

As It Ripples | Mica Pan | Rietveld Fine Arts 2021

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Introduction

When thinking about what to write my thesis on, there was a word in my head that I could not get rid of: the “real”, the experience of the “real”. The word is so hopelessly vast and intricately formless that, like “love”, “time”, “truth”, “consciousness”, it may either be an ultimate epiphany, or a self-inflicted entanglement. Yet to feel “real” is so important to me, whether I am working as an artist, living my daily life, or trying to write down a thought like this one.

I cannot describe directly what I mean by “real”, but I have thought about why it may be important at this point in time. It has to do with today’s use of the internet and various electronic devices. Our current culture, based on mass social media and image-making, turns the reality of the digital into an environment in which we live daily. Our perception and reaction seem to be getting lost in it. Furthermore, the quarantine brought on by the persistent coronavirus epidemic, reinforces the proportion of various types of digital communication, like online courses, online exhibitions and on the like. Whenever I put my phone down and take my eyes off the screen after a long use, a deeply eerie feeling emerges when I face the view out of the window in comparison. However, this is only a broad context. I have no intention in researching and discussing the “real” from a social, cultural, or even philosophical perspective, but have chosen to do so from an artistic and experiential point of view.

In my opinion, art’s biggest potential derives from the rich, subjective experience a mind can potentially have with an artwork. It has

always been the work which is concerned with being present, that has struck me the most, whether it is a performance, a walk-in installation, a site-specific, participatory work, or a type more difficult to name.

Currently, in my performance practice, I investigate the potential to re-define minimal events or gestures as works of art, and to involve the participatory presence of a viewer. This thesis relates to my practice in a twofold way: it is an exploration and elaboration of the “real” from an innermost urge and at the same time, a performative reflection on art and life channeled through related artist and artworks.

There are two things which need to be clarified:

First, the term “membrane” will appear frequently in this text and has different alternative meanings such as frame and boundary, all of which roughly point to the same definition: a barrier that separates something from another. I have found similar descriptions in several sources that inspired me to settle with the word “membrane”: In *Inside the White Cube*, in which Brian O’Doherty critically examines the relationship between white cube and artwork, the idea is deployed that the frame, which once was a pragmatic necessity for a painting, gradually became a metaphor. He argues that the white cube itself has become a new frame, separating the content inside it from the environment on its outside.¹ When it comes to the word “frame”, the impression is of something hard, corresponding to the action of “breaking”. Allan Kaprow’s work and texts are invested with “blurring” art and life, introducing another impression of a boundary or a border.²

Ultimately there is the description of a “shell”, a “protective film” between awake reality and asleep dream which “erodes” each waking day, imagined in *The Fork* by Valery Podoroga, in which the term “membrane” and its relative descriptions also appear. ³

Although the distinction between artwork and life will remain part of all the examples mentioned above, I think the relationship between the two is multifaceted: you can look at the same thing through the eyes of art, or through the eyes of life. A thing can always have the status of both.

I am therefore borrowing the term “membrane” from a biological context, which indicates a soft, permeable layer of demarcation that allows for an interchange of matter between two sides: similar to the way the artwork and everyday life influence each other. In addition, I conceive of the structure of the “membrane” and a surface of water as a symbolic and morphological complement. The surface of water was once used as a mirror. When the water was calm, it reflected the reality of life as it was. This mirroring quality, continuing the metaphor, suggests that art and life are inspiring one another. When the water is disturbed, it takes on a variety of distorted appearances. It does not disappear or blur but becomes variable and disorienting. Summing up, the “membrane” is a layer of distinction between one thing and another, yet soft, reflective, translucent, permeable, and ever-changing.

Secondly, the reader will soon notice that part of the text is written as imagined dialogues between two people, descriptions of a scenario, through which I change my way of expressing ideas. Rather than summarizing the voices in my head, I let the conversation flow directly out of my mind and depict symbolic

imagery in the form of literary text rather than translating them into concepts. Though these texts appear to be fictional, their main aim is to unify the contents of the different parts of analysis that will follow. This way of writing was related to my habit of thinking in symbolic terms at the time, but in the end became a tool to capture the subjective experience of the kind of artworks I will refer to. Moreover, these sections contrast the expository ones, interweaving two ways of thinking and complementing two worlds.

1 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (London: University of California Press, 1999).

