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Art Is in the Air. The Public Dimension in Allan Kaprow's Utopian Un-Artistic Theory

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Abstract. In the present essay, I want to suggest that the public dimension is a crucial issue in Kaprow's un-artistic art theory, and that this shift from art to "nonart" literally occurs as a transition from private to public: from private contemplation of "complete" paintings to artistic experience publicly performed and shared. Primarily, I will focus on his troubled relationship with painting. Then, I will concentrate on his groundbreaking reflections on framing and unframing. After that, I will analyse his most relevant theoretical achievements, environment and happening, emphasizing the active role of publicity in his personal idea of performance art. Finally, I will discuss his distinctive interpretation of "nonart", by comparing it with other substantial variations on the "post-art" theme, offered by different authors, either modernist or post-modernist. In the end, the Kaprowian un-artistic theory will emerge re-configured as a singular, and somehow "aerial", utopian proposal for public art.

Keywords: Modernism, Allan Kaprow, Happening, Performance studies.

Beginning his openly anti-modernist theoretical enterprise, Allan Kaprow paradoxically started from a strongly modernist base, that can be regarded, in some respects, as an actual heritage. He considered himself the artist as an unplanned child of what he called «the "private" plastic arts» (Kaprow [1966]: 153) in general, and of «the idea of a "complete" painting» (Kaprow [1993]: 5) in particular. He spent his entire life finding the best ways to disown those parents somehow inconvenient and definitely adverse. He firstly deconstructed the abovementioned "painterly" paradigm, which automatically superimposed pictoriality (viz. opticality and vision) to all modern art¹, with the aim of achieve a «total art» (Kaprow [1993]:

¹ On the so-called "vision itself", or "pure vision", a unidirectional modernist standard, see Krauss (1993). On the modernist (e.g. Greenbergian) bureaucratization of the senses, see Jones (2005). On the contrary, Kaprow claimed «impurity» in art as a positive and inclusive value; see Kaprow (1993): 27-45.

10): intermedial, transmedial, and multisensorial². This would have been possible only «if we bypass “art” and take nature itself as a model or point of departure» (Kaprow [1993]: 10), crossing over into a peculiar mode of overcoming Avant-garde and even Neo-avant-garde art that he called «nonart» (Kaprow [1993]: 98).

In the present essay, I want to suggest that the public dimension is a crucial issue in Kaprow’s “bypassing” art, and that this shift from art to “nonart” literally occurs as a transition from private to public: from private contemplation of “complete” paintings to artistic experience publicly performed and shared. To demonstrate this, a survey on Kaprow’s theory in its entirety will be necessary. Primarily, I will focus on his troubled relationship with painting meant as a specific medium restricted to the picture plane. Then, I will concentrate on his ground-breaking reflections on the picture frame, on framing in general, and on the ensuing urgent drive to unframing. After that, I will analyse his most relevant theoretical achievements, environment and happening, emphasizing the active role of publicity in his personal idea of performance art. Finally, I will discuss his distinctive interpretation of “nonart”, by comparing it with other substantial variations on the “post-art” theme, offered by different authors, either modernist or post-modernist. In the end, the Kaprowian un-artistic theory will emerge re-configured as a singular, and somehow “aerial”, utopian proposal for public art.

1. “PRIVATE” ART: PICTURE, FIELD, PLANE, FRAME

Quite confessional in tone, Kaprow admits his feeling guilty about having been formed as a painter, and even worse as a modernist one; later, he became known as «a professor of art history»

² Using the word “total”, Kaprow was thinking completely different from the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*; in his opinion, the idea of a “Total work of art” (along with the further of “Synthesis of the arts”) was still hierarchical, and to some extent theological; see Kaprow (1993): 10.

(Kirby [1965]: 11). One would say that his writings are an attempt to atone for his *avant-gardish* sins of youth. He is always aware that this burden is inherently dangerous, and that can at any time visual-orient his perspectives on art. The aforementioned project for a “total art”, for example, is clearly informed by a substrate stemming from visual arts, to the detriment of other forms of expression (and of other forms of perception other than the optical): «Because I have come from painting, my present work is definitely weighted in a visual direction while the sounds and the odors are less complex. Any of these aspects of our tastes and experiences may be favoured. There is no rule that say that all must be equal» (Kaprow [1993]: 11).

