

The Education of the Un-Artist, Part II (1972)

Catbirds Mew, Copycats Fly

What can the un-artist do when art is left behind? Imitate life as before. Jump right in. Show others how.

✓ The nonart mentioned in part I is an art of resemblance. It is *lifelike*, and "like" points to similarities. Conceptual Art reflects the forms of language and epistemological method; Earthworks duplicate ploughing and excavating techniques or patterns of wind on the sand; Activities replay the operations of organized labor—say, how a highway is made; noise music electronically reproduces the sound of radio static; videotaped examples of Bodyworks look like close-ups of underarm-deodorant commercials.

Ready-made versions of the same genre, identified and usually claimed by artists as their own, are imitations in the sense that the condition "art," assigned to what has not been art, creates a new something that closely fits the old something. More accurately, it has been *re-created* in thought without performing or making a physical duplicate. For instance, washing a car.

The entire thing or situation is then transported to the gallery, stage, or hall; or documents and accounts of it are published; or we are taken to it by the artist acting as guide. The conservative practitioner extends Duchamp's gesture of displacing the object or action to the art context, which brackets it as art, whereas the sophisticate needs only art-conscious allies who carry the art bracket ready-made in their heads for instant application anywhere. These moves identify the transaction between model and replica.

Afterward, whatever resembles the Readymade is automatically

another Readymade. The circle closes: as art is bent on imitating life, ✓
life imitates art. All snow shovels in hardware stores imitate Duchamp's ✓
in a museum.

This re-creation in art of philosophical and personal inquiry, the forces of nature, our transformation of the environment, and the tactile and auditory experience of the "electric age" does not arise, as could be supposed, out of renewed interest in the theory of art as mimesis. Whether we are talking about close copies, approximations, or analogues, such imitating has no basis in esthetics at all—and that must be its point. But neither is it based on an apprenticeship to fields unfamiliar to art, after which it will be indistinct from politics, manufacturing, or biology. Because nonartists may be attracted intuitively to mimetic behavior already present in these fields and in nature as well, their activity parallels aspects of culture and reality as a whole.

For instance, a small town, like a nation, is an amplified nuclear family. God and the pope (papa) are adult projections of a child's feelings about the divinity of its father. The governance of the church and of heaven and hell in the Middle Ages echoed the workings of secular governments of the time.

The plan of a city is like the human circulatory system, with a heart and major roads called arteries. A computer alludes to a rudimentary brain. A Victorian armchair was shaped like a woman with a bustle, and it actually wore a dress.

Not everything is anthropomorphic. Machines imitate animal and insect forms: airplanes are birds, submarines are fish, Volkswagens are beetles. They also imitate each other. Auto design, in the streamlining of the thirties and the tailfins of the fifties, had the airplane in mind. Kitchen appliances have control panels that look like those in a recording studio. Lipstick containers resemble bullets. Staplers that shoot nails and movie cameras that shoot people and scenes have triggers and are shaped like guns.

Then the rhythms of life and death: we speak of a stock market or a civilization growing and declining, as if each were a living organism. We imagine family history as a tree and trace our ancestors on its limbs. By extension, the grandfather theory of Western history proposes that each generation reacts to its immediate past as a son reacts to his father. Since the past reacted to *its* past, too, every other generation is alike (Meyer Schapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art," *Marxist Quarterly*, January–March 1937).

Barry
→ Duchamp

The nonhuman world also seems to imitate: fetuses of different species look similar at early stages of development, whereas some butterflies of different species are dissimilar when young but look the same in maturity. Certain fish, insects, and animals are camouflaged to blend with their surroundings. The mockingbird mimics the voices of other birds. The roots of a plant reflect its branches. An atom is a tiny planetary system. Such matchings continue without apparent end, differing only in detail and degree.

The inference that our role may be that of copycat rather than master of nature is no secret to scientists. Quentin Fiore and Marshall McLuhan (in *War and Peace in the Global Village* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968], p. 56) quote Ludwig von Bertalanffy on this: "With few exceptions . . . nature's technology surpasses that of man—to the extent that the traditional relationship between biology and technology was recently reversed: while mechanistic biology tried to explain organic functions in terms of man-made machines, the young science of bionics tries to imitate natural inventions."