2 Allan Kaprow, *Essays On The Blurring Of Art And Life* (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd., 2003).

3 Valery Podoroga, "The Fork", in: *MJ-Manifesta Journal №3, Spring / Summer 2004 Exhibition as a Dream* ed. By Viktor Mazin and Igor Zabel (Ljubljana, Slovenia: Moderna galerija Ljubljana and Amsterdam, The Netherlands: International Foundation Manifesta, 2004), p257, 267.



[Fig.1] *Senza titolo (La fine del mondo)*, 2017, Installation, Giorgio Andreotta Calò. Photograph by Roberto Marossi.

A huge expanse of water covers the entire platform constructed under the ceiling of the architecture, generating a mirage-like effect.

Unt itl ed⁴

“I think about it from time to time, about the REAL.” A says.

“Real?” B asks gently in return.

A walks up the stairs built of steel pipes to the factory space above and sat at the edge of the black water. The water reflects the huge factory roof at the top, the worlds above and below are connected in a coherent mirror image.

A bends down and gently places her hand on the surface, the ripples that reverberate, sway the world inside the water. “Well, yes, real. Real as opposed to unreal. Real in contrast to imagination. Real in contrast to dreams.”

B is silent.

A continues to speak, “Look. The water surface before us is like a membrane. Above it is the ‘real’ world, below it is an ‘unreal’ reflection. You know what? That’s how I feel about the real: when that membrane starts to sway, weave, fluctuate and tear. The moment when that reflection on the surface starts to change and becomes hard to tell.”

A’s hand reaches fluently underwater and pulls B out. B stumbles a few steps and sit wetly besides A.

B says, “I like to stare at the details of a thing. The more I look

without moving, the more it becomes real and unreal at the same time; the image intensifies yet start to dissipate. Like that swaying sensation you speak of.”

“Why do you stare?”

B, after thinking for a moment, says, “It’s an amazing feeling of being in the moment. My sense of what’s real is an alertness that points to the present moment.”

4 Referencing [Fig.1].

Win do w

We are viewing constantly. Not only viewing in the visual sense, but also in the sense of understanding, receiving information and being exposed to the outside. I like to think of human mental activity as an alternating state of receiving and releasing information. We receive information and energy from the world, digest it internally, and release our own back onto the external world, sometimes in the form of creative practices. If creative practices are understood to be the process of creating a work of art, viewing a work of art is correspondingly a process of receiving information.

While we take in a great deal of information every day, a work of art usually contains a concentrated and condensed amount of information. Usually, we stay at a moderate level of alertness, would not pay much attention to the phenomena around us, even unexpected ones. When you are cooking at home and suddenly leaves float in through the window, all stays within a common sense level of daily activity: there are trees outside the window, there is wind and the window is left open, so it is reasonable to see leaves drifting in. But this level of attention is relatively low. Imagine you are in a pure white space, in a gallery where there is nothing but a window with leaves constantly drifting in. You are likely to pay attention to the scene in the same way you would watching an artwork: the shape of the window, the sight of the leaves, the sound of the wind, etc. How is this different from seeing leaves drifting in by chance at home?

The difference is that this window is removed from everyday

life and framed by the white space. Imagine an invisible membrane appears around it, separating the work from the rest of the building. The information is now presented to you in a concentrated manner. Your attention is focused, you are consciously viewing it, you are actively ingesting the information. The artwork, by excluding something, by making an act or object its focus and its centre, creates a membrane as its boundary. When placing a sculpture inside a gallery, in most cases, it is important to clear the gallery of irrelevant objects like tables, chairs and the like first. To gain enough attention, the work itself must radiate a boundary that communicates that some things are part of the work and other things are not. Thus, people's attention is gathered, concentrated, and separated from everyday life, focused within the boundaries of the work. Hence, one can examine and interpret what happens within its scope as a whole.