An all-encompassing art is not simply a matter of an old-fashioned *fin-de-siècle* synaesthetic interplay between arts; rather it is the search of a new horizon in artistic research, that before being acted upon must seriously cope with any pictorial and painterly residual³. According to Kaprow, in fact, «from time immemorial picture making [...] has maintained hands-off policies respecting two elements: the [...] field, and the flat surface» (Kaprow [1966]: 155). It is as if centuries of habit, custom, and norm had established an ontology of the image which is also and mainly an ontology of the picture. Or to better say, an ontology of «the framed picture» still associated «with the principles of pictorial representation» (Conte [2020]: 122), that for Kaprow are active from the time of Egyptians. “Picture making” is equivalent to making an operation of *cadra*ge since its origin: there has always been – borrowing Victor I. Stoichita’s vocabulary – the «instauration du tableau» (Stoichita [1999]), and it has always had political implications. This “instauration” has the characters of an imposition, and a prevarication in its tracks. It is not an «apparition», linked to «discours métapictural» and caused by «la crise du statut de l’image religieuse» (Stoichita [1999]: 9, 10); that is to say: something that happened from a certain point in time.

For Kaprow, «when the image was enclosed within a predesignated boundary, the nature of

³ See Kaprow (1993): 11.

the field as a unique metaphor of the real and total world has been clear» (Kaprow [1966]: 155). The status of the image as been established as ontologically grounded in the “field” of painting: «a conventional picture area» (Kaprow [1966]: 155) at the same time dependent on symbolic referentiality and dictating law to art. In every case, field is marked with a privatising and isolationistic nature, since it has sanctioned «the separation of image from environment» (Kaprow [1966]: 156), of art and life⁴. The instrument that guarantees this separation is the «the useful convention» of «the flatness of the surface» (Kaprow [1966]: 156). And here Kaprow has in mind the specific historical conception of painting, and then of modernist painting, re-shaped on medium specificity by Clement Greenberg⁵. It applies the «flatness» and «integrity» (Greenberg [1960]) of the picture plane criteria for judging every kind of artwork, in order to assure each form of visual art self-determination and self-sufficiency, with a purpose of narrowing a sharp hierarchy among arts founded on painting⁶.

To free the image from picture making focused exclusively on field and plane, «a clear break with painting without simply going to sculpture» (Kaprow [1966]: 157) is needed. It was only once some Abstract Expressionists opened up the picture to «the Big Canvas», a wider pictorial support, which is «something actual, in physical size»⁷ (Goossen [1958]: 49), that can hold an actual «not-quite-painting» (Kaprow [1966]: 158).

Jackson Pollock's big canvases, to give a meaningful example, are picture that «are the *actuality*, the coalescence of act, form, and content» (Goossen [1958]: 55). According to Kaprow, with the «dance of dripping» and by placing the huge canvases horizontally upon the floor, Pollock goes further; he has been the first to eradicate the tyranny of the field: he

ignored the confines of the rectangular field in favor of a continuum going in all directions simultaneously, beyond the literal dimension of any work. [...] The four sides of the painting are thus an abrupt leaving off of the activity, which our imaginations continue outward indefinitely, as though refusing to accept the artificiality of an “ending”. (Kaprow [1993]: 3, 5)

To overcome the field which, there, «no longer functioned in the spatial way in could in an older painting» (Kaprow [1966]: 158), the painter must conceive the painting as an experience, as an act⁸, rather than an enclosed *oeuvre*. He must leave the “private” dimension of the picture and expand the boundaries of the field of painting⁹. Not by merely seeking an imaginary, fictitious and visionary *hors cadre*, but by broadening art to the “public” dimension of assemblage, environment and happening; in the end, by destroying painting¹⁰. For Kaprow the “not-quite-painting” goes well beyond picture making, and it tends to blur its own bounds. Thus, it dispenses the frame, that

⁴ «Painting had become symbol rather than power, i.e., something which *stood for* experience rather than *acting directly upon it*» (Kaprow [1966]: 156).

