

Research Article

Barbara Formis*

Thinking Gestures. On How the Philosophical Conceptualization of Ordinary Life Can Be Shaped by Art Practices

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0273>

received July 24, 2023; accepted December 1, 2023

Abstract: As a speculative and abstract discipline, philosophy is traditionally considered to be in dialectical tension with physical experience and daily practice. In contrast to this conventional and idealistic perspective, and in line with aesthetics as embodied knowledge, this article attempts to show that not only do we constantly think via gestures, movements, and physical experiences but also that there is no need to disconnect a concept from practice. Passing from Wittgenstein's idea of "form of life" to the pragmatist aesthetics initiated by Dewey's idea of "art as experience," I propose an analysis of the philosophical framework of postmodern dance (Yvonne Rainer) and of Happenings (Allan Kaprow), in order to underline the theoretical and conceptual research that is already at work in the field of contemporary art practice, the latter being understood as a sensorial dimension intrinsically linked to ordinary life. My general argument is that gestures, which are an inescapable and vital part of everyday life, can be foregrounded by certain artistic practices without corrupting or theatricalizing their ordinariness.

Keywords: pragmatism, postmodern dance, happenings, ordinary, life, gesture, experience

1 Gestures as Philosophical Tools

Philosophers have often considered sensibility to be an obstacle to clear reflection and conceptualization. This is particularly true for idealism and speculative thinking, wherein materiality is to be overcome by theoretical meditation. If this dissociation from practical matters, emotions and sensation is often necessary to reorganize intellectual understanding, it is precisely because knowledge is often embedded in multiple and diverse activities.

Recent research into embodied cognition and embedded aesthetics has identified the existence of experiential and sensitive knowledge formed from our bodily movements. The systems theory focusing on the phenomenon of autopoiesis and epistemological methods such as cognition 4E (embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended) recognise the close link between perception, action, and knowledge, arguing that our cognitive activity involves the whole organism as related actively to the environment.¹

Similar to this perspective, but with a less cognitivist and a more aesthetic orientation, I propose to follow ordinary language philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein) and pragmatism (John Dewey) in order to outline a methodology capable of grasping the embodied qualities of knowledge which are pertinent to art practices.

¹ Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind*; Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*; Noë, *Strange Tools*.

* **Corresponding author: Barbara Formis**, School of the Arts, Institute ACTE, Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, Paris, France, e-mail: barbara.formis@univ-paris1.fr

From this standpoint, thinking is a living experience and concepts do not float above ordinary activities, nor do they simply “apply” to daily habits and behaviours. As a matter of fact, in our daily lives, we tend to simplify the complexity of our lives by using the body as a tool and by considering our bodily movements as simple *means* to attain *ends*. We then forget that our movements often shape our own identity and have a profound influence on our thinking. In other words, we often forget that *manner* cannot be dissociated from *content*, that the way in which we tend to behave contributes to defining our subjectivity, and that our gestures intrinsically define who we are. There is still much to discover within our habits and the conduct of our lives. There is an *uncanniness of the ordinary*, as Stanley Cavell,² paraphrasing Sigmund Freud’s *Unheimlichkeit*, nicely summarized and this uncanniness is the object of a philosophical “quest” that is founded in scepticism. That is to say, in order to philosophically grasp the inner meaning of our ordinary life, a distance has to be developed with the help of a sceptical attitude: we have to stop pretending we always understand what we are doing and accept that we might need to discover, or better “uncover” as Cavell says, the real nature of our ordinary lives, habits, and gestures.

The idea of gestures is particularly interesting in philosophy and art because they are sufficiently embodied to possess aesthetic qualities, and sufficiently evocative to produce a speculative meaning. Let’s briefly try to define gestures: we can do this through a *via negativa*. A gesture is neither simply a mechanical act, nor a fully semantic *sign*, nor an intentional *action*. A gesture is not simply mechanical, not fully semantic, and not yet intentional: as such it cannot be reduced to explanations determined by the rules of physics, language, and consciousness. A gesture is not yet a determined idea with a developed meaning as an independent notion because it is often a simple virtuality of the body. A virtuality of the body creates relations and often inadvertently designates a “milieu.” A gesture very often takes place amidst a situation of metamorphosis and change; it is most of the times situated at an immanent level, *in media res*, in the middle of things, and it takes place within the interstices of events, things, and processes that develop and transform our everyday lives.

