

KAPROW

Performance artist causes a 'happening'

By Ann Jarmusch

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ALLAN KAPROW, an internationally acclaimed artist who bounced art off the pedestal and into the realm of the living by creating unique art events called happenings, composes himself atop a wooden stool next to an unlikely prop — a traditional tabletop still life of real fruit.

Making friendly eye contact with the audience and two video cameras at the University of Texas at Arlington, Kaprow quips that the stool is of the television host variety: providing "a sense of elevation as well as precariousness."

The man loves a metaphor — even at his own expense. Serenely modest at 61 about the lasting impact of 30 years of aesthetic audacity, Kaprow has been singled out for unusual attention by UTA's Center for Research in Contemporary Art, where he is in residence this week. Director Jeff Kelley persuaded Kaprow to undertake a "retrospective consideration" of his groundbreaking —

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Jeff Shaw / Dallas Times Herald

Allan Kaprow conducts a symposium on participatory art.

and illusory — career of making public and private events that evaporate into memory but resound in today's performance art arena.

Called "Precedings," the ambitious six-month project includes the reinvention of nine happenings dating from 1958 to 1985 to occur in five cities (including Arlington and Austin), Kaprow's theoretical survey of his own career in four lecture/performances (the final one is at 8 tonight) and a symposium on participatory art Saturday to feature more internationally prominent artists and critics. Pending funding, a publication is to document "Precedings" and collect Kaprow's critical writings for the first time in one book.

Twinkly-eyed Kaprow says he loves to play and that he really only needs a couple of people to play with. He's been tweaking the art world for three decades by creating these experiential works that cannot be purchased and that leave few tracks, except in the mind and in photographs. He keeps no notebooks or artifacts, so dealers have nothing to sell. Critics have nothing to critique, unless they participated in the spectacle of a happening in the 1950s or '60s or, more recently, undertook a simple, metaphorical activity devised by the artist.

"This is a kind of art where you change in some way, vis-a-vis your participation," says the University of California at San Diego professor, who teaches art history, performance and theory and criticism of art.

Active participation — not the passive contemplation of a painting or sculpture — is what Kaprow's after. Digging holes, pounding nails and sweeping debris are the kind of ordinary, physically demanding tasks that Kaprow, a practicing Zen Buddhist, structures into art activities. "It cannot be sweeping of the ordinary sort. It has to resonate," advises the artist.

'Precedings' schedule

"Precedings" continues today at the UTA Studio Theatre in the Fine Arts Building, Cooper near Border, Arlington. At 1 p.m. Kaprow and "Sweeping" participants are to meet to discuss their experiences. At 8 p.m. Kaprow will lecture/performance titled "The Reinvention of One's Past and the Transformation of a Present Self."

Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., the symposium "Art as Participation, 1958-1988" is to feature Kaprow on panels with other leading artists working in participatory art (Claes Oldenburg, Suzanne Lacey, George Segal) and prominent critics (David Antin, Lucy Upward, Ingrid Sischy).

All events are free. For further information, call (817) 273-2790 or 273-2891.

"Trading Dirt," which Kaprow did for more than two years, literally involved swapping buckets of soil, some of it venerated, with various people while philosophically examining the act and value of exchange.

"If the metaphor is good, it generates a wave of experience," says Kaprow, the creator of intriguing works such as "Wink," "Comfort Zones" and, for a wedding at California's El Mirage Dry Lake, "Moon Sounds."

The 1988 version of "Sweeping" occurred during the past 48 hours as part of "Precedings." Nearly 20 people showed up at UTA Wednesday to meet with Kaprow, who once collaborated on happenings with artists Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg and George Segal and who studied painting, philosophy, art history, music and environmental art with the legendary John Cage, Hans Hofmann and Meyer Schapiro.

A low-key Kaprow invited individuals or small groups to plan a path to sweep, but then to interrupt their sweeping to distribute the gathered litter "over the next

part of the course, so that it is unnoticeable," alternating sweeping and littering "for as long a distance as possible." (Distance, like time, remains a conundrum in Kaprow's work.)

Kaprow thinks that by overlapping "good" and "bad" behavior in "Sweeping," right and wrong become meaningless. But some potential sweepers voiced concern that local law enforcement officers might not see it that way.

"You're in grave danger of being thrown into jail," Kaprow teased. "It will be up to you to point out the rich, philosophical irony inherent in 'Sweeping.'"

Some ready participants brought household brooms, but Dallas artist Harold Clayton came with a graceful, fragrant plume of tarragon plucked from his garden and mounted in a decorated handle. When the plume reached his nose, Kaprow smiled.

▀ Tre Roberts, a Dallas artist who was to join a group armed with infrared film to document their nocturnal "Sweeping," had already spent one eight-hour night participating in UTA's second reinvented happening, "Company." Anyone could sign up to "perform" the piece in a five-story stairwell especially equipped with more than 50 cement blocks. Choosing the midnight to 8 a.m. shift, Roberts took an hour to settle in with her pillow and hot tea, her "I Ching" and her journal.

Once she found a comfortable place, Roberts followed Kaprow's instructions to move a single concrete block at a time, contemplate it and then move another, until she had assembled one block for each year of her life. Then Roberts completed the process by dismantling her 34 blocks. When she left in the morning, exhausted from hoisting the heavy blocks and from filling 12 pages in her journal, a pigeon flew from its nest at the bottom of the stairwell, delighting Roberts by exposing two perfect eggs.

"It folds art and life together," says Roberts of the "Company" experience.

"You are the event," says Kaprow. His role, he says is "to open doors. That's about all. I'm a doorman."