⁵ Medium specificity is an eminent modernist issue, but it obviously predates it. It raises in modern Europe of the Eighteenth century (see Jurt 2019), and it develops throughout the Nineteenth century (see Anceschi 1992).

⁶ Kaprow blames the Greenbergian urge to enhance «the enduring presence of flatness underneath and above the most vivid illusion of three-dimensional space» (Greenberg [1960]: 86-87).

⁷ On this topic, with particular reference to Mark Rothko's big paintings, which intentionally tend to blend the distinction between picture, window, wall and space, see Venturi (2007): esp. pp. 68-149. See also Conte (2020): 141-143.

⁸ The pioneer of the concept of “art as act” is of course Harold Rosenberg (1960). On Rosenberg as a forerunner of performance art (in opposition to Greenberg), I allow myself to refer to Sessa (2022). Kaprow himself adopts Rosenberg and his “art as act” as the only modernist putative father, when he says: «On the edge of such an abyss, all that is left to do is *act* (to echo Harold Rosenberg)» (Kaprow [1993]: 47).

⁹ I limit myself to hint at the complex debate on the difference between “picture” and “painting”, a dialectics that is crucial in several of writings of artists and critics of that period, such as Ad Reinhardt, Barnett Newman, by referring to Danto (2002), and Conte (2020): 122-132.

¹⁰ As Pollock, for Kaprow, precisely did: «He created some magnificent paintings. But he also destroyed painting» (Kaprow [1993]: 2).

object both literal and theoretical, which for ages has kept him imprisoned in the regime of the illusionistic field.

Pollock's canvases are literally unframed and frameless, and, in the Kaprowian view, «discarding the frame means rejecting the packaging, the perfect balancing, the orientation, that is, the whole *architecture* that, for centuries, seemed to be a necessary condition of painting» (Conte [2020]: 132). By abolishing frames, Pollock has entirely filled the surrounding space with painting. This also implies a strong push in favour of the inclusion of the spectator, whether in the artistic experience or in the work of art itself, in a dual movement of incoming and outgoing: «The painting is continued out into the room. [...] The entire painting comes out at us (we are participants rather than observers), right into the room» (Kaprow [1993]: 6). Kaprow states a total unframing – making a clean sweep of a debate that for decades saw in the frame an essential criterion to distinguish (and to divorce) art and life¹¹ – opens the doors to a conception of art eminently performative and evenemential, also widening the very concept of art.

2. “PUBLIC ART”: COLLAGE/ASSEMBLAGE THEORY, ENVIRONMENT, HAPPENING

As it can be deduced, the liberation of art from conventions and convictions is, for Kaprow, more a matter of *space* than a matter of *media*. To reconnect art and life, it is necessary to activate a process of “de-privatization” of every form of art making. After having coped with the legacy of modernist painting and sculpture, this process is configured as a gradual motion of expansion of artisticity, from the confined insular enclosure of the field to an increasingly open and “public” space, which art gradually occupies by “infesting” it in some degree. This leads to a sort of art's

¹¹ The whole debate, which involves important thinkers such as Georg Simmel and José Ortega y Gasset, is well summed up in the Italian critical anthology ed. by Ferrari, Pinotti (2018).

phase change, from solid to gaseous state, that culminates with its “evaporation” in the air. Kaprow frequently employs scientific metaphors, stealing the language of physics and translating it to art; it can be useful to follow his passages, from the post-painterly assemblage to the ephemeral happening.