Imitation of this sort in science or art is a thoughtful affair. Even its frequent wit is profound, sometimes approaching existential trials and proofs. But when it is clear that the most modern of the arts are engaged in imitations of a world continuously imitating itself, art can be taken as no more than an instance of the greater scheme, not as a primary source. The obsolescence of that instance doesn't discredit the mimetic impulse but spotlights art's historic role as an isolating discipline at a moment when participation is called for. Leaving the arts is not enough to overcome this obstacle; the task, for oneself and for others, is to restore participation in the natural design through conscious emulation of its nonartistic features. The feeling that one is part of the world would be quite an accomplishment in itself, but there's an added payoff: the feedback loop is never exact. As I have said, something new comes out in the process—knowledge, well-being, surprise, or, as in the case of bionics, useful technology.

Everywhere as Playground

When the un-artist copies what's going on outside of art, or copies a less visible "nature in her manner of operation" (Coomaraswamy), it

doesn't have to be a somber business. That would be too much like work. It's to be done with gusto, wit, fun; it's to be play.

Play is a dirty word. Used in the common sense of frolic, make-believe, and an attitude free of care for moral or practical utility, it connotes for Americans and many Europeans idleness, immaturity, and the absence of seriousness and substance. It is perhaps even harder to swallow than *imitation*, with its challenge to our tradition of the new and original. But (as if to compound the indiscretion) scholars since the time of Plato have noted a vital link between the idea of play and that of imitation. Besides its sophisticated role in ritual, instinctive imitation in young animals and humans takes the form of play. Among themselves, the young mimic their parents' movements, sounds, and social patterns. We know with some certainty that they do this to grow and survive. But they play without that conscious intention, apparently, and their only evident reason is the pleasure it gives them. Thus they feel close to, and become part of, the grown-up community.

For adults in the past, imitative ceremony was play that brought them closer to reality in its more felt or transcendent aspect. Johan Huizinga writes in the first chapter of his valuable book *Homo Ludens* [Boston: Beacon, 1955] that the

"ritual act" represents a cosmic happening, an event in the natural process. The word "represents," however, does not cover the exact meaning of the act, at least not in its looser, modern connotation; for here "representation" is really *identification* of the event. The rite produces the effect which is then not so much *shown figuratively* as actually *reproduced* in the action. The function of the rite, therefore, is far from being merely imitative; it causes the worshippers to participate in the sacred happening itself.

In the same chapter he says:

As Leo Frobenius puts it, archaic man *plays* the order of nature as imprinted on his consciousness. In the remote past, so Frobenius thinks, man first assimilated the phenomena of vegetation and animal life and then conceived an idea of time and space, of months and seasons, of the course of the sun and the moon. And now he plays this great processional order of existence in a sacred play, in and through which he actualizes anew, or "recreates" the events represented and thus helps maintain the cosmic order. Frobenius draws

even more far-reaching conclusions from this "playing at nature." He deems it the starting point of all social order and social institutions, too.

Representational play is thus as instrumental, or ecological, as it is sacred. Huizinga, shortly after commenting on Frobenius, quotes Plato's *Laws*:

"God alone is worthy of supreme seriousness, but man is God's playing and that is the best part of him. Therefore, every man and woman should live life accordingly, and play the noblest games and be of another mind from what they are at present." [Plato condemns war and continues] "Life must be lived at play, playing certain games, making certain sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods and defend himself against his enemies and win the contest."

Huizinga goes on to ask: "How far [do] such sacred activities as proceed within the forms of play [i.e., mimetic forms] also proceed in the attitudes and mood of play?"

He answers: "Genuine and spontaneous play can also be profoundly serious. . . . The joy inextricably bound up with playing can turn not only into tension, but into elation. Frivolity and ecstasy are the twin poles between which play moves."

Sports, feasts, and parties on holidays (holy days) are no less sacred for being enjoyable.

It's been observed often enough that nowadays we have no sacred rituals left that have even the remotest representational, and therefore propitiative, function that anyone can observe, much less feel. Only in such sports as surfing, motorcycle racing, and sky diving; in social protests such as sit-ins; and in gambles against the unknown such as moon landings do we approximate them unofficially. And for most of us these experiences are acquired indirectly, through television. We participate alone, immobilized.

