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# Of(f) Our Times: Curatorial Anachronics



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Scene of the Myth

Sarah Pierce

I.

“The event? And had it taken place?”<sup>1</sup>  
(Maurice Blanchot)

In 1963, in response to an invitation to participate in a group exhibition of former students of Hans Hofmann,<sup>2</sup> Allan Kaprow constructed two rooms in a warehouse: one brightly lit and decorated with mostly yellow furniture and objects, arranged like a small bedroom; the other dim, lit by a solitary lightbulb, and filled with “junk”—ladders, boxes, stacks of paper,

Scene of the Myth  
Sarah Pierce

plastic wrap, etc. This room's walls were covered in dark paper and the objects within appeared more *stored* than *arranged*.

Kaprow provided a lengthy set of instructions to accompany the work, in which the artist laid out his plans for visitors to remake the rooms after him—choosing the furniture, exchanging it between the rooms and adding their own “interpretations” of the environment. Each day the rooms would change through the efforts of someone coming in and rearranging what someone else had left behind.<sup>3</sup>

Kaprow embellished his instructions with recommendations. These he wrote as a direct address, in which he urges visitors to consider various formal and aesthetic relationships between the objects, the rooms, and, significantly, people. Try, for example, contrasting “positive and negative” elements; place a “sunset-colored” room against a “blue-Monday one.” “Do you like candy-canes? Then why not paint everything in stripes?” He goes on to encourage visitors to produce new compositions even after they leave. “Consider whether or not you're a red-head and dressed in Kelly green. Are you fat, fatter than the table? In that case, quickly change your clothes if the small chair's color doesn't correspond; and also lose some weight.” In places, the instructions adopt a pseudo-philosophical tone: “How long does it take to develop artistic senses? Why not ask an interior decorator? [...] Instead of ‘forms’ try simply an idea like rooms full of people versus empty rooms. [...] If form is too much for you why not chuck it all and take the pure leap? What is a ‘pure leap?’”<sup>4</sup>

The instructions are part of the work, and the address treads a line between judgment and charade, affect and lousy taste, where participation is more a result of cajoling than open systems, cast and yet

unbound by the space of the artwork or exhibition, where “anyone can find or make rooms of any shape, size, proportion, and color,” and “everyone else can change them.”<sup>5</sup> The delivery brims with absurdist logic, and one can hear Kaprow, the student, poking fun at Hofmann, the teacher. The latter would often paint as he lectured, in order to demonstrate his famous push-and-pull technique of moving pigment around a canvas to create abstract works. Hofmann's aesthetically charged language translates into a joke among his students, and yet there is more at stake Kaprow's “furniture comedy” than just parody. As Kaprow's Happenings evolved from once-off events into socially charged environments capable of expanding (in theory) beyond the specifics of space and time, his instructions for *Push and Pull* prepare us for a work that hinges on its own exhibition—on the moment when it is most exposed, and therefore most conditioned by and co-dependent upon a *community of the exhibition*.

In writing about community, Jean Luc Nancy describes a scene of transmission where people gather to receive narratives he names *myths*. Unlike other stories, the myth includes the scene of its invention and recital—a scene connected in space and across *times*. He writes: “With myth, the passing of time takes shape, its ceaseless passing is fixed in an exemplary place of showing and revealing.”<sup>6</sup> The community of the exhibition is not simply present to receive the artwork (as narrative or myth). It is initiated into the *scene of the myth*, as Nancy writes, “if myth is primarily defined as that with which or in which time turns into space.” The Museum of Modern Art in New York's original press release for the show took considerable care to relate the parameters of Kaprow's contribution, to describe the objects and rooms *and* the instructions, and to indicate

that the work would not tour with the other artworks, but that other exhibitors “can stage an environment in the spirit of a text provided by the artist.”<sup>7</sup>

Crucially, the community of the exhibition is as dispersive as the work, perhaps initiated, but a community nonetheless of “anyone.” This is not to say that Kaprow’s *Push and Pull* is an open system where the viewer completes the work, nor is it conceptual (formed as instructive text), nor is the claim that through compliance everyone is an artist. And despite multiple restagings in recent years by artists, curators, and even dealers, the work is not *contingent* (as with relational aesthetics). It is *dependent*, wholly and completely, upon the community of the exhibition. A community, if you will, that does not refer to a particular set of individuals bound to a particular origin, but rather a community that traverses the event—appearing and dispersive—anyone and no one.