As already said, pictorial and sculptural patterns are not a problem in itself; the thing is that they are more often given as predetermined values. It is important to detect that, since the apical modernism of Abstract Expressionism, their status has been steadily mutating and they now persistently intertwine: «a changing ratio» (Lip-pard [1967]: 120 ff.) is always at stake. Kaprow warns us that the new post-field artistic space «is also a space that is a direct heritage of painting. [...] For purely pictorial phenomena play a strong part» (Kaprow [1966]: 160). But, to use the Kraussian terminology, painting and sculpture have to renegotiate their own «discursive spaces», letting themselves be reshaped in «space[s] of exhibition» (Krauss [1982]: 132, 133), other than the traditional ones (viz. illusionistic, symbolistic, realist) and the most advanced (viz. modernist)¹²; and finally embrace – like post '60s sculpture – an «expanded field» (Krauss [1978])¹³. According to Kaprow, visual and plastic arts must untie from «the psychological and physical definition of space given to them by architecture» or, at least, approach organic architecture, and growing as «an organism which would flow from part to part, not only easily within itself, but within the forms of nature» (Kaprow [1966]: 151-152). In simple words, painting and sculpture must go environmental¹⁴.

The first alternative to “private art” is, for Kaprow, the so-called assemblage. Not only with regard to «new forms» and «materials», but

¹² According to Rosalind Krauss, modern painting is bound to a relation of dependence with its spaces of exhibition, see Krauss (1982): 133. Such a vision seems to be similar with the Kaprow's one, when he speaks of art and architecture, see Kaprow (1966): 151-155.

¹³ See also Krauss (1973).

¹⁴ See Kaprow (1966): 152.

mostly to new «attitudes» (Kaprow [1966]: 159) toward art making. Assemblage is a term with a definite history: it was coined by Jean Dubuffet in 1953, in order to differentiate his newest polymeric works from the previous forms of modernist sculpture, Futurist, Cubist and Dada collage, and *objet trouvé* art: see Waldman (1992). In the Kaprowian way, it works more as a «principle» before being a genre; it goes like this: «The materials (including paint) at one's disposal grow in any desired direction and take on any shape whatsoever» (Kaprow [1966]: 159). Although «it is a different point of departure from the accepted pictorial one, being basically environmental» (Kaprow [1966]: 160), it still retains – as already seen (see *supra*, n. 12) – distinct pictorial and sculptural features. And even though some specialists have later argued that part of happening art ultimately arises from a «collage theory», largely derived from Kurt Schwitters' *Merz* found object art (Kirby [1965]: 22-24), one has to deal with the fact that it is ultimately one of modernism's latest and ripened fruit. And that has been several prominent modernist collage theories that, albeit conflicting, deeply grounds assemblage, collage, and – more generally – «the work of art as object» (Wollheim [1970]), in the visual-oriented legacy of the historical Avant-garde.

Think about Greenberg's interpretation of Cubist collage, for which the literalness of the affixed object operates as a marker stronger than ever of the pure opticality of the painting: «The pasted paper establishes undepicted flatness *bodily*, as more than an indication or sign. Literal flatness now tends to assert itself as the main event of the picture» (Greenberg [1959]: 75)¹⁵. Or, on the opposite, look at Harold Rosenberg's more Benjamin-like¹⁶ point of view, which sees in collage «in itself, [...] no aesthetic or intellectual character» (Rosenberg [1974]: 173). To be applied in art, it demands a of «unity» which «lies in the metaphysics of mixing formal and material realities through

introducing the concreteness», and it is therefore a mirror of modern art itself; it is «the form assumed by the ambiguities that have matured in our time concerning both art and the realities it has purported to represent» (Rosenberg [1974]: 175, 176).

For Kaprow, however, the principle governing assemblage *via* collage theory is no more metaphysical: it is experience-based. The field of assemblages is, in fact, «now an objectlike area», and «often it substitutes for the wall» (Kaprow [1966]: 163). Assemblage in an amphibious object, a chimera of painting and sculpture that simultaneously pushes their features in the reality of space. It is the prime art object capable of «heating» art, to spread in in the air. Here comes one of the first notable Kaprow's physical metaphors: «The work begins to actively engulf the air around it, giving it shape, dividing it into parts, weighing it, allowing it to interact with the solids at such a rate or in such a strange manner» (Kaprow [1966]: 164). With assemblage, not only the spectator has the task to enter the work of art; it is the work itself that publicly expands in the air, «thus becoming an Environment» (Kaprow [1966]: 165).