The imitative activity of modern adults outlined earlier is probably instinctive, like children's. Like children's, it also ranges from being unconscious, as I would guess the feminizing of furniture was in the Victorian era, to being deliberate and conscious in the case of certain artists and scientists today. But in general it is haphazard and occa-

sional, a specialized function of professions concerned with other matters. The designer of an atomic submarine doesn't think he's Jonah making a whale for himself, even though he may know that predecessors studied whales and fish and their aquadynamics. The maker of an Apollo rocket may be familiar with popular Freudian symbolism, but he isn't mainly out to create an erect penis. Neither is he out mainly to have fun.

"Serious" practicalities, competition, money, and other sobering considerations get in the way. Such discontinuity and specialization produce a sense of separation from the whole of life and also veil the imitative activity along with the enjoyment that might be had from it. The result is not play; it is work.

Work, Work, Work

Epworth, England (UPI)—Minutes after a gang of workmen had placed a new layer of tar on the main street of this small Midlands town, another gang of workmen appeared and began digging it up. "It's just a coincidence that both gangs were working at the same time," a local official said. "Both jobs had to be done."

—New York Times, circa December 1970

Runner

St. Louis, Missouri, Washington University—(1st day) A mile of tarpaper is unrolled along the shoulder of a road. Concrete blocks are placed on the paper every twenty feet.

(2nd day) Procedure is repeated in reverse, second layer of tarpaper laid over first. Again repeated in opposition direction.

(3rd day) Tarpaper and concrete blocks removed.

—Activity, A.K., February 9–11, 1968

Imitation as practiced by nonart artists may be a way of approaching play on a modern yet transcendent plane, which, because it is intellectual—or better, *intelligent*—can be enjoyed by adults afraid of being childish. Just as children's imitative play may be a survival ritual, this could be a stratagem for the survival of society. In the passage from art to un-art the artist's talent for revealing the interchangeability

of things could be made available to "civilization and its discontents"—in other words, could be used for bringing together what has been taken apart.

But if all the secular world's a potential playground, the one taboo against playing in it is our addiction to the idea of work. Work cannot be banished by fiat; it must be replaced by something better. To guess at how that may be done requires an examination of the meaning of work in our society—even if with minimal expertise. One thing is clear: the concept of work is incompatible with that of play, childlike or holy.

Home Work

Western Europe and the United States, in the course of industrialization, developed a practical life-style of self-sacrifice for the purpose of growing and fattening machines. Perhaps evolved initially as a middle-class "con job" on laborers, it soon conned the con men. Work and pain were internalized as truths on high; they were right for the soul, if not exactly for the body (since that passed into the machine).

But the picture has changed. Industrialization has accomplished its purpose, and we live in the "global village" of communicational contact, with all the new insights and problems this entails. The issue now is not production but distribution; it is not even simple distribution but the quality and organic effects of distribution. And what matters is the quality and distribution, not of goods alone, but also of services.

Farming, mining, and manufacturing in this country, largely mechanized, each year require fewer additional workers to implement steadily rising levels of output. It is probable that the work force will level off and then drop sharply with increasing automation. In contrast, the expanding service industries, consisting mainly of people rather than goods and equipment, now represent about 50 percent of the nation's employed and are expected to increase to 70 percent of the total work force in the next few decades (*Fortune*, March 1970, p. 87).

But services—they include local and federal government, transportation, utilities, and communications as well as trade, finance, insurance, real estate, and the professions—services are themselves changing. Menial and domestic workers and other routine service

workers such as mail carriers, mechanics, maids, clerks, bus drivers, and insurance agents hold jobs with little growth potential; none have significant social status, all pay rather poorly, and there is little or no inherent interest in them as vocations. In a period of large-scale mobility, physical and social, they appear to be dead ends, vaguely implying that those performing such jobs are themselves dead.

All the while billboards, magazines, and television sets beckon everyone to the good life of adventurous travel, sex, and eternal youth; the U.S. president himself dedicates his government to improving the "quality of life." Labor unions strike not only for higher wages but also for better conditions and fringe benefits, shorter hours and longer paid vacations. Enjoyment and renewal for everyone. Given these pressures, it is probable that many of the drudgery occupations will eventually be automated along with industry, while others will simply disappear as workers abandon them.

The more modern services, however, such as corporate management, scientific and technologic research, environmental improvement, communications, planning consultation, social dynamics, the wide field of mass education, and international, outer-space, and undersea law, are growing at an exponential rate. They are vital occupations with seemingly unlimited possibilities for development (therefore for personal development); they offer global travel and fresh experiences; they pay well and their status is considerable.