If there is any doubt as to whether or not Kaprow expected visitors to carry out his instructions, it is worth noting that he added an amendment to “the exhibitors,” which was never meant to be read by the public. The original show, *Hans Hofmann and His Students*, was held over one day in a warehouse in Manhattan, organized by MoMA before traveling to various venues in the United States. The plan for the tour, as mentioned, was to send Kaprow’s instructions only, along with the works by other artists in the show. However, at a certain point Kaprow realized that his intentions for the work were not happening (so to speak). The amendment attends to this problem:

Implied here, and of course in the actual Environment-Happening, is the wish to bypass the habit of ‘ssh, don’t touch,’ useful with respect to older art but an impediment

to understanding certain traditions that have recently begun to develop. I am most interested in the handshake between the artist and others. The museum or gallery director can now be instrumental in bringing this about.

In parentheses Kaprow adds:

(From reports, I gather that this arrangement has not worked out optimally. In an exhibition atmosphere people are not geared to enter into the process of art. Hence, this kind of work is much better off away from the habits and rituals of conventional culture. A.K.)<sup>8</sup>

This is a subtle clause, an additional directive for the exhibitor to be instrumental in the work, taking on a special role in its repeated and restaged transmission by demonstrating how to move the objects, touch them, drag them, and arrange them. A momentary defeat, perhaps, but revealing of Kaprow’s ambivalence towards this abdication of the work to the “scene” of the exhibition. He acknowledges that the museum or gallery director carries or conveys the special connection between the artist and “others”—whom I am naming the community of the exhibition. Nancy describes the speaker who delivers the myth this way: “We do not yet know whether the one speaking is from among them or if he is an outsider. We say that he is one of them, but different from them because he has the gift, or simply the right—or else it is his duty—to tell the story.”<sup>9</sup> It is not the speaker’s story; it is the community’s. The myth is not authored; it is *held* and sustained.<sup>10</sup> Kaprow’s ambivalence expands to the curbing effect of the exhibition on an audience that is unsure (or unwilling) to exceed convention and, in turn, onto an artwork that refuses to be avowed as such.



## II.

Allan Kaprow's instructions for *Push and Pull* include a large, cumbersome wooden crate that houses a numbered series of cardboards onto which Kaprow painted (using heavy black paint) his original set of instructions. Like an ark and its tablets, the crate and its contents are safely stored at mumok in Vienna as part of the museum's permanent collection. In 2010, curators Barbara Clausen, Achim Hochdörfer, and Catherine Wood invited me to make a new work for a group exhibition at mumok, which would travel to Tate Modern. The exhibition was called *Push and Pull*, after Kaprow's work (and not, ironically, after Hofmann's technique).

*Future Exhibitions* (2010) is a performance that takes place in the midst of the environment of Allan Kaprow's *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hofmann* (1963). The performance takes place in two rooms connected by a large opening; one room is white, the other is black. The white room is evenly lit. The black room is rigged with theater spots and colored gels. Each room consists of materials gathered from around the building: shelves, tables, rope, a television monitor, a fan, scraps of timber, boxes, frames, cardboard tubes, used carpet, packing materials, and pedestals. It is the generic material found in and around cultural organizations, in offices and storage spaces—the stuff of past exhibitions, relating to the administration of artworks, their display, as well as the physical managing of the institution.

When the performance begins, the white room contains only black or white materials, arranged in geometric configurations around the room. The black room holds all the remaining objects, set up in discrete combinations that loosely resemble artworks by known artists. For example, a pair of wooden crates placed side-by-side (Donald Judd), a piece of carpet carefully folded into a symmetrical lump (Robert Morris), low-level static on a TV (Nam June Paik), or a set of transparent pipes leaning against the wall (Eva Hesse).