Environment is the eventual expansion of the field of art in space; it is «a further enlargement of the domain of art's subject matter» (Kaprow [1966]: 166), that now coincides with the domain of making (more than creating) and experience (more than contemplation). Once again, this is not limited to media, because the choice of new media is here directed toward the search of «a new range of forms not possible with conventional means» (Kaprow [1966]: 166-167). New factors enter the field of environment making, «change» and «chance» (Kaprow [1966]: 159-176), making it closer to a proper aesthetic experience in the sense of John Dewey, who – with its pragmatist declination of aesthetics so influential for lots of artists¹⁷

¹⁵ For a sharp confrontation with this lecture, see Krauss (1992).

¹⁶ See Benjamin (1936).

¹⁷ «Artists as diverse as Marcel Duchamp, Josef Albers, Robert Motherwell, and Allan Kaprow all read *Art as Experience*. [...] Dewey's concept of art as experience lay behind the work of John Cage, Kaprow, and other contemporary artists being» (Jacob [2018]: 2,6).

– outlined it «simply as *an* experience» (Jacob [2018]: 38). According to Dewey, «in such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts» (Dewey [1934]: 37). They spring from art process, and no more from artworks, and they embody «making as manifestation of the mind-body» (Jacob [2018]: 18): of a creating self not split from its parts nor from the world. This completely fits with the Kaprowian environmental art, for which «the art work must be free to articulate [...] on levels beyond the conceptual» (Kaprow [1966]: 168), read aesthetic in a metaphysical sense.

Environment is an «embodied practice» (Jacob [2018]: 19), that

suggest a form principle for an art which is never finished, whose parts are detachable, alterable, and re-arrangeable in theoretically large numbers of ways without in the least hurting the work. Indeed, such changes actually fulfill the art's function. (Kaprow [1966]: 169)

Environments are enhancing experiences that, moving away from the field as a work, appear closely similar to any other kind of experience, even non aesthetic ones, as Dewey suggested, because all of them «flow from life» (Jacob [2018]: 40). In Kaprow's words, environmental art is «something to be renewed in different forms like fine cooking or the seasonal change, which we do not put into our pockets, but need nevertheless» (Kaprow [1966]: 169). Its is not merely a generator of new artistic categories, such as Minimal environments, Earthworks and Land Art¹⁸, but «a semi-intangible entity» (Kaprow [1966]: 168), that contribute to make art ever more “public” (and, in some Deweyan sense, democratic, participative, communitarian¹⁹). Environments are endless works – «there is no end to the work, quite patently» Kaprow [1966]: 171) – that “aerates” art,

opening its doors to the public and getting people in to.

Happening is, finally, the extreme manner to bring forward the «free style»²⁰ (Kaprow [1966]: 187) of the assemblage and the environment; it ultimately wipes every shadow of the pictorial/visual and sculptural/tactile field²¹, leading art in the realm of the pure event. Because they succeed in developing art process completely in *time*, as well as in space, putting art in motion: «Time would be variously weighted, compressed, or drawn out, [...] and things would have to be set into greater motion. The event which have done this is increasingly called a “Happening”» (Kaprow [1966]: 184). Kaprow provides happenings a tautological definition: «Happenings are vents that, put simply, happens» (Kaprow [1993]: 16). They are most often indefinable «great moments» (Kaprow [1993]: 15), that intensify our experience in ways which somehow deal with what we are used to call art: a concentrate of experience, whose artisticity relies on the most unexpected variables, but still «generated in action» (Kaprow [1993]: 19). Happenings sharply make art fully performance art; in «art as action», «matter has been transformed into energy and time-motion» (Lippard [1968]: 255).