Whereas routine services are merely necessary, the new services are important. Routine services steadily require less of a worker's total time, thanks to machines and legislation; although the new services actually take up more time, they function in more flexible and, in a sense, "growing" time. Time that is merely filled is debasing, but time that is flexible and personalized is released time. The ability to move, in space, hours, and mind, is a measure of liberation. As more young people demand and receive extensive educations, the ranks of the modern services will swell, the public appetite to consume what they offer will increase, and the world will continue to change—while quite possibly its moral base will remain rooted in the past: work.

Work? For nearly everyone, the workweek has been reduced to five days. Workdays are shortened regularly, holiday periods lengthened. The four-day week is being increasingly tried out, and a three-day week has been predicted. Even if this last prediction is a bit utopian, the psychological expectation is popular and affects performance

on the job. As a result, the meaning of work is becoming unclear since steady pressure is felt to eliminate it or falsify it if it can't be eliminated.

The issue is traditionally fought out by big business (that is, the produce, goods, transportation, and basic service industries) and by labor unions, which still represent the bulk of the country's work force. Let's say business wants to automate and scrap expensive payrolls. That decision may mean a shorter workweek, which in turn may cost thousands their jobs and society more than it can afford in a chain reaction. The results are rarely self-evident. Labor steps in immediately and insists on work crews when one worker or none at all is needed. Management suffers by being prevented from modernizing; labor suffers by doing patently dishonest work. It amounts to this: neither business nor labor is particularly interested in extolling leisure time; they want to make money, and money is a token of work. Labor will accept shorter hours if management pays for them, but when a reduced workweek means forfeiting jobs or hard-won guaranteed overtime pay, labor will oppose the change (as in fact it does; see, e.g., *Newsweek*, August 23, 1971, p. 63). Hence the concept "work," maintained artificially, can only elicit the most cynical responses in society.

The arts are among the last high-status vestiges of the handicraft and cottage industries. It is curious to note how deeply tied they are to the idea of labor. Artists work at their paintings and poems; out of this sweat come works of art. Following the Russian revolution, artists everywhere began calling themselves workers, no different from those in factories. Today, the political reformist Art Workers Coalition, in its name and some of its rhetoric, continues to appeal to the rallying values of "the people" and "an honest day's work." Art, like work, is quaint.

In contrast to this work ethic, our underlying attitudes toward life goals are shifting, and not in work habits alone. The "fun market"—entertainment, recreation, tourism—according to *Look* magazine (July 29, 1970, p. 25), amounts to about \$150 billion a year and is forecast to reach \$250 billion by 1975, "outrunning all the rest of the economy." But to atone for this indulgence, the American public permitted its government in 1970 to spend more than \$73 billion, or 37 percent of its annual budget, on war and armaments (confidently

spurred on by a global outlay, in 1969, of some \$200 billion). In fact, according to Senator Vance Hartke in a report to the Senate Finance Committee, our military outlay was about \$79 billion in 1968 and has been rising at a yearly rate of 12 percent since 1964; with this rate of increase, military spending in 1971 will be \$107.4 billion (*Vista*, March–April 1970, p. 52).

The State is our outspoken conscience. Fun, it seems, is not yet fun; it has hardly diverted us from the common "weekend neurosis," which leaves us anxious to play but unable. More atonement for trying. It's abundantly clear that we don't want to work but feel we should. So we brood and fight.

Playing really is sinning. Every day hundreds of books, films, lectures, seminars, sensitivity sessions, and articles gravely acknowledge our worries over our incapacity to freely enjoy anything. But such commentaries, when they offer help, offer the wrong kind by reciting the standard formula: *work* at sex, *work* at play. To help, they'd have to urge a wholesale revision of our commitment to labor and guilt, which they won't do. We live by a scarcity mentality in a potentially surplus economy. With time on our hands that we cannot infuse into our personal lives, we damn ourselves, as we've been taught, for wasting time.

Basically, our way of life, reflected in our love life as well as in our foreign policy, believes in the way things used to be. As long ago as the writing of the Declaration of Independence, an ambivalence toward pleasure was hinted at in the salute to our right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The "pursuit" part of it seems to have occupied most of our time, implying that happiness is only a dream . . . We struggle not to struggle.