The audience gathers inside the white room and a speaker, standing on a plain chair, announces the “first scenario”:

This is a photograph of an exhibition. In it there are several canvases hanging on the walls with paintings of geometric shapes, circles, squares, crosses and similar compositions. The paintings are numbered 1 through 39 with bits of paper tacked to the wall. The paintings are hung in

groups, salon style. The photograph is oriented to the corner of the room. Hung in the upper corner, near the ceiling is a black square on a white canvas. On the floor, placed next to the wall is a modest black chair. It is *The Last Futurist Exhibition*.<sup>11</sup>

The speaker gestures to the walls, pointing at paintings that are not present, describing how they are hung, and finally gesturing to an empty corner where the walls meet near the ceiling. After each scenario, there is a scene change witnessed by the audience, made by specially prepared demonstrators who move the various items between the rooms, dismantling and rearranging the objects. These changes are long and drawn out and the audience members view them from where they stand in the room, so that at times the demonstrators' actions are difficult to see depending on one's vantage point. The performance continues in this way, with the speaker moving back and forth between the black room and the white room, and the audience following, crowding into the space, as the demonstrators rearrange the rooms until finally the black room is completely empty and the white room is dense with materials.

Each scenario in *Future Exhibitions* relates to a historical exhibition, but not necessarily a historic one. Beginning with the famous photograph of Kazimir Malevich's installation of thirty-nine Suprematist paintings and ending with a letter written by the director of an art space in Dublin to a student whose work was damaged by a drunkard who "went berserk" at the opening when asked to leave. The documents (a photograph, a calendar, a newspaper article, and several letters) form the script, so that each scene works as an intensification of both the act of making

something public and visible (the act of exhibiting), and its documentation (the archive, exhibit, or evidence). "Future exhibitions" is a category: it is how institutions anticipate "the work" before it arrives in the exhibition and how publics prepare for what comes next. The intersection of references, past and present, present and absent, continues throughout the performance, as the speaker moves back and forth between the white room and the black room, joined by the audience. With this movement, the objects shift as well, as the demonstrators carefully and methodically take the installation apart and remake the next scene. These changes happen while the audience watches, and over the course of the performance the rooms change as a result of materials being dragged, rolled, dissembled, pushed, and pulled between the rooms. Each carefully prepared interval re-situates a respective document in space and time, literally performing the spaces between times, between documents as a fluctuation of objects, people, and narration. The space is difficult to navigate physically, as the audience, demonstrators, and materials move around, crowded in, cutting across the two rooms.

If we pause for a moment and think about the object of the curatorial—and in this moment, this hesitation, if we shift slightly to ask, what is the *subject* of the curatorial—we may begin to distill the *community of the exhibition*. A subject produced at the moment of exposition, beyond the display of artworks (and beyond the necessary, usual or coerced participations, interactions, and gatherings that arise out of the moment of exhibition). Things like: knowledge, encounters, gatherings, economies, exchanges, careers, experts, territories, and so on. If we think of an exhibition as an end, a destination, something we move towards, then the curatorial is only an organizing function, a process,

how we get there. However, returning to Nancy, the exhibition is also a mythic scene (not to be confused with myth itself): “It names things unknown, beings never seen. But those who have gathered together understand everything, in listening they understand themselves and the world, and they understand why it was necessary for them to come together.”<sup>12</sup> Like the gestures and interruptions that Walter Benjamin cites in epic theater that run *through a moment of exposition*, beyond the event and around it, the curatorial takes place in intervals, so that in fact, the curatorial sustains the scene of the myth, and turns the exhibition into something *held*, temporarily and less bracketed in terms of a beginning and end.



### III.

For Hannah Arendt, the nuances that link action to freedom and plurality, speech and remembrance, distinguish political action as a mode of human togetherness on the one hand, from prescriptive political agendas on the other. If we consider the meaning of politics as described by Arendt, rather than presuming there is a consensus around the political, we can find ways to address “those enduring elements that are worthy of being remembered and are revealed only in our living and acting together politically.”<sup>13</sup> Paul O’Neill describes the curatorial at its most productive, as the prioritization of “a type of working with others that allows for a temporary space of cooperation, coproduction, and discursivity to emerge in the process of doing and speaking together.”<sup>14</sup> For O’Neill, the curatorial involves a constellation of discursive forms and processes, of varying degrees of publicness, that at times disrupt or, at the very least, remain unreconciled within an exhibition. Without fixating on process or any semblance of medium, and without setting up an opposition between the publicness of the exhibition and the less, or not-at-all, public activity that runs through all exhibition-making, we can pick up O’Neill’s inference of a temporary space of doing and speaking.

The apparent openness of Kaprow’s invitation carries a set of expectations, forms and traditions. The work can be reproduced, possessed, and imposed, and *equally*, dispossessed, disavowed, and discharged. This is the seed of Kaprow’s instructions—they can be *not followed* without interrupting “the work.” The work’s exhibition is a return to the awkward scene of the myth—a work that never actually *happened* to begin

with. The folly of each restaging of *Push and Pull*—and there have been many—is the appeal for curators and artists alike that these scenarios can stand-in for a community that may or may not arrive, a conversation that never takes place, but an artwork that can be attested to nonetheless.