Since their emergence, there has been much discussion on their relationship with theatre, and on their supposed «theatrical» nature: on their «theatricality»; see Fried (1967). An eminent expert as Michael Kirby, for example, described them as «*a form of theatre in which diverse elements, including nonmatrixed performing, are organized in a compartmented structure*» (Kirby [1965]: 21), and by doing so he roots them in experimental theatre history: in that branch of «ritual» theatre (Fischer-Lichte [2005]: esp. 15-88), not entangled in «“the priority of the eye”» and «verbal character» (Kirby [1965]: 12). Others have connected performance to theatre instead of sub-

¹⁸ For a concise history of these post-modernist artistic tendencies, see Rose (1986): 1114-1117.

¹⁹ See Jacob (2018): 77-142.

²⁰ But «Happenings are not just another new style» (Kaprow [1993]: 21).

²¹ While they are quite close, environment (and of course assemblage) tends to be hierarchical on the background, see Kaprow (1966): 184.

jugating it the normative «art form as a new and unique medium»: to break away from the «concept of art» (Brown [1983]: 68). By the opposite side of the same token, Michael Fried, in his post-Greenbergian phase, used the marker of «theatrical» to label all post-painterly-shaped art. He called it «literal» and he equipped it with «literal sensibility», consisting of the attention on the beholder, the «preoccupation» with time, and with the pretence of rendering the «endlessness» of theatrical temporality²² (Fried [1967]: 153, 166).

Kaprow itself sometimes indulges to the theatrical comparison, when he admits that «these events are essentially theatre pieces, however unconventional»²³ (Kaprow [1993]: 17). But what really counts to my argument is that this parallel is employed to stress the big breakthrough of the field achieved by happening, analogous to breaking the fourth wall. As in research theatre, happening breaks through – and destroys – every curtain, bringing art to nature and even to life: «Happenings invite us to cast aside these proper manner [of traditional art] and partake wholly in the real nature of the act and (one hopes) in life»²⁴ (Kaprow [1993]: 18). Happening perhaps it may be theatre in substance, but it transforms itself continuously, constantly refreshing all its forms, wherein «the last shred of theatrical convention disappears» (Kaprow [1966]: 196). It is due to happening's transient and transitory nature, «which would apparently transcend palpable time» (Kaprow [1966]: 193) and space.

Happening's theatricality is the fuel needed to burn all the remaining conventions of per-

formance art, acting, and performing itself²⁵. As Kirby affirms, a «*nonmatrixed* performing» is at play: a non-traditional acting, that enacts «a great variety» of experiences (no longer plays or *pièces*) which «take place outside of theatre» (Kirby [1965]: 16). Art and theatre conventions burst in the air, in the massive explosion that spreads art in the air, totally engulfing the whole world of art-isticity. Kaprowian «aerial» metaphors are taken to the extreme. Happenings' «impermanence» is «melting» every formal component «into an elusive, changeable configuration»; they provide «not only a space, a set of relationships to the various things around it, and a range of values, but *an overall atmosphere* as well» (Kaprow [1996]: 20, 18; mine italics). With the continuing growing openness, Pollock's *allover painting* (still «private» and accessible only in galleries and museums) has become *an allover liminal artistic atmosphere* («public» as the air, as long as it can be breathed by potentially everyone). The post-modernist urge to put an end to modernist elitism has led art to its «evaporation», with the belief that the utopian purpose of «art for everyone» comes about only if we cease to consider (and consume) the artwork «as a commodity» (Kaprow [1993]: 26). For doing so, it is imperative to decompose it in its «molecule-like» status (Kaprow [1966]: 159). Once we get back to the atom, and one we follow Kaprow in letting artistic experience happen, art will be in the air within everybody's reach.

3. «EVAPORATED ART»: DEMATERIALIZATION, DE-DEFINITION, NONART, ATMOSPHERES

An art theory such as this, with so many radical aspects, is part of those post-modernist theoretical attitudes which Arthur C. Danto called «narratives of the end of art»: positions of dis-

²² «Theatre confronts the beholder, and thereby isolates him, with the endlessness not just of objecthood but of time; [...] the sense which, at bottom, theatre addresses a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come, *simultaneously approaching and receding*, as if apprehended in an infinite perspective» (Fried [1967]: 167).

