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Inhabiting Allan Kaprow's Push and Pull

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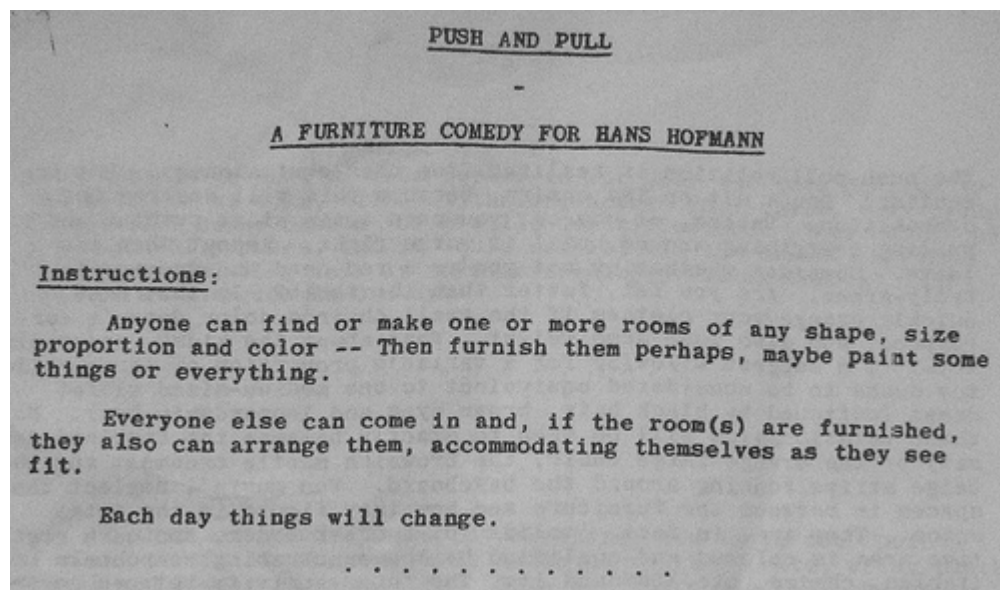
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Bilateral

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Inhabiting Allan Kaprow's Push and Pull



[Excerpt from instructions page at Kaprow's *Push and Pull*. The full text of the instructions is available online [here](#), or for the typewriter/paper feel, read them [here](#).]

[Creative Time](#) organised a presentation of Allan Kaprow's *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hofmann*, during the [Performa](#) Festival. It ran for three days at a space called Passerby.

Push and Pull is a dynamic installation in which anyone can come and rearrange furniture which is spread around in a room. Well, we might call it an installation now, but in Kaprow's day (the piece was first presented in 1963) it was a "Happening" (or an "Environment"). It's clear that Kaprow, in the four years since [18 Happenings in 6 Parts](#) was presented, had substantially reworked his idea of what a Happening should be. If *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was a sort of experimental theatre involving specially prepared "actors", then by the time he devised *Push and Pull*, Kaprow had moved on to creating situations where the "audience" was now the primary activator of the work.

In terms of the name of the piece, it's obvious that "push" and "pull" are verbs describing what we must do to the furniture to move it around the space. But apparently these were also terms used by [Hans Hofmann](#), who had been Kaprow's painting teacher in California, and to whom the piece was dedicated. Something about Hofmann exhorting his students to "push and pull" various shapes and colours around the arena of the canvas – or perhaps the "push and pull" effect that the resulting composition might have on your eye as it works its way around the surface of the painting.

I read somewhere that this push and pull business was a bit of a joke amongst Hofmann's students – he became amusingly predictable in his use of the phrase – and it is in this vein of jocular homage that Kaprow named the work. Nevertheless, the importance to Kaprow of “composition” in three dimensional space (*and* in time, *and* in social interaction) shouldn't be underestimated. The room, and the time, and human attention, become frames in which the composition of action and experience takes place.

Here are some notes about my time spent with (and without) the work:

Day 1:

(Thursday 15th November 2007) 12:15pm

Push and Pull is advertised to run from Thursday to Saturday from 12 to 6pm. Not knowing much about the work in advance (is it a performance with prepared actors? do I have to “participate”? do I need to stay for the full 6 hours each day?) I show up at noon on Thursday. I'm the first to arrive. The room looks like a second hand furniture shop after a fire sale, where everything's been turned upside down by bargain-maddened shoppers trying to get to the good stuff: only the crappy items, it seems, are left behind. Haybales, and some loose hay, scattered around the floor. And a few lamps, boxes of op-shop records and cassette tapes, a half dead TV with only the sound working, an electric typewriter that buzzes but won't type, chairs and tables stacked on each other in precarious piles. A small electric cooker stashed in a draw, and a few tins of Campbell's cream of mushroom soup. The walls are covered with reflective silver wallpaper.

Here are a few pictures of the scene as I found it: [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

I pick my way through the rubble to get to the box of instructions placed on the floor in front of a big black plastic box with the title of the work painted in rough white letters. The instructions are quite handy: there's a small paragraph which is just enough to get you started. Essentially, it reads: rearrange some furniture in the room, but beware, others will also rearrange furniture, so what you set up might be quickly changed.