Au sga ng⁵

In some works, the presence of such a membrane is so obvious and resolute that the work itself seems to create another world into which one can enter. For Gregor Schneider's large walk-in sculpture END shown at Abteiberg an der Abteistraße Museum in 2008, he designed a huge black corridor as an entrance to the museum.⁶ The interior of this corridor is completely dark and starts from an opening approximately 14 metres high, those who enter, will squeeze through a small 1 x 1 metre opening at the end of the corridor and, finally, find themselves inside the museum. Viewers who walk through the corridor gradually lose their sense of space and direction in a total darkness of 70 metres. Ahead of the small opening into the museum space is a series of rooms designed by Gregor Schneider. There is something unsettling about the interiors of these rooms and the connections between them: walking from room to room, one discovers in one room, there are windows but no view to the outside; in another room, there are three doors next to each other in a small corner. Suddenly, one has to climb down a vertically constructed metal ladder, and sometimes one opens a door but only to find a wall with a partitioned window frame. The sense of confused space is continued and extended. After walking through a series of rooms in this way, the viewer eventually reaches an exit where the door opens to the outside and conventional reality. The public space inside the museum. This is where the exhibition ends.

The work embodies a dreamlike quality: the boundary, or a sense of beginning and end, is clear: you are surrounded by the work, you enter it. The black 70-metre corridor emulates the process of drifting off before you fall asleep, and without realising it, you enter a dream space. The black sculpture seems to mysteriously wrap the space into a separated world, and from the moment you enter, you have already fallen into the haunted reality of the artwork. You will not wake up from this dream until you reach the exit. In this separated space, you see familiar scenes, such as a bed in one of the rooms and a coffee table and chairs in another, as if it were a morning scenery in a regular corner of a regular house. But the eerie details remind you that it is actually a misplaced dream within which illusionary, bizarre, curious, narrative, sensory experiences occur. The only difference from a dream is that it remains a present, physical, and direct experience within real life.

It is not until you walk out of the exit door that you see the real world again, as abruptly and crisply as if you had just woken up from a dream. The door that closes behind you marks the ending of the journey. Walking through that door is a surreal moment of crossing the border of the work: now, you have woken up, you have emerged from the work. You travel from the world of art, into the “real” world. The moment of passing through the membrane, of coming out of one world and entering another, the subtle difference that lies in it is magnified. The reality in front of you seems more real, and the reality of a moment ago seems more unreal. This very moment remains as an intriguing, integral part of the work. And now, all you can do is to recall the experience as if it were a dream.

A and B are sitting in front of the door that says “Exit”. The door is not yet open, and they are still immersed in that omnipotent darkness.

B says: “Remember that red church of Giorgio Andreotta Calò’s?⁷ The one in the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam.”

A says: “Of course, there was a school group visiting, that went in with us, the teacher told the students: ‘if you feel dizzy or any kind of discomfort, don’t force yourselves, wait for the rest of us outside’.”

B says: “As if someone struggles to wake up from a nightmare! Colours could be a very powerful and clear dividing indication of a body of work, directly affecting both mind and body.”

A says: “I quite like the switch between the two poles. Same thing happens when you’ve just walked outside the cinema after watching a movie. There is a tension between the ins and outs that make you confuse and think.”

B says: “Maybe the feeling of being in the moment is like a feeling of the real and the unreal being awakened at the same time, coexisting. In thinking about what the real is, it seems natural to compare it with its opposite: the unreal, which is perhaps the way we are used to think, in terms of duality as a tool. If there were no more unreal, there might not be a concept of the real either.”

A says: “When people go after the ‘real’, the ‘unreal’ naturally emerges, even it is for chasing what’s more real than the reality.⁸ As

in Magritte’s paintings, the absurdity of the dream is not so much in how it differs from reality, but in the subtlety between what is and what is not.⁹ A realistic approach to depict the absurd.”

They sit in front of the door for about five more minutes, silently watching the light of the outside filtering through the gap. That glowing gap outlines a rectangular shape in the darkness, while the sound of footsteps on the marble outside the door grows conspicuously in the silence.

5 German for “Exit”.

6 See [Fig.2].

7 See [Fig.3].

8 E.H.Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London: Phaidon Press; Pocket edition, 2006), p.457. When talking about the origin of Surrealism, Gombrich noted, “...’Surrealists’. The name was coined ...to express the longing of many artists... to create something more real than reality itself.”

9 See [Fig.4], and another example [Fig.5], [Fig.6].



[Fig.2] *END*, 2008, Walk-in Sculpture, Gregor Schneider.
The artist experiments with how to enter an exhibition space by building a 70 meter disorienting diagonal funnel. The huge walk-in sculpture can be seen from afar, looking monumental and mysterious.



