at the time, a thought like this would, in all likelihood, have been inconceivable. Probably even dangerous. For the audience member was the captive of the mediatized and spectacular culture it lived in. In Kaprow's hands, then, art became a tool to oppose the stringent hold on people's imagination and daily lives. Happenings and the participation they called for, almost romantically, set out to make people more self-conscious and to make them more aware of their hidden and obvious daily behaviour. Kaprow considered this a moral act and it is here that his art touched upon politics and ethics. However, it needed an instructor, an educator, someone who could guide and direct people towards a more self-conscious life. His desire to put into practice his ideas and intentions was so strong that he created scripts wherein his authorial voice and presence structured both the event and in part also the experience. Curator Paul Schimmel even wrote that Kaprow's Happenings 'manipulated the audience to a degree virtually unprecedented in 20th century art' (1998:22) and that 'audience members in many of Kaprow's Happenings

became props through which the artist's vision was executed' (61). It seems that in the Happenings of Allan Kaprow, proximity – the reduction of distance between the artist, the work of art and the audience – became a condition for controllability. This tendency towards artistic control through the eradication of distance was even more pronounced in the work of Bruce Nauman.

NAUMAN'S RESTRICTIVE GAME

Unlike Kaprow, Nauman did create works that could be experienced by audiences visiting galleries and museums. In contrast to Kaprow's view, Nauman did not see the audience as a victim of a mediatized culture. However, he was perturbed that he did not know who constituted the audience for his work. He said, 'It is difficult to address yourself to an anonymous public' (cited in Cordes 2003 [1989]: 350). Nauman's reservations were informed by the fact that he realized that others could turn his work into something else. He stated:

I mistrust audience participation. That is why I try to make these works as limiting as possible. It has more to do with me not allowing people to make their own performance out of my art. I don't like to leave things open so people feel they are in a situation they can play games with. (Nauman cited in Sharp 2003 [1970]: 113)

He also said, 'I didn't want to present situations where people could have too much freedom to invent what they thought was going on.... I wanted it to be my idea, and I did not want people to invent the art' (Van Bruggen 1988: 19). Nauman mistrusted the audience because he feared being misunderstood and alienated from his own work. The artist set himself the task of developing an art with which he could control the aesthetic response of his audience. When asked what he thought about the fact that people could have different responses to his work, he answered:

I think that if you can control the situation physically, then you can have a certain amount of similarity. People are sufficiently similar so that you can have at least a similar kind of experience.

But, certainly, the private thing can change the experience a great deal in some ways, and I don't expect to be able to control that. But, on the other hand, I don't like to leave things open so that people feel they are in a situation they can play games with.... Partly it has to do with control, I guess. (Butterfield 2003 [1975]: 182)

In about 1966/7 the artist realized that painting and sculpture were no longer viable options for him and he started to experiment with photography, sound installations, film and video (Butterfield 2003 [1975]: 180). The switch was important for an artist who was in search for more authentic ways to represent his ideas. He said, 'you tend to believe that what is shown or, a film is really true – you believe a film, or a photograph, more than a painting' (Raffaele 2003 [1967]: 105–6). But the presence of the audience was, at the time, a difficult issue. In a 1968 sound installation, entitled *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room*, Nauman immersed the audience in his own, vocally expressed anguish. People could enter an empty room in which a tape recording was playing. On it, he shouted and whispered, 'Get out of my mind, get out of this room.' The resentment expressed by the artist in words that ask, beg and command the audience to get out of his 'mind', suggests that he experienced the audience as an imposing and stifling presence.

In the videotaped performance *Stamping in the Studio* (1968) Nauman stamped his feet repetitiously while running around. The artist hung the video camera upside down while videotaping himself from a high vantage point. This abstracts the image. It also disturbs the viewer's visual perception. The sound claims first stage and it lodges itself in the body and mind of the viewer. Rhythmic stomping, almost like a military march, ruptures the screen and intensifies our perception of the activity. Nauman seems to tell us that what is behind the screen, in the studio, is no genius, but also not a body without intention, without creative will. Is his anxious behaviour a result of the audience's potential presence? Or is it that of an artist not knowing how to proceed now that painting and sculpture are no longer

viable options? Or both? What is certain is that we can feel the performed movement as an act in tension – a tension we are being asked to witness. The artist stated that ‘the tension is intentional’ (cited in Butterfield 2003 [1975]: 182) and that ‘there has to be a certain sympathetic response in someone who is watching you. It is a kind of body response, they feel that foot and that tension’ (cited in Sharp 2003 [1971]: 148). Again, Nauman was seeking ways in which he could direct the experience of the work – consciously seeking the audience’s proximity and drawing them closer to him via the rhythmic stamping in order to be able to transfer his own anxiety on to the audience.