Playing and Gaming

The nation's education system must take much of the responsibility for perpetuating and championing what's wrong with us: our values, the goods and bads, the dos and don'ts. Educators in the twentieth century, we all know, operate in loco parentis. Principals and deans like to say the Latin words reassuringly because they know how nearly impossible it is for mothers and fathers to bring up their children, with all their time consumed in motion on the highways, shopping, vaca-

tioning, and working. And, besides, like everyone, parents are specialists at whatever they do. So they depend on other specialists, the educators, to do what they can't and worry that TV is doing a better job than both.

Consider what happens to children after the age of five or six. At first, they enjoy school, often beg to go. The teacher appears to like it too. Both the teacher and the children play. But by the first or second grade, Dick and Jane discover that learning and winning a place in the world are not child's play at all but hard, often dreadfully dull work.

That value underscores nearly all educational programs. "Work hard, and you'll get ahead" is a guide not only for students but for educators. "Ahead" means being head man. Authoritarianism closes out play's inviting role and substitutes the competitive game. The threat of failure and dismissal for not being strong hangs over every individual from college president to school superintendent on down.

Students compete for grades, teachers for the well-behaved class, principals for higher budgets. Each performs the ritual of the game according to strict rules, sometimes artfully, but the fact remains that the many are striving for what only the few may have: power.

Calendar

planting a square of turf
amid grass like it

planting another
amid grass a little less green

planting four more squares
in places progressively drier

planting a square of dry turf
amid grass like it

planting another
amid grass a little less dry

planting four more squares
in places progressively greener

—Activity, A.K., California
Institute of the Arts,
November 2, 1971

In spite of, and perhaps because of, the disclosures of Freud and other psychologists, the games people play are played to win. The forms of sports, chess, and other diversions are symbolically akin to the forms of business, love, and battle. Huizinga's classic *Homo Ludens*, quoted before, richly documents the pervasiveness of such transferences. As direct play is denied to adults and gradually discouraged in children, the impulse to play emerges not in true games alone, but in unstated ones of power and deception; people find themselves playing less with each other than on or off each other.

A child plays his mother off against his father, using affection as the game's reward. In the game of international diplomacy, a strong nation plays at helping weaker ones to gain their political subordination and to force the hand of competitors. A young executive on the way up plays off one company's offer of advancement against another's. In the same spirit, a large business stimulates and plays on the public's appetites in its advertising campaigns, gambling against the similar tactics of an entire industry. War itself is the play of generals, whose rehearsals are appropriately called war games. As civilization lives to compete and competes to live, it is no accident that education in most parts of the world is deeply involved in games of aggressive struggle. Education plays at ignoring or denying such struggle (substituting the metaphors of democracy) while perfecting its forms and encouraging participation in it in every classroom exercise (take, for an example, one of its pleasanter diversions, the spelling bee).

Those who plan public instruction programs need first to learn, and then to celebrate, the idea of play—but play as inherently worthwhile, play stripped of game theory, that is, of winners and losers. Huizinga, writing and lecturing in the thirties in an economically depressed and politically unstable Europe, finally publishing his book in Switzerland during World War II, could not easily have imagined the social potentials of play without contest. For Huizinga, play in the form of the agon was a way of discharging and clarifying violence and unreason. Although he and earlier theorists, from Kant and Schiller to Lange and Groos, acknowledged pure play, they did not believe it to be enough by itself; it was "primitive" and needed the "higher" forms of tragic awareness that games (and art seen as a game) provided. Today, the conditions are different, and it is obvious that agonistic games, no matter how ritualized, are testimonials to the forces they would sublimate. Anyone who has seen *Berlin Olympiade*, Leni Rie-

fenstahl's great film on the 1936 Olympic games, needs no persuasion. Through art and sport, it powerfully persuaded viewers that a master race was the prize of perpetual struggle.

Similarly, the real substance and the stimulus of our "fun market," particularly in entertainment and sportive recreation, are superstars, record sales, popularity ratings, prizes, getting someplace first, catching the biggest fish, beating the house at Las Vegas. Some fun!