I turn a chair up the right way and sit for a while, with this page of writing in my hand. For someone who generally loves this kind of participatory stuff, even *I* have trouble getting started. I feel foolish. I feel watched. I begin shuffling around the room, looking at details, picking up and considering objects and then putting them back down again. None of it inspires me. It's just crap. I feel like the room has been over-prepared. It looks too dishevelled, contrived, composed. It annoys me. I want it to be less “curated” – maybe the furniture should have been just left where it was first placed when the removalists brought it in. These stacks of chairs look like assembled sculptures – like someone was trying to make something “artistic”. This irritation, then, I guess, is my starting point. I begin disassembling the towers of chairs and tables. I begin putting things in order, stacking chairs properly, tidying up, trying to make some space. I figure, it's only when you have a little order, a little space to move, that any contribution will be discernible.

Another visitor steps in. There's the inevitable moment of tension between us – am I performing for her? Does she think that *I* am the artist? Then she goes to read the instructions and the tension shifts. When will *she* start moving furniture around? She becomes self conscious. I am watching her from the corner of my eye, I want to see if she has the same nervous tentative beginnings. Of course, me shuffling stuff around breaks the ice, and soon she too is nosing around like a dog looking for a good place to pee. She doesn't stay long, but I guess she's got the gist of the work.

The guy minding the exhibition is kind to me, he lets me borrow his phone to make a call. But he's not really interested in Kaprow, he's listening to music on his headphones and is absorbed in his laptop. I find an old broom and begin sweeping some of the hay away from a section of floor, to make a clean area with a sharp edge. I pile the hay up to make a stack in front of the entrance to the "back room". I do this partly out of perversity – I know the guy minding the show will have to climb over it to go behind the scenes. Maybe I figure I can force him into being involved in this way. But he catches me doing it. He pulls out his headphones and warns me not to push the hay any further. I've discovered the first "boundary" I must not cross.

1:55pm

I go off to have lunch at the Chelsea Food Markets. It's a drizzly cold day. I write some postcards to friends back in Australia. I take my time. I'm not in a hurry today.

2.50pm

Only an hour has passed, but *Push and Pull* looks completely different! It's been occupied by what looks like a [university class for retirees](#), run by an extremely energetic and intelligent Jewish New Yorker. They've pulled all the chairs into a big circle and the professor is holding forth on Kaprow's transition from action painting to action-per-se as art. It's a topic dear to my heart, so I sit in the wings and listen along. His narrative is compelling and entertaining. He compares a photo of Jackson Pollock making one of his drip paintings with one of Kaprow in his yard of used car tyres. Both artists are literally "in their work". This leads to a discussion of the role of documentation in ephemeral art practices. The class is remarkably clever, they ask good questions. Even the fellow minding the show has taken out his headphones and put down his laptop to listen in. We all become aware of the camera sitting up on top of the wall in the corner of the room, taking one frame every minute. Later, I suppose, we'll watch it back and see our hours compressed into seconds. Will this adequately capture what we went through here in this room together?

The class discusses some of the elements within the room. They're not as random as you might have expected, apparently. The silver wallpaper, the professor muses, has been carefully chosen because of its resemblance to the walls of Andy Warhol's Factory, often thought of as one big Happening in itself. The cans of soup, naturally, are another little joke about Warhol.

I wonder about this. Warhol's Factory, and his soup cans, appear almost simultaneously with *Push and Pull* (1963). How much were the two artists aware of each other? Plus, in pictures of the earliest versions of *Push and Pull*, (which are available in a handy folder in the room) there is no silver wallpaper, no hay, the room is much more sober, like a "normal" middle class living room. It's only in later versions that the silver paper appears (during the last 10 years). I'm no historian, but I'd like to know more about what went on behind the scenes of these aesthetic decisions...

The professor, at some length, then discusses Kaprow's relationship to chairs. In his instructions to *Push and Pull*, Kaprow writes:

But one caution! Don't sit on the chairs, because this will destroy the composition. Unless, of course, you once again start pushing and pulling everything around until it works right. Repeat when you leave.

Chairs, the professor points out, are pretty interesting pieces of technology. We only notice them when they stop working – when they cause us pain. As soon as we start sitting on them, they seemingly disappear from Kaprow's environment. So we have to be careful of them. His students become conscious, for the first time, of their chairs. Perhaps they had not thought them to be an important part of the composition until now. They have unwittingly (through the force of the social requirements of the class situation) made an oval shape with the chairs and their bodies in the middle of the room. It is a small oasis of order and rationality among the chaos.

3:25pm

I have to run, I've got to go off and meet [Anthony McCall](#), a rendezvous I've been looking forward to for ages. Anthony and I talk about Kaprow. He tells me he actually interviewed Kaprow back in the late 1980s for a publication that never eventuated. We talk about why it is that artists of one generation are fascinated with those of the recent past. Like going to visit an old uncle who your parents always dismissed as eccentric and loopy. Only now do you realise just how fascinating and urgent everything that uncle has to say really is.