A gesture is a “means without end,” in the words of Giorgio Agamben.³ Following the Italian philosopher, we can argue that a gesture is definitely related to its own etymological root from the verb Latin “gerere” which means to manage, maintain, and conduct; and it is consequently a form of mediation, a disposition to arrange, manage, and facilitate the existing situation. Yet, this internally instrumental and immanent nature of gestures is not an obstacle to its value. In opposition to a traditional conception that categorizes means as being inferior to ends, Agamben considers gestures as “pure” means, which implies that they are liberated from their ends and equal in value to them.

Gestures are not mere movements that a machine could make, yet neither are they actions that arise from a fully anchored intentionality: gestures occur within a field of immanence and vulnerability that is produced by habits and behaviours. When gestures are understood as immanent intermediaries, a rich field of research appears between ordinary life, art practices, performance art, and philosophy. I have developed an aesthetics of ordinary life related to contemporary art practices in a book called *Aesthetics of Ordinary Life*.⁴

2 Performing Some Quite Simple Everyday Activity (Ludwig Wittgenstein and Yvonne Rainer)

There is something extremely commonplace in the very fact of living in a human body, but this banality is highly rich in its value and significance. It is precisely on the basis of the immanent multiplicity of micro-events common to human beings that I propose to draw a comparison between concepts and bodily gestures, and more precisely between art practices and philosophy. If we understand performance as a particular way of living, of experiencing the world, and of initiating relationships and connections with the environment, then performance is also a way of activating life and of producing a series of emotions and reactions that stipulate

² Cavell, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary.”

³ Agamben, *Mezzi Senza Fine. Note Sulla Politica*.

⁴ Formis, *Esthétique de la vie ordinaire*.

the kind of life we are living. In this respect, performance is not only a form of art but also a form of life, as in Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of *Lebensform*. This concept has been developed within the field of art by both artists and art theorists such as Nicolas Bourriaud, who chose this concept as the basis for his theory of relational aesthetics. In Wittgenstein's terms, a form of life is the capacity to perform "*some quite simple everyday activity*."

Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved *performing some quite simple everyday activity*. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be *uncanny and wonderful* at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. – But then we do see this every day without it making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view. ... But only an artist can so represent an individual thing as to make it appear to us like a work of art; A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective.⁵

A form of life is a simple activity performed so that its double quality of "*uncanny and wonderful*" is graspable. The conceptual twist proposed here by Wittgenstein involves a kind of double negativity whereby theatre presents itself as a non-theatrical space, as a milieu of immanence: he asks us to imagine a "theatre" where we are "observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange." However, the artistic process is not lost since only "an artist" can represent life in the "right perspective" and only art "forces us" to see it in that way. And thus, a form of life is a sort of a "biographical chapter" that is both "uncanny and wonderful," to put it in Wittgenstein's terms. By consequence, there is no real or radical change between the artwork and an action taken from ordinary life, but rather the activity that is captured in the work of art makes a sensible "impression" on us: it is demarcated from what comes before and what comes after without any real disconnections, and becomes a "chapter" of our own life.

In Wittgenstein's analysis, a form of life has a gestural quality to it, because it is always dynamic and possesses a theatrical, or a rudimentary *scenic* quality, in which the intimate life of a solitude ("a man alone in a room") is made manifest by the seemingly ordinary gestures. Wittgenstein's examples are simple actions: walking, eating, lighting a cigarette, having a conversation, and so on. These activities become *Lebensformen* when they show an *inner* interest, when they reveal their *internal* quality. Furthermore, a form of life indicates that our behaviour has a certain "*temperature*," in Wittgenstein's terms, as if actions can possess an inner warmth, a degree of intensity. It is impossible to attempt to comprehend a form of life with an attitude of cold dissociation that would be more appropriate for an image or a spectacle. It is precisely because a *Lebensform* is internally distinct from any representation that it opens up the possibility of an innovative and immanent way of documenting life. Forms of life are not explanations meant to comprehend any concept as a whole, but they are rather simple, non-controversial descriptions of ordinary understanding. A form of life cannot be extracted or conceptualized, but it is simply lived.

Let's think about how many gestures make up a simple part of your life. Typing on a keyboard as I am doing right now, drinking a cup of tea as I will do in a little while, answering the telephone, as I did twenty minutes ago, and scratching my ear as I just did (because I was thinking about what example to write about). Our life is made up of a myriad of micro-movements: some of these movements are intentional, others are instinctive; some are a simple response to the environment, others are a way of changing this environment; and some movements are composed of a very long sequence of smaller acts, others are shorter.

