

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN ART AND LIFE:
JAN VAN EYCK'S *Ghent Altarpiece* (1425–32); ALLAN
KAPROW'S *Apple Shrine* (1960) AND *Eat* (1964)

Jan van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* of 1426–1432 was a fundamentally innovative work in its depiction of naturalism: the artist presented to the viewer a rational world very much like that in which the viewer stood. Moreover, van Eyck intentionally broke down the boundaries, or rather, broke through the picture plane of his panels, posing his Adam and Eve so they seem to pierce the invisible divide between the fictive space of their shallow niches and the real space of the viewers, and he also seems to include the real viewers standing before the *Altarpiece* as an extension of the groups of figures kneeling and standing around the painted Altar of the Lamb in the lower center panel. Since the ensemble was erected in a chapel too small for it to begin with, the visitors/viewers/participants of this altarpiece were forced to stand close to it and to experience its immediacy.¹ In spite of its new location, behind bazooka-proof plastic, in the Church of St. Bavo at Ghent, it is still easy for the sensitive modern viewer of this work to imagine himself or herself penetrating the picture space, literally moving from the real world into the painted distant landscape, visually sampling the fruits arranged there for our delight.

That the innovative nature of the *Ghent Altarpiece* was also noted by its fifteenth-century viewers can be demonstrated by the fact that within twenty-five or so years of its dedication in the Church of the Sts. John (now St. Bavo) in Ghent, the townspeople used its compositional format as the basis of a *tableau vivant* erected in one of the city's squares during the *Triumphal Entry of Duke Philip the Good* (1458).² This tableau, played out by living figures dressed in costumes based upon those in van Eyck's panels, complete with a realistic Holy Lamb that pumped blood into a real chalice and a three dimensional Holy Spirit that descended on a guy wire from the upper stage of the tableau to the lower one, marked Ghent's return to the Duke's protection after a period of rebellion. Here we can see how a major work of art provides inspiration in contexts outside of that in which the original functioned. The work of art can take on new meaning after the death of its artist, and the traditional formats and ideas depicted in it can lend themselves to new, unforeseen, contexts when they shift from the world of religious or liturgical usage to that of the secular political sphere. The breakdown of the boundaries

between the world of the painting and the world of the viewer is now complete, although the *tableau vivant* was played out on a three-level stage, in front of onlookers.

Naturally, in this translation from the liturgical to the political, some figures – the Adam and Eve, for example – were edited out of the *tableau vivant* and the meaning of the Altarpiece as a whole underwent a change. By the end of the fifteenth century, important visitors to Ghent were shown the ensemble during their tour of the highlights of the city – even Albrecht Dürer gives us an account of his visit/viewing that reads more like what we find in the letters written home by our contemporary artists than what we would expect of a near contemporary of Jan van Eyck.³ Also by 1500, figural groupings and structural elements derived from the *Ghent Altarpiece* were being employed in panel paintings that served no liturgical functions – that is, did not function as altarpieces – but which were hung from the columns along the nave of a church as testimonies of faith.⁴ At least two such works survive, one in the Prado in Madrid and the other at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio. It seems, then, that van Eyck's ideas about making the painted surface as naturalistic as possible – that is, to make it look exactly like the real world – had some effect on moving the art work away from its limited role enhancing the Sacrifice of the Mass towards a larger, more complex role certifying a personal faith or serving as a community's expression of loyalty. Later in the sixteenth century, an exact copy of Jan van Eyck's great work was commissioned by Philip II of Spain, so he could have his own "version" of the ensemble for his own devotional purposes. This copy is now in Antwerp at the Museum of Fine Arts.