Day 2:

(Friday 16th November 2007)

I can't make it to visit Kaprow today. I have other places to go.

I hang out with my friend Michael, we drop his son Lew off at daycare, and walk across Central Park to the Metropolitan Museum. Inside, we look at ["artifacts" from Papua New Guinea](#), amazing huge ceremonial masks and ghost canoes, to be carried and worn and danced with during village "happenings". Many of the masks are safely stowed within glass cases. Every so often the information describing an artifact is augmented by a grainy black and white photo of it being used. These photos are compelling and disturbing. What happened between the photograph being taken and now? The images seem a million miles, a million years away.

Later, I meet my friend Vincent, and we go and visit Catherine, a curator friend of his. They're trying to organise an exhibition of works which were featured in Lucy Lippard's *6 Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (c. 1972). I devoured this book a few months ago. It occurs to me now, writing this blog entry, and reflecting on how all these things might be related, that Kaprow hardly rates a mention in Lippard's book. Why is that?

Day 3

(Saturday 17th November 2007)

3pm:

Vincent and I head down to Passerby for a final dose of *Push and Pull*. Keg shows up too, and we really start to push things around now. A record player has appeared out of nowhere, and we put on music while we work/play. Yazz' *The Only Way is Up*, some crazy Disney tunes, polkas, TV themes. The record player mixes with the sounds of advertisements from daytime TV and we move into something of a frenzy.

Keg begins by making a scarecrow out of a mannequin, a lampshade for his head. She dresses up in a dirty

cream kaftan she finds. Vincent grabs a gold sequin shirt and puts it on while he and I systematically disassemble some big black boxes. The boxes are big enough to stand inside. Keg and Vincent ritualistically [sweep a ring of hay](#) in the middle of the room. Another girl discovers a cache of spraypaints, some of which still work, and begins spraying “[DON'T SIT ON THE CHAIRS](#)” onto the silver wallpaper.

Soon we begin to discover other unspoken “rules”, boundaries not laid down by Kaprow himself. Vincent is hungry, so I try to cook him up some soup, but the guy minding the show outlaws it as a fire hazard. We scowl at him. I really wanted the smell of cheap mushroom soup to mix with the sharp mindbending spraypaint fumes filling up the space. Keg [tips the soup](#) over the TV, and we start a [list of forbidden activities](#) on the back of one of Kaprow's instruction sheets. It turns out the soup makes a pretty good glue, and Keg sticks our list, which by now includes “no trespassing into the back room”, “no cooking soup”, and “no peeking behind the silver wallpaper”.

“Behind the silver wallpaper” is a zone which fascinates everyone who comes in. Almost the whole surface of the wall behind the wallpaper is covered with [professional celebrity photos](#), Hollywood stars standing around drinking and posing. In one small section, the wall is clad with a bizarre all-over photographic collage of mega close-ups of pink vaginas (!?). Screwed into the surface of this rude wall-section are odd-shaped plastic noggins like you'd find at a climbing gym. It is this obliquely pornographic section of the wall which our host declares off-limits. We wonder why.

By now the room has begun to fill up with people. Creative Time is having a book launch in here at five, and early-birds are getting a chance to play with the Kaprow before it gets so full that you can't move anything any more. Some of these visitors approach us and we talk with them about our experience of the work. Others tell us things — one enthusiastic English chap raves: “I get it now! It's the social aspect of the work which is important!”; and another girl congratulates us for making explicit the hidden rules which structure any human interaction, no matter how seemingly “free”. We're really having a good time now, and it's nearly over. By five, there are beers laid on and we relax and chat with Mark the curator. He tells us that the Kaprow family estate allowed Creative Time to put on this work for free. They simply send a file of notes and documentation from previous versions of the work, and the rest is up to you.

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P.S.: the timelapse movie that Creative Time made of the whole shebang is [here](#).

This entry was posted in performance art, re-enactment and tagged allan kaprow, boundaries, conceptual art, environment, happenings, instructions, performa, performance art, push and pull, re-enactment, rules on November 23, 2007 [<http://www.lucazoid.com/bilateral/inhabiting-allan-kaprows-push-and-pull/>] .

5 thoughts on “Inhabiting Allan Kaprow's Push and Pull”

Pingback: [Learning from being there? at Bilateral](#)



Lucas Post author

April 23, 2009 at 10:59 pm

ps – some more photos [here](#) from keg...



Lucas

February 7, 2010 at 8:24 pm

ps – our re-creation of Push and Pull in Sydney, May-June 2009 is rather heavily documented here:

<http://www.pushandpull.com.au/>



ben

August 12, 2010 at 8:42 am

i cited this for an essay i'm writing. thanks for the account!



Lucas Post author

August 22, 2010 at 12:48 am

thanks for letting me know Ben, I'd be keen to read your essay if you'd like to share.

cheers

Lucas