[Fig.3] *Anastasis*, Installation, 2018, Giorgio Andreotta Calò. Photograph by Gert Jan van Rooij.
The overwhelming red light produced by the red glass on the window changes through out the day according to the brightness of the sunlight.



[Fig.4] *Empire of Light*, Oil on canvas, 1953–54, René Magritte.
The paradoxical combination produces a surprisingly harmonious effect, with the street and trees staged as a night view, and the sky a morning one.



[Fig.5], [Fig.6] *IT'S ALL RHEYDT*, bamboo, wood, coir ropes, straw, clay, polystyrene, color, 2011, Gregor Schneider. The replicated road of the city Rheydt was set upright, vertical to the actual ground. By looking upwards, you can access the normal look of the street.

Pa per and Jam

For performances that take place in open spaces, the presence of a boundary is much more subtle, as the membrane between the work and life is a concept that arises in the mind of every spectator. A performance may take place in a seemingly random corner of a hallway: how, then, does one know whether the performer will suddenly use the window to their left as the performance progresses? Or whether they will make use of a seemingly random

chair somewhere near the audience? In other words, the boundary becomes more irregular and uncertain. Sometimes the audience can clearly feel when they are crossing the boundary of the artwork, and sometimes they cannot. When one is aware of doing so, one becomes unconsciously cautious. Am I touching something that should not be touched? Should I stand here instead of there? Is it okay to sit? Will it be in the way of others? Who is the person performing? Has it started? When the audience begins to wonder about these questions, whether the creator wants them to or not, the boundary of a performance is automatically, gradually formed. It is true that in some cases the performers invite the audience on stage, or willingly disrupt groups of people, but this does not affect the audience's perception of such a boundary.

In the case of watching a performance as opposed to entering a work physically, the boundary of the work reinforces the separation of audience and performer. When a work is a work and a viewer is a viewer, a sense of watching, of withdrawal and a resulting

sensation of artificiality unfolds. Consider watching a movie or television, what is inside of the screen or on the stage seems to be in a different world, exhibiting a life completely other than our own. When witnessing a performance with a strong boundary, one becomes a “blank sheet of paper” in order to receive information. The work unfolds itself as time progresses, as if watching a movie or an opera, the audience stands still or sits at a distance, temporarily emptying themselves of the thoughts of their daily lives.

While it is inevitable that thoughts and reactions are generated in the act of watching, it is the subconscious identification of a boundary that allows for the overall interpretation of the work once one has received its message. Due to the time-based nature of performances, we are led to assume, that we have not yet finished witnessing hence there still might be something that we do not know. In a way, we reserve our ideas and save space for more, thus creating this temporary state of a blank sheet of paper. On this piece of paper, information is constantly being written: the form of performance demands a more focused and receptive attention per unit of time.

However, there is a counterpoint in Allan Kaprow’s thinking and Happening practices: he explicitly calls for the integration of work and life. Kaprow was a student of John Cage, they both were key figures of the Fluxus movement of 1960-1970. The Fluxus movement actively explored and experimented with matters such as performance, process, time, chance, interactivity and the relationship between life and art. The word “Happening” was used to describe an event that happened on the spot. As Kaprow put it,

“Happenings are events that, put simply, happen.”

The most intense and essential Happenings have been spawned in old lofts, basements, vacant stores, natural surroundings, and the street, where very small audiences, or groups of visitors, are commingled in some way with the event, flowing in and among its parts. There is thus no separation of audience and play Happening invite us to ... partake wholly in the real nature of the art and life.¹⁰

Usually, in order to make a Happening happen, Kaprow first wrote down a “program” describing the idea, and then sent the paper to a group of people.¹¹ Those who were interested, gathered at an agreed time and place, where they discussed all the details, assigned roles and tasks, and then carried them out.

Part of the program of Household (1964), one of Kaprow’s seminal pieces, reads as follows:

...

4

People’s voices call “Hey!
Men go to women, put on shirts, squat down and watch them.
People very slowly start coming in toward car, still calling “Hey!
Women screech.

5

Women go to car and lick jam.
Men destroy nest with shouts and cursing.

People, coming in, start to pound pots and blow police whistles in slow unison.