Art can be an important research tool for the philosophy of ordinary gesture. Art intensifies the inner qualities of daily activities and allows us to grasp their meaning by giving ordinary life a dynamic and poetic form. For example, Yvonne Rainer's video entitled *Hand Movie* (1966)⁶ clearly underlines the conceptual potential of bodily gestures. In this short film, only a hand is captured; the movements are simple and minimal, the hand is not identifiable as feminine or masculine, it lies in a particularly neutral dimension, a sort of

⁵ Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, *Culture and Value*, 4.

⁶ https://ubu.com/film/rainer_hand-movie.html.

“anybody’s” hand, a sort of *Überhand*, or a hand “without qualities,” following Robert Musil. And yet even given its minimalistic aspect, by simply staring at this silent short film, we can relate what we see to a kind of dance, something more than a simple movement. We can notice that the hand is frail, even without knowing that at the time Yvonne Rainer was convalescent in a hospital bed. The hand seems to seek for help, and it seems to address a message, to evoke something more than the fact of being “just” a hand. The fingers seem to interact with each other, to express something emotional and unexpected. We can project sensuality, fear, rage, and love into this series of micro-gestures.

Through Rainer’s art piece, the force of what is at stake in Wittgenstein’s idea of “*performing some quite ordinary activity*” becomes evident. A simple hand, diminished in its qualities and its activity, naked in its neutrality, can point out the inner meaning of life as a “simple” performance, and could be taken as to be potent material for artistic performance. As Wittgenstein indicated, a form of life is a particular type of documentation, it is not an individual story in which the subject engages in a sterile account of his or her own isolated experience. In contrast to conventional language, a “form of life” is intersubjective and impersonal, it retains its vitality and it is the presentation of an experience that is intimate whilst being collectively shared and understood.

It must be stressed that if ordinary gestures point to an internalized “impersonal” set of behaviours, then they are learned; conditioning has taken place. There is a tension between gestures that are the result of conditioning (and “impersonal” because of their constraints) and gestures that belong to biological reflexes (and are “impersonal” because mechanical). The idea of the impersonal here should be understood in terms of somatic unconsciousness, a form of life that we all share even before any type of social conditioning or personal stylization. Impersonality as a form of life serves as the common ground from which any bodily refinement can arise, leading to gestures that are thoughtful, individualized, and carefully perfected.

Following Wittgenstein, it is precisely in its variety, its realism, and its confusion that a form of life “makes sense,” it appears in its warmth, without being fixed in a determined signification and without losing its living and sensible form. A *Lebensform* is a particular type of testimony where we are witnessing an intimate and at the same time impersonal experience. In other words, the inner life exposed in a form of life is aesthetic when it is not singular but neutral and multiple. A form of life takes on a certain aesthetic “flavour,” in Wittgenstein’s terms, which alone prevents the “tasteless” side of an experience that is predetermined. Wittgenstein indicates this flavour as the universal potential of ordinary life.

Performing some quite ordinary activity could become an artistic method, specifically an anti-theatrical one, as in Yvonne Rainer’s work. Similar to Wittgenstein’s ordinary language philosophy, Rainer developed an ordinary language art such as in *Trio A*, the seminal work of postmodern dance: a ten minutes solo work of 1966. In this solo, that became iconic in postmodern dance, there are no breaks between phrases; the phrases themselves consist of separate parts, such as, for example, joining the right leg to the left leg, arm, jumps, etc. The end of each sentence immediately dives into the beginning of the next without visible differences: gestures are taken into a sort of flux, or at worse into a physical “blob.” Yvonne Rainer says: “I have manifested a kind of effort where it is traditionally concealed, and I concealed phrasing where it is traditionally deployed.” Thus, *Trio A* has proved to have been one of the most difficult pieces of dance in terms of documentation and archive, its movements are too blurred and undefined, even if it has also been one of the most studied, analysed, and learnt pieces of contemporary dance.

The solo is accompanied by a written text called *No Manifesto* (1965), in which Yvonne Rainer insists on the negativity and the minimalism of the piece:

No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendancy of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.