Charity

buying piles of old clothes

washing them
in all-night laundromats

giving them back
to used-clothing stores

—*Activity, A.K.,*
Berkeley Unified School District,
March 7, 1969

This critical difference between gaming and playing cannot be ignored. Both involve free fantasy and apparent spontaneity, both may have clear structures, both may (but needn't) require special skills that enhance the playing. Play, however, offers satisfaction, not in some stated practical outcome, some immediate accomplishment, but rather in continuous participation as its own end. Taking sides, victory, and defeat, all irrelevant in play, are the chief requisites of game. In play one is carefree; in a game one is anxious about winning.

Making the world carefree, converting a work ethic into one of play, would mean giving up our sense of urgency (time is money) and not approaching play as one more political game, for that would contradict what is done. We can't say we game not to game. This is exactly what we've been doing with our Judeo-Christian virtues and democratic ideals all along.

Gymnastics, surfing, long-distance running, glider flying are among those sports sometimes practiced apart from competition, and almost approach the condition of

play. In each, an ideal is probably internalized and acts in lieu of an opponent; but this motive for developing skills and intense involvement falls considerably short of the combat mentality that most sports, such as football, depend on.

Generally, coaches and gym teachers conduct their professions with military zeal and sometimes murderous discipline. But a new breed, more philosophical and pleasure-oriented, could use noncompetitive sports, and their resemblances to the movements of animals, fish and airborne seedlings, as departures for the invention by students of fresh activity devoid of win-lose possibility.

It is not the history of crimes committed in the name of ideas that needs to be noted but the perfectly well meant, sympathetic "good works" of humankind implied by expressions like "good, clean sport," "a clean bomb," "a just war," "fighting spirit," and "free enterprise." It is the connivance, bought votes, and wheeler-dealing necessary to pass every enlightened law on civil rights, abortion reform, or job opportunity. This particular mode of deferred gratification, excused as transcendent competition or a necessary evil, has caused us to practice the exact opposite of what we preach.

A typical example of innovative learning in high school is the simulation game. Students in a class studying international politics assume roles as the leaders of certain nations. They act out local news reports, gather "intelligence" from political journals, and spy on one another; they try to work out deals, exert various forms of pressure, use "public forums" such as their own press or their version of the UN; they figure the mathematical odds on every proposed move, attempt trickery and deception—and in general try to win power for the country they represent. The teacher acts as observer-referee and keeps score. Such lifelike education has proved effective, especially for the sons and daughters of white affluent parents. It closely parallels training programs given by industry and government to their most promising elite in top management, the diplomatic corps, and the military.

The issue is obviously an educational one. Education can help

change the system, given enough time and money. Neither parents nor neighborhoods nor communes that sentimentalize work in simple, controllable forms of sharing can so measurably affect values. In education are included not only schools but also education's most persuasive and timely teachers, the mass media—television, radio, film, magazines, billboards—and the leisure industry. All that's needed is their commitment.

But sadly, the media and the leisure industry are unlikely prospects for help. They are dominated by quick-profit interests, even while their technologies are developed by men and women of uncommon imagination. At present they offer only token "community services," forced on them by government and the tax structure. Asking their representatives to commit expensive facilities and choice exposure to the promotion of playfulness would be futile; they would have to be shown that consumerism is the highest kind of play.

The better bet is still the public schools, hidebound in habit, bureaucracy, and janitors as they are. Principals and teachers are more likely than members of the business community to consider implementing changes in human values. Traditionally, they have viewed their vocation as performing a positive, even innovative, social function. Although eventually schools as we know them may give way to the technology of mass communication and recreation, instruction in play can begin in kindergarten and teachers college.

To foster play as a foundation of society, long-term experimentation would be essential, say twenty-five years minimum, with assessments every five years. The usual, loudly touted, flash-in-the-pan welfare programs, tailored to changing political administrations, would be out of the question. Financing would have to come variously from state education commissions, major public-minded foundations, industry, and private individuals, all utilizing tax programs and allowances as inducements more fully than they presently do.

At the same time, the nonartists now populating the globe, who continue to believe they are part of the Old Church of Art, might think about how unfulfilling their position is and how by un-artisting, that is, dropping out of the faith, they might direct their gifts toward those who can use them: everyone. Their example would be a model to younger colleagues, who could then begin to train for constructive roles in elementary and secondary public education. Those under

twenty-five today tend to feel keenly about performing some humanitarian service, but among vanguard artists the desire is frustrated by a profession lacking inherent utility. The proposed alternative not only eliminates this problem but also avoids the disaster of populist solutions that watered down and ruined major talents in Soviet Russia and Europe and in the United States in the thirties.