...¹²

In this small detail of his use of jam and car combined, we see that Kaprow's approach to blurring the boundaries between art and life involved the use of living, everyday objects, or "form" as material to create with.¹³ He argued, ".....take it for granted there's plenty of form there already. Nature can never appear formless because of the way the brain is made, so why worry? Just take things as they come....."¹⁴ This inspires us to look at everyday life and see all objects, shapes and fragments as raw, potential material for art making. "Form" can carry an expression in itself, in addition to being object and action that is removed from its original context.

Kaprow refers to Happenings as having a "raw, rough, sudden and fresh" quality, emphasising the sense of art as a real presence in life.¹⁵ The border between life and art is broken down when the audience becomes a participant rather than a viewer, when people realise that they are in the moment in which the act is taking place rather than witnessing a reenactment. Additionally, Kaprow speaks of "risk, fear" and a kind of "fine nervousness". Naturally, one senses nervousness when becoming aware of actively being the one producing the content of the "present". This sense of tension and anticipation is to be distinguished from the caution mentioned earlier. It is simply proof of the audience being present in the moment. They are not people sitting at a distance, waiting and receiving information, they have to actually be in the moment in which "anything can happen". It is as if the audience itself were to

become lines stretching across a blank page. In a Happening, the spectator is not only mentally involved, but fully engaged.

In real life, people often take the ordinary for granted, passing time as we are ought to do what we do everyday. But when one identifies something as art, especially when such art frames life itself, one enters, directly, a vivid and tangible present in which awareness is put under a spotlight. A fresh split second which is particularly charged when it is framed.

10 Allan Kaprow, *Essays On The Blurring Of Art And Life*, p.17-18.

11 Allan Kaprow, *How to make a happening*, 1966.

12 Allan Kaprow, *Some Recent Happenings* (New York:A Great bear pamphlet,1966), p.7.

13 See [Fig.7].

14 Allan Kaprow, *How to make a happening*.

15 Allan Kaprow, *Essays On The Blurring Of Art And Life*, p.17-20.



[Fig.7] Household, 1964, Happening,
Allan Kaprow. Photograph by Sol Goldberg.
“Women licking jam off a car.”

B puts down the book and materials in her hand and turns to A, “Wouldn’t a piece like this be pointless if it weren’t experienced! Kaprow said himself: ‘some of us will probably become famous. It will be an ironic fame fashioned largely by those who have never seen our work’.”

A looks back at that statement and finds it worth thinking about. In an artwork like this, the number of people involved is limited, but the subjective experience cannot really be recorded, and thus those who participate, perhaps, bear with the responsibility of telling others about the event. A is about to dwell in her own thoughts for a longer time when something else in the book catches her attention. “Look at this picture I found!” A waves with a picture in her hand on which a couple of women are depicted, with their heads down, licking the jam smeared on the surface of a car.

Leaf

In autumn, A and B are walking down a slightly chill street. The autumn wind is blowing a few yellow leaves, dried cigarette butts and used matchsticks along the street. They leave the iron gates of a building, crossing the street to see an exhibition in another building not far away.

“It just occurred to me that the person who experiences an undocumented work seems to have, so to speak, the obligation or the mission to go and speak about the experience. At this point, an audience is not only spectator, but also participant, and more importantly, a witness. Their presence is a record of the work, a shadow and afterlife of the work, and in a way, the essence of these works, for these works are situated almost completely in the subjective level of the person experiencing them.” A suddenly says.

“It reminds me of Florence Jung!” B replies.

They have both been to an exhibition of Florence Jung once, where the audience had to queue to enter a space, one at a time, and just before entering, the doorkeeper would slip them a small slice of paper with instructions to make a phone call. There was nothing in the space, and after making the call you would hear someone talking to you, glancing at you from outside the window, at the bottom of the building. The amazing thing was that when you had finished visiting the exhibition and got back home at night, you would receive a text message with content related to the phone call.¹⁶

“That’s right! I was going to mention her. When I got that note, after 20 minutes of waiting, I felt a shift in perspective. I clearly felt that I was not a spectator anymore, I was part of a scene, even its protagonist.¹⁷ I was transformed by the artist into a part of the work. Participation is particularly important in her work, to the extent that the work would not be valid without it. The audience is reminiscent of a protagonist in a story. And that scene of the work is some sort of fragmental, fictional, and cinematic extract of framed, real life.”

The two walk slowly down the street, the sun occasionally peeking through the clouds and illuminating a corner of a grey stone wall.