²³ And further on: «Happening [...] suggests a «crude» version of the avant-garde Theatre of the Absurd» (Kaprow [1966]: 188).

²⁴ In short: «There is thus no separation of audience and play» (Kaprow [1993]: 17).

²⁵ The very concept of «audience [...] should be eliminated entirely» (Kaprow [1966]: 195), for the realization of an actual communion between performers and participants; in happenings, they both «[them]selves are shapes (though [...] not often conscious of this fact» (Kaprow [1993]: 11).

trust toward the very notion of art, expressed after modernism by artist themselves «with varying degrees of pessimism» (Danto [1989]: 331). The concept of art no longer fits advanced art practices, including happening, to which it appears obsolete. In Kaprow's own words, «the Happening is conceived as an art, certainly, but this is for a lack of a better word» (Kaprow [1966]: 190). By comparing it with other substantial variations on the "post-art" theme, offered by different authors, either modernist or post-modernist, I would like to discuss his idea of "nonart", and to prompt that Kaprow's hypothesis is not pessimistic at all, but fertile instead, thank to its utopian vitalist drive to inhabit the public dimension.

One of the first studies noticing the collapsing trends in art making and art thinking has been Lucy R. Lippard's 1968 investigation into «the dematerialization of art» (Lippard [1968]): into the loss of its physicality and objecthood²⁶. Even though she ascribes the emphasis of «the thinking process almost exclusively» to «an ultra-conceptual art», she acknowledges that «losing interest in the physical evolution of the work of art» also involves what she names «art as action»²⁷ (Lippard [1968]: 255). Since «the time element – vital, as seen, for Kaprow's work – becomes a focal point [...] absorbed in unexpected ways by the performing arts» (Lippard [1968]: 256), they too get dematerialized. Even they do not equate art process with cognitive process, performing arts increasingly end up aspiring to a disembodied «"thinness", both literal and allusive» (Lippard [1968]: 270). But Kaprow's formulation, keeping up actual experience as a value, is inscribed in what Lippard outlines as the «visionary» (Lippard [1968]: 270) side of dematerialization. Namely, an artistic conception that goes non-objectual without being

²⁶ On the other side, the Greenbergian modernist orthodoxy sees in objecthood the threshold between art and "non-art", in which «the question of the phenomenal as opposed to the aesthetic or artistic comes in» (Greenberg [1967]: 186).

²⁷ An art in which – echoing Rosenberg and Kaprow himself – «matter has been transformed into energy and time motion» (Lippard [1968]: 255).

exclusively intellectual²⁸. It configures itself as «a "nonvisual structure"» for denying «compositional sense» and detail, but not for claiming to be «non-visible» (Lippard [1968]: 273, 270). It is reasonably impalpable, just like air, and it does not mean that it does not exist. In the Lippardian perspective, Kaprow dematerializes what he calls the pictorial and sculptural field, but preserves the tangibility of happening, whereas he is convinced that one can "feel" it, as it can be "felt" the caress of the wind.

In his mature phase, Harold Rosenberg however complained that after Action painting «art enter[ed] into a state of limitless expansion» (Rosenberg [1967]: 302). He called that region "post-art", and he insisted on the centrality of the figure of the artist to the disadvantage of the artworks: «The post-art artist carries the de-definition of art to the point where nothing is left of art but *the fiction of the artist*» (Rosenberg [1972]: 12; mine italics). In his opinion, "de-definition" goes on with "de-aestheticization", and its essence lies in the refusal to understand the nature and the reason of any intermedial stepping. He also traces its origins in every trend that he classifies as «anti-art» (Rosenberg [1972]: 17-27), which would have characterized proper American art since its origins. The "post-art artist", who can now live without art, thus appears as an extremization of the "action painter", once strictly focused on gesture rather than on results. De-aestheticized artworks, being the final term of a process concentrating on itself all its energies, are «inventions produced and discarded in the course of a *liberating act*» (Rosenberg [1972]: 54; mine italics), fallen as a precipitate of a solution whose components are forgotten and irrelevant. Rosenberg regarded happenings as "post/anti-art", for their representing «the vision of transcending the arts in a festival of forms and sensations» (Rosenberg [1972]: 13), and his observations may be read *a contrario*