While I cannot document any direct connection between van Eyck's *Ghent Altarpiece* or the *tableau vivant* of 1458 based upon it (or, indeed, any of those later panels that derive from the *Ghent Altarpiece*) and Allan Kaprow's *Apple Shrine* (1960) and *Eat* (1964), the modern works similarly use quasi-liturgical forms and symbols to provide the viewer/participant with the means of experiencing a secularized ritual that has roots in earlier religious forms.⁵ Moreover, in Kaprow's works we also see a breaking down of the space of the art work and the real space of the viewer. In fact, the viewer/participant now enters the art work and becomes part of it.⁶ While Kaprow's rituals and forms are purposely designed to be universal and non-denominational as well as non-sectarian, the environments themselves – in their large scale and in their use of open-ended symbols and scripted actions – recall the processions and movement of figures together with the ritualized devotional forms seen in van Eyck's *Altarpiece*. This must have been intentional.⁷

In discussing these similarities, I will review Kaprow's writings (c. 1960–72) as well as draw on my own memories of discussions with this artist dating to the mid and late 1960s. From 1964 to 1967, I took undergraduate studio art courses (a sequence of painting studios as well as a studio in Assemblages, Environments and Happenings) and art history courses (in nineteenth and twentieth century art) with Allan Kaprow at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Rituals of a religious or quasi-religious nature had long fascinated him and are examples of "play" as outlined in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1944).⁸ It seems natural to me that he would link ideas informing his own art works with those great art works he had himself studied while at New York University and at Columbia University and which he taught at Rutgers and at Stony Brook. After 1967, I went my own way and entered graduate school in another state and pursued a career in art history with a special interest in Medieval and Northern Renaissance painting. I have had only one further contact with Kaprow since then, in 1994. Enough time has now passed (almost forty years) and we should start to put Kaprow's environments and Happenings of the early 1960s into a larger art historical context.

Robert E. Haywood's article on the "alliance" of the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village and "cutting edge" artists working in New York City, starting in the late 1950s and throughout the '60s, brought to light the fact that Allan Kaprow played a prominent role in the Judson Art Program.⁹ He even served briefly as gallery director in November 1960 which, according to Haywood, "led directly to the mounting of his environment 'An Apple Shrine' in December 1960" at the church. This was one of his "passive" environments, where the audience/participator/visitor walked through, stood and observed, although Kaprow himself outlined that *Apple Shrine* was a work you "GO IN to, not LOOK AT."¹⁰ In *Apple Shrine*, the visitors threaded their "way through narrow passages of board and wire choked with tar paper, newspaper and rags. Lights changed from very dark to very bright. At the end of the maze was a large restful space where apples – some real, some not – were suspended from a tray and signs read 'Apples, Apples, Apples, etc.' There were bright bands of color hanging from the ceiling. After taking this in the viewer made his way out of the gallery."¹¹

The multi-level meanings of apples in American culture – where the fruit makes its "first" appearance (to English speakers) in the *Book of Genesis* and symbolizes the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil through the more prosaic and local readings associated with the patriotic ideals of "Mom, Home and Apple Pie" or of "Johnny Appleseed" or the folkloric "an apple a

day keeps the doctor away” – all inform Kaprow’s *Apple Shrine*.¹² At the heart of *Apple Shrine* was an altar of apples. The word *shrine* also has several meanings, all of which, when linked to the word *apple* as in this title and seen in light of the above description of the environment, enhance its quasi-religious aura.

In the catalogue text for his environment *Words* (1962), Kaprow states,

Words is an environment, the name given to an art that one enters, submits to, and is – in turn – influenced by.... In its impermanence and changeableness, it is ... fashioned from the real and everyday world, a world it celebrates, probes, comments on, perhaps, and surely dreams about. ... On one level, *Words* is light-hearted, jazzy, flip. Within this mood, there are contrasts. The larger room is public, bright and more formal in both the character and also in the placement of lettered strips, cloth-rolls, and red and white blinking lights. The small room is more subdued, private, organic, and less “arranged.” On another, less obvious, level, the composition of the environment rooms within a normal room, their centrality and squareness (9’ × 9’ and 6’ × 6’), the repeated words and phrases, the passage in gradual degrees from the outer world into an inner one, may suggest to the sensitive participant a sanctuary or tabernacle of sorts, an enshrinement of The Word. In this presence, our acts become ritual and our everyday is transformed.¹³