B says: “She seems to use life as a material to go about shaping some kind of implicit parallel reality out of it, like a pinch of clay

A says: “When I was walking through the exhibition and suddenly saw her work, I felt a subtle border between real life and artwork, and therefore a parallel realisation: I’m still in life, I’m still within myself, but at the same time I’m in a script that she’s constructed. The line between real life and the artwork is completely indistinguishable, and the relationship between the two is so close that the viewer develops a subtle sense of dreaminess.”

“Also, none of her stuff is formally documented, no one takes pictures, videos, or anything else. If you go looking for her online, you can’t find any visuals, not even what she looks like in person. Don’t you think that’s a pretty bold act? Art seems inconceivable

without a visual. But in terms of the nature of her work, I do find it hard to imagine how a piece like that is going to be documented.”

“That just can’t be done. When a work happens in the form of life, documentation seems to become a secondary creation. This is true for all performance work, and even more so for her work. It works on the platform of each person’s subjective feelings. It would be ridiculous to notice a camera somewhere in the background, constantly watching and filming everything, while you are experiencing it. It just doesn’t make sense that way.”

“So her work lives on as a rumour, and in people’s minds as its medium. It’s like art is being released again, back to life. People are invited to enter the dimensions of life, to turn away from interpretation, from secondary reproduction, from counterfeit memories...experiences are painted with emphasis, and you are encouraged to generate a sincere connection with the present ...”

“One may feel that it’s a shame not to have any sort of documentation, but if you’ve been in this substantial connection, the work becomes distinct and alive in the memory instead. Her work creates an alertness to the present moment. And it’s an energising experience: you develop a desire to talk and share, as if you’ve gone on an expedition to a place without signal. And when you come out, you just want to share with the people around you the amazing things you’ve seen in the cave. Through the words, comments and shared experiences, the work comes to life again. It’s another way of documenting, an afterlife, I believe.” Having finished speaking, A takes a glance at the map.

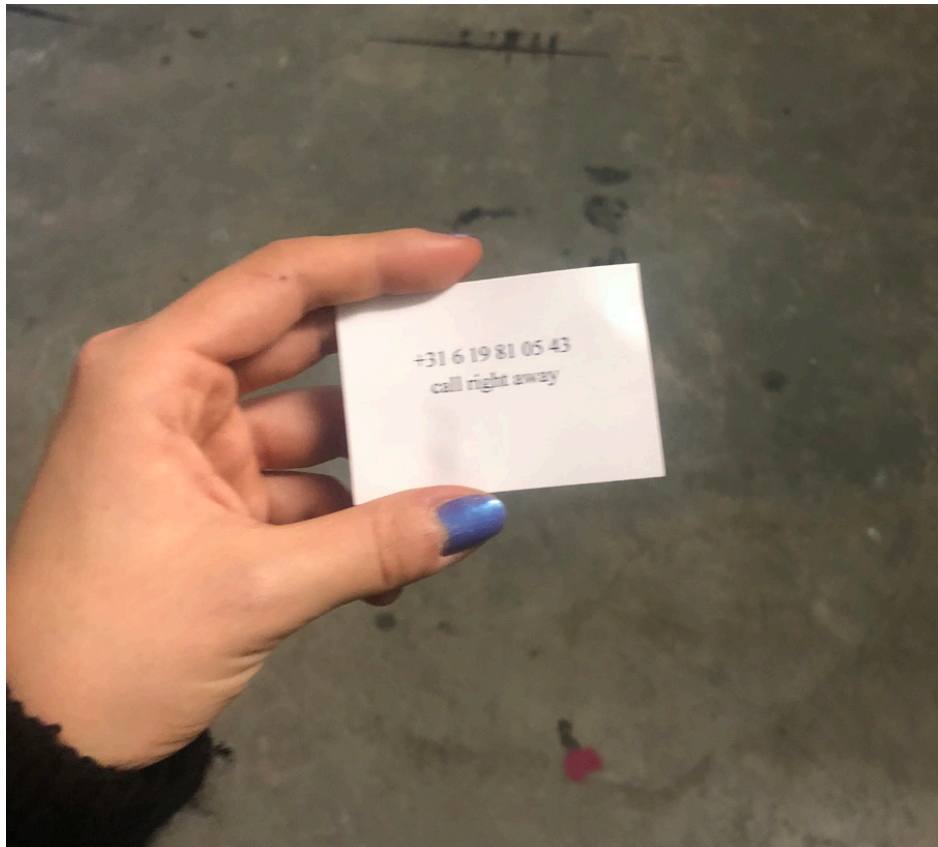
“We are here, aren’t we?” B sees a line of people forming downstairs, not far away. Falling leaves make scraping noises as the wind piles them up by the bottom of the building. The two walk toward the very end of the line.