The *No Manifesto* clearly promotes a rejection of classical norms (i.e. “virtuosity,” “transformation,” “spectacle,” etc.), but it does not replace those norms with a new set of norms because it also advocates a critical dissociation from new or postmodern criteria such as “trash imagery,” “camp,” or “eccentricity.” Aware of the dialectical nature of the relationship between the artistic and the mundane, high art and popular art, Rainer

prefers to defend the medium term and chooses the party of suspension of judgement. Instead of cancellation and the creation of something new (which is the dream of both modernity *and* post-modernity), she implements an indiscernible space, a sort of aesthetic *epoché* of neutrality. This minimalist neutrality and critical refusal of representation is a specific tactic for activating Wittgenstein's philosophical investigation of the ordinary as a form of life anchored in bodily practices.

This neutral space rejects both the "heroic" and the "anti-heroic" and is strongly consistent with a desire to return to common criteria, in other words to humanity, immanence, and real life. In terms of bodily movements, this "return to the real" translates into something that is paradoxical because the piece is both *simple* in its appearance and *complex* in its physical feasibility. We should remember that for a long time, Yvonne Rainer repudiated her "No Manifesto" precisely because it could potentially be misinterpreted as advocating or championing some universal "ordinariness" based on a form of life specific to a particular community – white, middle class, largely heterosexual, well educated, etc. On the contrary, the "No Manifesto" needs to be situated in a precise period related to the minimalist practices of American neo-avantgarde: It advocates neutrality in terms of the non-aestheticized nature of the gestures employed in the artworks and more generally as implying a democratization of art.

Trio A could be understood as a concretisation of Wittgenstein's *Lebensform*, in that the dance is identified with "performing some quite everyday activity." The movements are "found" or "ready-made" and do not require production, creation, or transformation; as in real life, the performance of the act can be repeated, the effort is invariant, and the dancer no longer needs to embody a character. In the essay entitled "The Mind is a Muscle," written in 1968 to accompany the piece, Yvonne Rainer writes:

If my rage at the type of impoverishment of ideas, narcissism, and disguised sexual exhibitionism of most dancing can be considered puritan moralizing, it is also true that I love the body – its actual weight, mass, and unenhanced physicality. It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities – alone, with each other, with objects – and to weight the quality of the human body toward that of objects and away from the superstylization of the dancer. ... My body remains the enduring reality⁷.

For Yvonne Rainer, physical control is geared to real time and the actual weight of the body through the prescribed motions, rather than adhering to a preset time distribution. In other words, what is required of the body in terms of actual energy resources is that the latter appear as co-substantial to the task itself – tasks such as rising up from the ground, raising one arm, swinging the pelvis, etc. These activities should be done in an ordinary manner as if the performer were to get up from a chair, reach a high shelf, and go down the stairs without hurrying. The supposed "fact of life" has no more reality than the supposed "artifice of art," and if life does not transfigure, it is because the movement is found to be in itself the result of artifice and learning. Rainer advises: "Also, and very importantly, these movements are NOT mimetic, they also do not refer to such actions. They have a factual quality similar to ordinary life but they don't have an ordinary appearance and are not immediately associated to ordinary forms and activities" (*ibidem*).

If we had to choose a philosophical current to which Yvonne Rainer would belong this current would certainly be an anti-metaphysical one: "The Mind Is a Muscle" is the title of one of her texts; *Feelings are facts*⁸ is the title of her recent memoirs. Yvonne Rainer has chosen the path of double negativity, it is not to stage life as it is, nor life as it is performed but rather to stage a kind of intermediate and immanent dimension that lies in between (or below) the other two dimensions, those two dimensions being art and life. It is only through this double negativity that a gesture can be documented because performance occurs here as a duplication of the refusal of the ordinary. What we see is not ordinary, but it is not *out of* the ordinary either.

The resemblance between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Yvonne Rainer's art practice is based on a similarity of style, this style is the one of silence which is inspired by Wittgenstein's famous phrase "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent," with which he decides to end his famous *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus*. This sentence aims to denounce the representational function of language.

⁷ Rainer, *Some retrospective notes on a dance for 10 people and 12 mattresses called Parts of Some Sextets*.

⁸ Rainer, *Feelings are Facts. A Life*.