²⁸ Although Kaprow can be surely tied to the paradigm of «the artist as a thinker», he is very careful not to narrow aesthetic experience as «the stringently metaphysical vehicle for an idea intended» (Lippard [1968]: 270).

as a precise description of their disruptive feature. But, concerning Kaprow, they are not accepting whereby they stress on the artist as mythological figure. With his non-artistic resolutions, Kaprow did everything to de-potentiate the so-called legend of the godlike demiurgic artist, limiting to the minimum its inference and suppressing its aura. Kaprow's art theory may be de-aestheticized, but not artist-centered.

In direct opposition to Rosenberg's conjectures, Kaprow's project on "nonart" is deeply related to the question of the definition, or better the definitions, of art. According to him, "nonart" the striving of art to encompass in its definition each most unlikely, and seemingly unconceivable variable: «Nonart is whatever has not been accepted as art but has caught an artist's attention with that possibility in mind»²⁹ (Kaprow [1993]: 98). It should be distinguished, in fact, from «antiart», which is the post-Dada nihilistic and nullifying push «intruded to the arts world to jar conventional values and provoke positive esthetic and/or ethical responses» (Kaprow [1993]: 99). As should be clear, Kaprow's theory is, on the contrary, positive and purposive, and it maximally widens the artist's range well beyond predetermined artistic and aesthetic categories. The "un-artist" is now the actor who can take the issue of defining art wherever he wants, and he can share it with everyone; the word «*artist* refers to a person willfully enmeshed in the dilemma of categories who performs as if none of them existed» (Kaprow [1993]: 81). "Nonart" and "un-artist" de-define and de-aestheticize just in the mentioned Deweyan sense: in order to thin line between art and life; "nonart" is not "antiart", rather it is «an active art» and «an arena of paradoxes», supremely incarnated by happenings, «whether life is an Happening or a Happening is an art of life» (Kaprow [1993]: 64, 82, 87).

²⁹ It is interesting to note that the Kaprowian writings devoted to this topic are entitled *The Education of the Un-Artist, Part I and II*, echoing Friedrich Schiller's classic *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), thus reinterpreting in a post-modernist declination the Schillerian scope of aesthetic education.

Art's lack of definition (but not of defining urge), is specular to "nonart"'s molecular, and evaporating configuration. Even Kirby argues that a real happening takes shape if «dynamic [...] atmospheric qualities» are enacted, instead of the «passive» ones (Kirby [1965]: 26). Given all the Kaprowian "aerial" characterizations of environment and happening, such achievements in art theory seem to anticipate new tendencies in aesthetics subsequent of decades; namely, those in which the idea of a «new aesthetics» rises precisely from "atmosphere" as a «basic concept» for an "ecstatic" «ontology of thingness», like that of Böhme³⁰ (2017): 14, 35. In this respect, Kaprow's conceptions of environment and happening thus analysed accords well with those phenomena of modern art which, according to Gernot Böhme, generate atmospheric aesthetic experience, because they «offer the extraordinary advantage of taking up a wide range of everyday experiences» (Böhme [2017]: 124). The Böhmeian definition of «ecstasy of things» as felt atmospheres or moods, for which «to sense oneself bodily is to sense concurrently one's being in an environment, one's feelings in this place» (Böhme [2017]: 21), is incredibly close to Kaprow's un-artistic theory. Happenings are finally an outstanding example of what Böhme calls «the art of staging», arranged by a «*phantastike techne*» (Böhme [2017]: 163). Yet for the political implications. In this view, "the art of staging" is intrinsically politic (other than aesthetic), since its field of action is no more localized in a specific place (in the Kaprowian field)³¹. It is ideally the whole world, on which it acts a disperse, public and evaporating "nonart" flying around in the air.

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³⁰ On the contemporary developments of the aesthetics of atmospheres, see Griffero (2014).

³¹ See Böhme (2017): 28-34.

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