By the end of the 1960s the artist stopped performing himself. He turned his attention to building, among other things, narrow corridors that could be entered by the public and he eradicated the distance between work and audience completely. He did so because it gave him the opportunity to control the experience even more. The first, entitled *Performance Corridor*, was shown in the exhibition *Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials* in the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1969. The corridor was blocked at one end. People could walk in and experience the narrowness of the structure and the feelings it triggered. But Nauman was still dissatisfied; he stated, ‘I wanted to control the situation, and I felt that by giving something as simple and uninflected as that corridor, that I was allowing people a lot more latitude than I was used to’ (de Angelus 2003 [1980]: 258). The artist would consequently elaborate the format and immerse his audience in corridors wherein he added light effects, closed-circuit videos, mirrors, television screens and so on. Nauman did not, unlike Kaprow, seek a particular, attuned, audience, but accepted – not without showing us his anguish about it – the audience as it presented itself. Nauman’s ‘solution’ lay in developing very precise and measured multisensory works that immersed the spectator and that could somehow trigger the responses he desired.

My analyses of these cases shows that the move towards a more performative approach

to audience experience did not necessarily come with a decrease of authorial presence or a parting with the desire to communicate and represent in an intentional way. Immersion, whether through the Happening or through the sculptural installation, as well as increasing the proximity between both work and viewer and artist and viewer, were not introduced by Nauman and Kaprow to increase the freedom of the audience, to make them co-producers or trigger creative responses. On the contrary. They were introduced to control the audience. Claire Bishop has written that post-war avant-garde artists often favoured open-endedness as a way of defying organized politics (2012: 283). Sayre and von Hantelmann also allude to the interpretative and experiential freedom of the 1960s audience in the above-cited quotes. And many artists did indeed pursue these values in their artistic practice. But these case studies of the work of two prominent post-war artists show us that open-endedness, freedom and collaboration were not always a desired outcome or strategy of work that sought to close the gap of spectatorial distance. Looking at their works from a moment in time where we have seen a gradual but growing acceptance among artists and those working and leading the institutions of art of ‘the emancipated spectator’, of the audience as already knowledgeable and capable of developing a legitimate opinion, the position of Kaprow and Nauman could seem outdated. One could even see it as a product of a paternalistic culture. And, yet, Kaprow has always been open about his desire to control and Nauman has shown us his own vulnerability as an artist desiring a particular response in his videotaped performances. However, while Nauman’s ability to fail is often a prominent aspect of his video works, the tight control that Kaprow exerted can be seen as trying to keep the possibility of failure as far removed as possible. From the start, both artists were open, explicit and self-conscious about their approach. The reason lies in the fact that, as I have shown, they were very conscious of the presence of a new audience for art. They witnessed an increase in

and diversification of the art audience as well as a mediatization of the arts that was without historical precedent. Their concerns, however, differed. Kaprow was concerned that people were losing their personal freedom and voice because of the growing impact of the mass-media culture they were living in. Consequently, he sought ways to make them more self-conscious and attentive. His method of doing so was a rather stringent form of control. Nauman, on the other hand, distrusted this 'new' audience, mainly because it was unknown to him. However, in difference to Kaprow, his distrust came from the fact that he believed that people came with their own voice to art; they interpret and experience art in relation to their own lives and knowledge. Nauman's oeuvre at the time is almost a symbolical testimony of the shift, broadly speaking, from representation to difference – from the belief that an artist can have full authorial control over the interpretation and experience of his work, to the insight that the experience and interpretation of a work by the audience can differ substantially. In Nauman we see an artist struggling with the presence of an audience that could potentially experience and interpret his art in ways that differed from his own intent. However, while staging his own desire to control the experience and interpretation of his work, he also shows us that it is an endeavour that is bound to fail. Both artists' work can be seen as an effect of and response to this new situation; in different ways, they responded by eradicating the distance of spectatorship by immersing the 'audience' in their work.

The audience for art has continued to grow since the 1960s. Are artists still trying to figure out how to deal with this developing and now also virtual crowd? Are they experimenting with how much of their own authorial voice can still be present? Or have artists become used to large crowds? Do contemporary artists, who decide to remove the 'distance' of spectatorship, really desire a creative, participatory, even emancipated audience, or is the closeness they seek and create again a strategy that will somehow enable them to more or less achieve

the satisfaction of their own intentions? As one considers these questions, what is important to remember is that, in the not so distant past, artists took up the presence of the audience versus their own desire for authorial presence and made it, in itself, the centre of their work while being explicit about what it meant for their own artistic identity and their own desires as artists. Immersion, proximity and participation were not merely situations they desired, but were conditions of reception that could not be ignored. The artists' attempts to harness and control their audiences through these modes of reception were necessarily fallible, full of vulnerability and doubt. I conclude here that there are links between choosing to eradicate the distance between work and viewer and the artistic fear of failing. Perhaps paradoxically, a desire for participation can be a method of reasserting, rather than relinquishing, artistic control. But is control really a viable option in the long run? Allan Kaprow, speaking about his Happenings in 1968, stated:

The reason that the performance worked in one sense was that it was very controlled. A reason that it did not work, in another sense, was that it was too controlled, and people do not like to be controlled in that way. (Kaprow cited in Kostelanetz 1968: 110)

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