The community of the exhibition is flawed by the very temporalities that accompany remoteness, distance, invariable failures, and the impossibilities of duration as a mode of being together. Nancy writes that the structure of *being exposed* involves being “posed in exteriority, according to an exteriority, having to do with an outside in the very intimacy of an inside.”<sup>15</sup> The community of the exhibition involves what is made manifest and exposed, temporarily and incompletely—keeping in mind that “what takes place” is not always in the realm of the visible, and that all displays, even ostensibly “permanent” ones, eventually recede and disappear.

Nancy also writes of the scene of the myth which, when interrupted, renders the myth of community impossible. To interrupt the scene of the myth is to intercede in a legacy of discrete and enduring narratives contained within a metanarrative. The community of the exhibition contains grammars that reproduce universalizing narratives as well as other, “localized” stories, subjectivities, and identities.<sup>16</sup> The temporality of the moment of exposition, including the repeated disappearances, interruptions, and intervals between exhibitions, comprises what it means to be the community of the exhibition—to be narrated, transmitted, and received as such. Rather than bound in a state of togetherness, exposure in exhibition leaves us vulnerable.

It is because both the exhibition and the art it contains arise out of plurality that I am seeking to

characterize the community of the exhibition through a politics that coincides with entering into an “address” with others through acts that present, demonstrate, reveal, invoke, make manifest, and, importantly, expose. Exhibitions summon and gather artworks and artists, audiences and narratives, and even when they prepare us to receive counter-narratives to unravel the scene of the myth by correcting the past or taking stock of the present, exhibitions reinforce a consensus, whether new or “renewed” that this is *the moment*. But regardless of claims and narratives, meta- or counter-, there is a quality of coming together that has to do with what it means to enter a community that precedes the moment, and extends beyond. A community that is not circumscribed by the event, and is unavowable through works of art. We know how to perform Kaprow’s instructions. The tradition has been absorbed. With allegiance, the community of the exhibition returns to the scene of the myth we have sworn to uphold.

All images: Sarah Pierce, *Future Exhibitions*, 2010. Installation view, in *Monogamy*, curated by Tirdad Zolghadr, CCS Bard Galleries and Hessel Museum of Art, 2013

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill 1988), 31.
- 2 Hans Hofmann and His Students, April 18, 1963, presented by the Museum of Modern Art at Santini's Warehouse, 447 West 49th Street New York.
- 3 Allan Kaprow, "Instructions: Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hofmann," *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jean Luc Nancy, "Myth Interrupted," in *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1991), 44.
- 7 Press release, Museum of Modern Art, April 18, 1963. The exhibition traveled on to Colorado, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. [https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press\\_archives/3139/releases/MOMA\\_1963\\_0051\\_48.pdf](https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3139/releases/MOMA_1963_0051_48.pdf) (accessed February 11, 2019).
- 8 Kaprow, "Amendment to Instructions" (1963), in *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings*.
- 9 Nancy, "Myth Interrupted," 43.
- 10 Nancy writes: "In the speech of the narrator, their language for the first time serves no other purpose than that of presenting the narrative and of keeping it going. It is no longer the language of their exchanges, but of their reunion—the sacred language of a foundation and an oath. The teller shares it with them and among them" (ibid., 44).
- 11 *Future Exhibitions* (2010). Installation and performance. Original script by Sarah Pierce. Commissioned jointly by mumok, Vienna, and Tate Modern, London, for *Push and Pull*, curated by B. Clausen et al.
- 12 Nancy, "Myth Interrupted," 44.
- 13 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 199. Arendt's theory of action comes into play here, as she states, "The goal is not contained within the action itself, but unlike ends, neither does it lie in the future..."
- 14 Paul O'Neill, "the curatorial constellation and the paracuratorial paradox," *The Exhibitionist*, no. 6 (June 2012), 56–57.
- 15 Nancy, foreword to *The Inoperative Community*, xxxvii.
- 16 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, reprint 1997), 156. Lyotard's idea of "grand narrative" is the story that is considered common to all. He proposes a move to small narratives—*les petit récits*—as a way to break up or unravel the metanarrative's dominant stream.