If words are normally used in philosophy to represent something other than themselves, namely, concepts or emotions, Wittgenstein's declaration aims to delimit the representational function of language by carving out a space in which words are no longer used to represent something other than themselves. Consequently, the style of silence, or better silence as a style (as we can witness in Yvonne Rainer's *Trio A* and *No Manifesto*), contains a deep critique of any form of representation: whether it be metaphysics or semiotics or linguistics or politics.

Continuing this parallel, we can notice that Rainer – especially during the period leading to the experimentations around *Continuous Project/Altered Daily* (1969) – uses a method similar to one of Wittgenstein's, namely, that of the “game” and “language games.” We can associate Wittgenstein's “language games” with the “task-like dances” that Rainer inherits from Anna Halprin. In the logic of the game, rules are never fixed once and for all but change throughout the experience of the game itself. This ludic method rejects the idea of the artist as a creator in order to produce works which may be called “open” or “modular” aiming to criticize the traditional ways of understanding and making art. Through the protocol of games and language games, art is neither an object nor a single entity closed in upon itself, but rather a structural assembly that can evolve and change in time. As Wittgenstein says in § 83 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, “Make up the rules as we go along.” In a similar manner, Yvonne Rainer wants to depart from the semantic and representational function of gesture by proposing collective choreographies based on simple rules of improvisation.

In *Continuous Project/Altered Daily*, the relationship between the Wittgenstein and Rainer is more explicit. As a matter of fact, in 2000, this project gave rise to a half-hour dance entitled *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, presented as part of Mikhaïl Baryshnikov's *White Oak Dance Project*. And it was precisely during the preparation of this video that Rainer began to take a close interest in Wittgenstein. After twenty-five years of cinematic research, she marked her return to dance by juxtaposing a video with the choreographic work that inspires it. The title of the video is “After Many a Summer Dies the Swan: Hybrid” because of its hybrid composition between documentary video and textual writing. The choreography features several dancers who speak intermittently, mostly quoting the last words of famous people. At one point, Baryshnikov himself utters Wittgenstein's words: “Tell them I've had a wonderful life.”

Rainer's work exhibits a resemblance with Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, similar to what Wittgenstein himself called a “family resemblance.” This kind of resemblance is neither mimetic nor direct and preserves individual singularities. By choosing the style of silence, Wittgenstein has promoted the anti-metaphysical idea of silencing language, and Rainer has explicitly provided a *No Manifesto* as emblematic of her art. Yvonne Rainer exposes the complex nature of human experience and the importance of its roots in cultural and personal contexts, thus the neutrality and the immanence of the work is essential to this new conception of art and life.

In line with Wittgenstein's thought, performing some quite ordinary activity contributes to art practice and is linked to *minimalism* understood not only as a way to produce and perceive forms but also as a criterion for using physical energy and body weight. In this perspective, “performance” is understood according to its original meaning in English, namely, as a simple action grasped neither through some parameter of efficiency that would place the action in a competitive domain nor through some criterion of transcendence. The method is *processual*, it prefers the manner to the result, the experience to the object, and the duration of time to the final objective.

3 The Continuity Between Art and Life (John Dewey and Allan Kaprow)

Via the comparison between Wittgenstein's concept of the form of life and Yvonne Rainer's choreography, we have seen that an anti-metaphysical and immanent approach to gestures leads to an indiscernible field between bodily practices and speculative ideas. This indiscernible field is indeed very close to our ordinary reality insofar as we are never acting as “pure” subjects nor as “pure” matter. Moreover, one may then notice that “going back to the real” is a philosophical and artistic orientation that is close to pragmatism, more

specifically in its aesthetic aspects such as in John Dewey's work. Dewey's theory is also anti-metaphysical in that what characterizes art, and its roots in living experience, is the integration of the environment as a process of interaction. When Dewey speaks of judgement, he says that the formation of a judgement cannot be separated from a chain of actions and reactions that are part of its context. He writes:

There are no different kinds of judgement, but distinguishable phases or emphases of judgement, according to the aspect of its subject-matter that is emphasized. ... Existential subject-matter as transformed has a temporal phase But all changes occur through interactions of conditions. What exists co-exists, and no changes can either occur or be determined in inquiry in isolation from the connection of an existence with co-existing conditions⁹.