Although *Words* (which was presented in the Smolin Gallery in Manhattan) has been described as one of Kaprow’s works in which the visitor/participant manipulated the environment – slips of paper with words on them could be taken down and new ones put up, in effect, changing the environment from day to day – it retained some of the spatial organization of *Apple Shrine*, complete with an inner sanctuary. If we substitute *logos* (the Greek equivalent of word) in Kaprow’s penultimate sentence in his text, we can better understand the many levels of meanings incorporated in the quasi-pilgrimage one made through the more maze-like *Apple Shrine*. Wordplay delights Kaprow. Even in the original *Apple Shrine*, the word *apple* was juxtaposed to painted images of apples and to actual and fake apples.¹⁴

Moreover, as Jeff Kelley notes in his Introduction to the collected writings of Kaprow (1993), Kaprow insisted on using the word *play* to describe what he did in making these environments and Happenings.¹⁵ It was Huizinga’s conception of play, one of the crucial elements of human culture which included religious rituals as well as theatrical and other events, to which Kaprow was referring. *Homo Ludens* was on the reading list for the comprehensive examination that all Fine Arts majors had to pass before receiving their baccalaureate degrees from Stony Brook in 1967. On the oral part of this exam Kaprow and the other faculty members questioned us closely about Huizinga’s book. Hence, Kelley might be understating the importance of this book in the following:

If there is one word dirtier than *copying* in the lexicon of serious art, Kaprow thinks it must be *play*. With its connotations of frivolity and childishness, play seems the antithesis of what artists are supposed to do. But Kaprow has always sought a certain innocence in his work, inviting humor and spontaneity, delighting in the unexpected. For him, play is inventive, and adults must be endlessly inventive to remember how to do it. Play is also instructive, since it imitates the larger social and natural orders: children play to imitate their parent's behavior and rules, societies to reenact ancient dramas and natural schemes. As a ritual reenactment of what Johan Huizinga calls "a cosmic happening," play at its most conscious level is a form of participation. As such, Kaprow sees it as a remedy for what he calls gaming (the competitive, work-ethical regulation of play) as well as for the ossifying routines and habits of industrial-age American education, which have less to do with learning and fun than with the "dreadfully dull work" of "winning a place in the world." With the work of art as a "moral paradigm for an exhausted work ethic," and with play as a form of educational currency that artists can afford to spend, Kaprow completes the education of an un-artist by assigning a new social role, that of educator, a role in which artists "need simply play as they once did under the banner of art, but among those who do not care about that. Gradually," he concludes, "the pedigree 'art' will recede into irrelevance."¹⁶

Another title on that required reading list at Stony Brook in 1967 was John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934).¹⁷ Kaprow's emphasis on the non-commodification of art – that is, the denial of the market value of his works – brings us back to art that must be experienced: i.e., as environments and Happenings. Neither *Apple Shrine* nor *Words* was a *tableau vivant*, but they were works which included the movement of visitors through a space, and in which, by so moving and participating, the visitors shared some experience.

During the mornings and afternoons of the last two weekends in January 1964, Kaprow's environment *Eat* was presented.¹⁸ Visitors were limited to twenty for each one-hour period the environment was open to prevent overcrowding and to keep free circulation in the space. The published "Cave Plan for *Eat*" (sketched by Kaprow) includes a note in Kaprow's own hand. It reads, "Note: work conceived as a quasi-eucharistic ritual. Contrasts between symmetries and asymmetries of physical things and activities [,] intended as a reciprocal rhythm between the stable and unstable. A. K."¹⁹

According to Michael Kirby, one entered *Eat* after walking through the old Ebling Brewery in the Bronx. This building fronted low cliffs that contained a large cave. Walking down several corridors and through doorways, the visitor finally came to the environment set in this cave. Its walls had been incompletely painted with white paint and the effect was that "age and seeping water had created a sense of decay." The entrance space was "narrow and dark" and led from the door to a low platform set beyond a stone arch. At right angles to this platform and a step down from it was another platform with rectangular wooden towers at each end. These stood

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