Not enough has been made of the drawbacks in art's celebrated uselessness. Utopian visions of society aided or run by artists have failed because art itself has failed as a social instrument. Since the Renaissance, art has been a discipline of privacy, the testament of the outsider in the midst of expanding urbanization. That the crowd is lonely in its own way does not give the artist an audience or political role, since the crowd does not want to be reminded of the depth of its unhappiness and cannot resolve it, as the artist does, by inventing countless personal cosmologies. Nor does the artist-seer, like William Blake, automatically know how to settle wage disputes and pollution problems. The separation has been complete, like that of the soul from the body.

Only when active artists willingly cease to be artists can they convert their abilities, like dollars into yen, into something the world can spend: play. Play as currency. We can best learn to play by example, and un-artists can provide it. In their new job as educators, they need simply play as they once did under the banner of art, but among those who do not care about that. Gradually, the pedigree "art" will recede into irrelevance.

I suspect that static words, particularly names, are greater deterrents than social customs to the changes brought about by such nonverbal forces as jet transportation. Adjustment to the new state of affairs is slowed down by keeping an old name, as when, until quite recently, one spoke of embarking on and debarking from a jetliner. Memories of the *Queen Mary* were evoked. Consider how the titles *financier*, *psychiatrist*, *impresario*, or *professor* burden those to whom they are applied with the weight of each profession's accumulated attributes and meanings; each virtually imposes a performance of its known frames of reference. A professor *acts* like a professor, and sounds like one. An artist obeys certain inherited limits on perception, which govern how reality is acted on and construed. But new names may assist social change. Replacing *artist* with *player*,

as if adopting an alias, is a way of altering a fixed identity. And a changed identity is a principle of mobility, of going from one place to another.

Art work, a sort of moral paradigm for an exhausted work ethic, is converting into play. As a four-letter word in a society given to games, *play* does what all dirty words do: it strips bare the myth of culture by its artists, even.

Doctor MD

(1973)

What good is history? Marcel Duchamp's legacy contains a small but influential body of quasi-art, often bordering on philosophy. A carefully styled dialectic is at work, in which linked visual and verbal puns are couched in narrative fictions, operational processes, common objects, and words meant not so much to be seen as read. He was opposed to the taste of his time for optical means in painting; he questioned whether modern art had its own language, doubted that such a "dumb" affair, which addressed itself to the eyes, could be intelligent. Above all, he wanted art to be intelligent. Today, thanks to him, critical discourse is inseparable from whatever other stuff art is made of. Conceptualism, for example, is "inconceivable" without Duchamp.

It followed that his position equally questioned the possibility of purely verbal intelligence. Professional philosophy, bound up as it was with words alone, was as fruitless as pure painting. That's the barb contained in his puns: human aspiration that until recently sought understanding through specialization was both futile and absurdly amusing. Multimedia experiments of the sixties were not caused by Duchamp alone, but he clarified the critical setting for their emergence.

Hence, his verbal-visual play, perhaps born of mixed skepticism and dandyism, confronted a romantic tradition of high, often tragic, seriousness in art making. Humor was superficial. Even humor as arch as his was overcast by the dreamwork of Surrealism and the existential struggles of Abstract Expressionism. But since Pop art (itself indebted to him), artists are quite funny and still avant-garde! The Fluxus movement, many Bodyworkers, Conceptualists, and Happeners are evidence of the permission he gave to wit. Wit, from the Duchampian perspective, is the condition and consequence of keen thought. If you see things clearly, *really* clearly, you've got to laugh because nothing's been accomplished. There's a Zen story about one of the great patri-

The Publisher
wishes to acknowledge
with gratitude the generous
support of the
Lannan Foundation
in funding the
Lannan Series of Contemporary Art Criticism,
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ESSAYS ON THE BLURRING OF ART AND LIFE



ALLAN KAPROW

Edited by Jeff Kelley

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kaprow, Allan.

Essays on the blurring of art and life / Allan Kaprow ; edited by
Jeff Kelley.

p. cm. — (Lannan series of contemporary art criticism ; 3)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-07066-6

1. Arts, American. 2. Arts, Modern—20th century—United States.

I. Kelley, Jeff. II. Title. III. Series.

NX504.K36 1993

700'.973'09045—dc20

93-18080

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of
American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984. ☺

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