According to Dewey, all experience is structured by a biological relationship to the environment or "situation"; that is to say, through the manner in which a living organism adapts to its natural and original environment. So, there is a very empirical organization of existence that does not refer to a model but rather proceeds step by step in a pragmatist way as a problem-solving situation. As Dewey points out, this method of framing experience is deeply related to temporality. Aesthetic experience is both in a relation of continuity with any other experience that is not lived as aesthetic *and* also marked out from this other (ordinary) experience within its own duration. Dewey sees aesthetic experience as a field of possibilities in which ordinary experience can change and evolve, a field where life may tend towards specific forms. Within these forms, art is a possibility, art is what life could be if its inner qualities were fulfilled.

Art as Experience is not only the title of a book, but it designates primarily a potentiality and a condition of possibilities¹⁰. In each experience, a horizon of expectations emerges because experience is considered by Dewey as a process, as a series of events that live and survive beyond simple accidents. Dewey then links the intensifying power of aesthetic experience to its ability to provide a subjective fulfilment and to identify a certain amount of self-sufficiency within the stream of ordinary events.

The continuous field of events in which life and art operate is similar to Kaprow's happenings and activities. *The Blurring of Art and Life* is the title of an insightful collection of essays that Allan Kaprow published in 1993. The relationship between John Dewey's philosophy and Allan Kaprow's art practice is directly claimed by the artist who says:

There's a whole current of 'for life rather than art' that goes back to the time of Wordsworth at least, to the current that emphasises art as experience, that tries to bring art back to life and that goes through Emerson and Whitman, all the way to John Dewey and even beyond - this tradition has influenced me a lot.¹¹

Following pragmatism and American philosophy, Kaprow also defends, like Dewey, the idea that any experience can belong to the realm of aesthetic experience, as long as we grasp its perceptual appearance and its fundamentally anti-productive nature. In an essay of 1986 called "Art Which Can't Be Art," Kaprow specifies:

Unless the identity (and thus the meaning) of what the artist does oscillates between ordinary, recognizable activity and the "resonance" of that activity in the larger human context, the activity itself reduces to conventional behaviour. (...) But ordinary life performed as art/not art can charge the everyday with metaphoric power.¹²

The line between art and daily life must remain as *fluid* and indistinct as much as possible. And fluidity in Kaprow's work can be understood as a metaphor of the kind of ontological continuity that Dewey establishes between art and life. Fluidity is not merely metaphorical because its literal meaning is also present in Kaprow's work. For instance, it is interesting to notice that one of Kaprow's most known *Happenings* is called FLUIDS. During the summer of 1967, teams of volunteers built several ice structures around the geographical area of Los Angeles, and then let them melt under the sun. The purpose of this art process was to produce

⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 220.

¹⁰ Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*.

¹¹ Kaprow, Interview with Susan Hapgood (12 August 1992), in Hapgood, Susan, and Jennifer Rittner. "Neo-Dada: Redefining Art, 1958–1962," 65.

¹² Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*.

“works of art” in order to let them evaporate. The collective nature of the action and the ephemeral aspects of the works are the result of specific methods: there is no staging, everything is real, there is no formal audience but accidental observers, and the participants are the actors of the experience.

In order to pursue at a more fundamental level the path of immanence opened by Happenings, Kaprow developed this strategy of disappearance in 1968 to overcome the methodology of happenings and to counter their symbolic significance by replacing them with another creative process; that of the *Activities*. In his writings, Kaprow often uses the term “Activity” with a capital letter. From 1968 until his death in 2006, Kaprow set up around 250 Activities. Each Activity is accompanied by a booklet consisting of instructions and pictures; their forms are multiple and different. Besides Kaprow’s use of the word “activity,” the general meaning of this ordinary term is actually very complex: if the term “action” is generally understood as a developmental process, the term “activity” can be defined in turn as the character of what is active, and it has the same quality as an action, but it considers the agent with respect to her own power and not with respect to the result of the action.

Just as in Dewey’s idea of aesthetic experience, Kaprow considers the process of an *Activity* to be independent of the existence of the work; that is to say, his entire approach is deeply critical vis-à-vis the ontology of the artwork. An *Activity* is always related to mechanisms of perception and psycho-sensory interaction between individuals. An *Activity* is “innocent playfulness” in Kaprow’s terms, and a “poetic naturism.”¹³ An *Activity* means, for example, moving furniture into the street in order to help someone move; brushing your own teeth every morning for two weeks by paying attention to the movements and sensations involved in this activity; grasping tightly someone’s hand a few times and becoming aware of the words exchanged; or calling someone up on the telephone and remaining silent, letting your friend listen to your own breath through the handset. Most importantly, Activities are not art creations, and Kaprow wishes to clarify this:

I don’t (to use a pietistic word) « create » an Activity, rather I arrange its ‘program’.¹⁴

An *Activity* is clearly separated from the classical concept of (art) creation and opens up the continuity of singular human experiences. This continuity is also foregrounded in a particular Activity called “On Time” that Kaprow arranged in 1974 in Paris. The Activity was carried out in an apartment at number 64 rue de Turenne and sponsored by Gerald Piltzer Gallery. Here is the program: two people enter at the same time by two separate entrances into the same apartment; one sits on a block of ice, and the other moves in the kitchen near a container of boiling water of equal volume to that of the block of ice. Everyone occasionally asks the other the question “NOW?” The answer is “NO” until the ice has melted, and the water evaporated. Kaprow adds a note to the statement:

The Activity is partially based on the confusion between the sound “NOW” and “NO” and on the similarity of the movements of the mouth that are necessary to pronounce these two words. But this subject of this Activity is above all waiting.¹⁵

We can see here that the flow of the Activity accords with the flow and the disappearance of the actual matter; humans are thus subjected to organic changes in their environment in a similar way to matter. The Activity becomes a sort of meta-action, a self-reflexive experience about action on oneself, and an experience that acts as a meta-discourse or a meta-language, according to which action is accompanied by awareness. The Activity becomes a sort of meditation, and the influences from Zen Buddhism were sufficiently strong at that time to act as new methods. A meditation can then become an immanent way of archiving and documenting life, leaving a very particular impression on the subject as she relates to the environment. The traces left in the memory and the moment of slight distancing from the action within a particular Activity produce a lived documentation that *frames* the series of gestures.

¹³ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 138.

¹⁴ Kaprow, *Allan Kaprow. A Bibliography*, 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 55. The booklet being written in French this quote is my translation: « L’Activité est en partie fondée sur la confusion que provoquent les sons « NOW » et « NO » et sur la similitude des mouvements de la bouche nécessaires pour prononcer ces deux mots. Mais le sujet de cette Activité est avant tout l’attente. »

Art allows us to take awareness as a protocol for documenting life and to frame life similarly to a sociological experiment. In actual fact, besides John Dewey's aesthetic pragmatism, Kaprow was also inspired by the sociologist Erving Goffman and his ideas developed in *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.¹⁶ Kaprow thinks of art as the conscious part of life; that is, art is a way of imitating the substantial and sensorial part of life, it is a way of "framing" life as a form of experience. Kaprow called this process *lifelikeart*, an artistic experience that reduces art to such a minimal form that it almost disappears into the opacity of ordinary life. *Lifelikeart* is an art that is so similar to life that art becomes equal to life once all of the latter's characteristic features are apparent. *Lifelikeart* helps us understand that there are two types of life: there is *life* and "*life*," the first being ordinary life, the second being the ordinary life lived "consciously" and *framed* within citation marks, and the latter being our "notion of ART." The line between ordinary life and "*life*" is so fluid and blurred that a third dimension arises in what he calls "the alternative elusive" of "not quite art" and "not quite life" (Kaprow, 1979).

Similarly to Wittgenstein "simple activity," here also performing a gesture acts as a *duplication* of the refusal of the ordinary. The identification with ordinary life is thus never direct but always takes place via a negative doubling. Due to its indiscernibility, the performance cannot be aesthetically judged. It escapes the traditional rules of judgement, we cannot say "it's beautiful," or "it is made with skill," as we would do in front of a classical painting. But how can the idea of continuity not lead to identification? This deeply Deweyan question is what animates Kaprow's theoretical and artistic quest as clearly shown by the title of his famous book: *Essays on The Blurring of Art and Life*.

Opposing the Kantian attitude, which subtracts the object from its environment, a *happening*, is made out of what Allan Kaprow called "lifelikeart," a blurred dimension where art and life almost coincide. If a happening shows an ontological continuity with ordinary life, then "performance" is understood as a simple and immanent series of gestures, and not as an action disconnected from ordinary life. To use Dewey's metaphor presented at the beginning of his book *Art As Experience*, ordinary events relate to aesthetic experiences as the earth relates to mountains; that is to say events are the foundation or principle of aesthetic experience and have the same ontological qualitative features. Art, in Kaprow's Activity, succeeds in abolishing the difference imposed by *mimesis* between performance and reality, thus arriving at the possibility of "performing the real."

Instead of making an objective image or occurrence to be seen by someone else, it was a matter of doing something to experience it yourself. It was the difference between watching an actor eating strawberries on a stage and actually eating them yourself at home. Doing life, consciously, was a compelling notion to me. When you do life consciously, however, life becomes pretty strange – paying attention changes the thing attended to – so the Happenings were not nearly as lifelike as I had supposed they might be. But I learned something about life and "life". A new art/life genre therefore came about, reflecting equally the artificial aspects of everyday life and the lifelike qualities of created art.¹⁷

As in a chiasm, on the one side art reveals features that are closed to life and on the other hand life in its totality reveals the unique characteristics of created art, the latter being defined as a finished product, such as a process of creation or manufacturing. The performance becomes nondeeply theatrical, as the artistic experience as an activity comes highly critical of the unit and the contemporaneity of this. The solution to the relationship between art and life, between creation and practice, is also the dispersion, the effort that leads to nothing. Of course, this perspective also has political implications. Living a life "consciously" changes one's perspective on life and highlights the energies, both positive and negative, that shape our daily behaviours because of social formatting and normative discipline, just as Foucault points out via his notion of biopower.

¹⁶ Goffman, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*.

¹⁷ Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 195.

4 Performance as Ordinary Experience

Following the ideas of both artists and philosophers, I have tried to demonstrate that a form of life can present itself as indiscernible from performance art and can do so in different ways: when life is “illuminated from within” (in Wittgenstein’s terms), when art shows its “lifelike” features (in Kaprow’s terms), when life is “fulfilled” (in Dewey’s terms), or when its “factual energy” is shown (as Yvonne Rainer would say). All these methods are immanent, and they sketch a programmatic schema of how forms of life can contribute to performance art and to ordinary life in general. The result of this inquiry does not lead to clarity and distinction, but rather to a *blurred* dimension where art could eventually dissolve entirely into ordinary life. The inquiry leads to the field of *indiscernibility*¹⁸ insofar as what is presented as art occurs within the ambivalence of a fertile confusion with life. Performance would thus not be proposed as “simple” life, nor as a “performed” life, but as something between the two; occurring within an intermediate zone, being “not just life, nor just art” and situating itself in a time and space of double negativity by which gesture is documented and archived by its own accomplishment.

In addition to this indiscernibility, the inquiry leads to *pluralism*. Performance art indicates the complex nature of human experience and the importance of its roots in a cultural and personal context: impersonality, multiplicity, dispersion, and collective actions are key features of this particular method of expressing life through art. All these features indicate that immanence is a key concept and method in contemporary art and philosophy. Through this pluralism, performance avoids the risk of being perceived as merely subjective and dismissed under the categories of exceptionality and originality, and consequently, performance truly escapes the traditional categories of the artwork, still trapped under the typology of objecthood and production¹⁹.

On the contrary, what Kaprow’s and Rainer’s practices have to offer is a programmatic methodology, where the artwork is an *open* and *incomplete* phenomenon mirroring the disruptive and unfinished forms that characterize any human experience. Performance would then clearly accomplish an emancipation from the idea of the artwork as a merchandise by maintaining its attachment to ordinary life and by keeping alive the vulnerability of any human subject; vulnerability that is visible in our tendency to make mistakes, to have feelings that are difficult to control, and to be in a state of weakness.

The intensifying power of performance provides an awareness of the stream of ordinary events. By doing so, performance would also partially lose its human condition in order to reflect the vulnerability of *any* living being (animals, plants, bacteria, and any transformable matter that is in danger under the present ecological conditions). The flow of the action goes with the flow and the disappearance of matter because humans are therefore subject to organic changes in their environment.

Between art and life, there is therefore not so much a transition, a change from one state to another as they pass a plain to a mountain as Dewey suggests, but rather an immersive conflagration of two states into one, without there being a total identification between the two domains. When we find art in life and life in art, we indicate that life and art share the same ontological domain. Performance art is then an ongoing, immanent, or “enduring” experience that makes sense within the continuous flux of simple accidents. Art becomes a sort of awareness in which philosophical investigation may find a valuable ally.

Funding information: Publishing costs have been covered from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 834759).

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

¹⁸ Formis, *Esthétique de la vie ordinaire*.

¹⁹ Laugier, *Politics of the Ordinary*.

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