B picks up one of the leaves, watching its veins spreading out like roots across the curly, dry, tawny surface. B starts doing this again unconsciously. Staring at details, at the surface of things, until space became distorted, time became absurd.

A has to think, it is a good way to pass the time while standing in line!

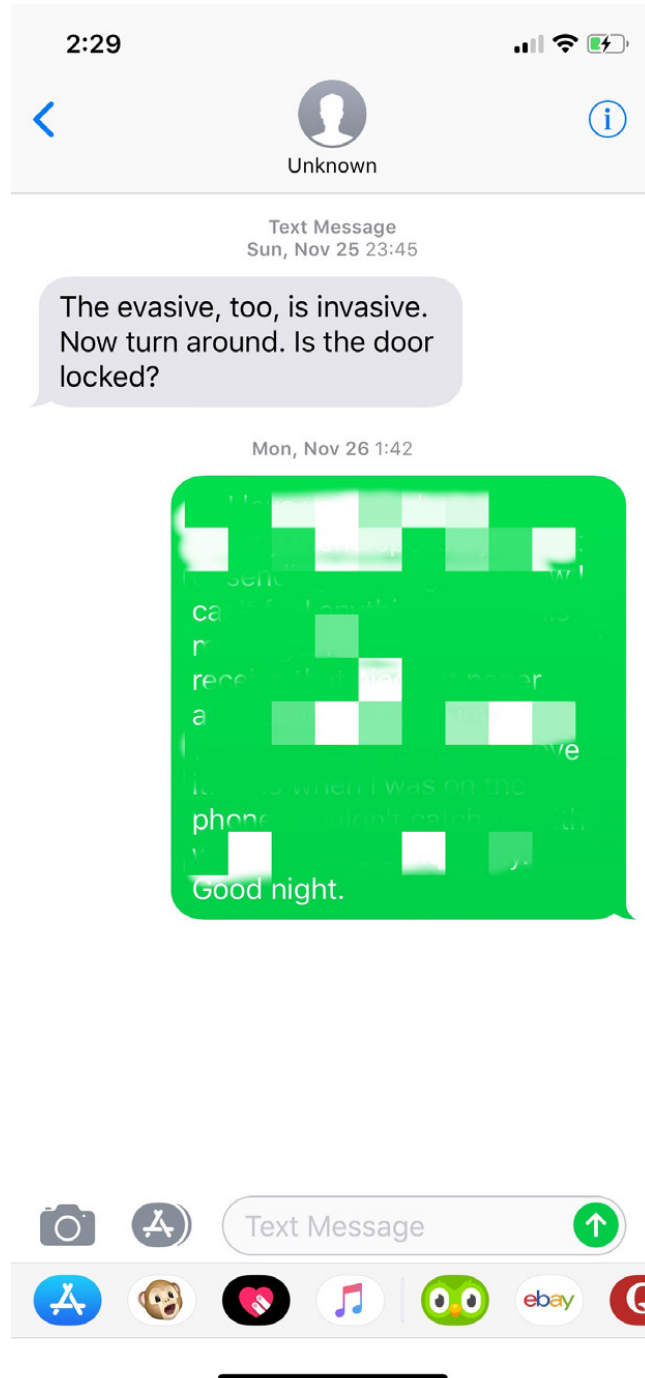
16 See [Fig.9]

17 See [Fig.8]



[Fig.8]

[Fig.8],[Fig.9] Jung66, 2018, Florence Jung. Photograph and screenshot by Mica Pan. These pictures show the note the viewer receives when entering the room, suggesting to call a number right away, and the message the viewer receives late in the night with w referring to the earlier conversation over the phone. Personal traces related to experiencing the work show an intimate participation, such as the colour of my nail and the excited reply (Contents have been kept confidential). With no official documentation, there are only photos in one's album among all the others.



[Fig.9]

Cli ff of a sec ond

When people recall the dreams, they have while asleep, they say “I remember...” as if the dream was the same as their everyday experience. Indeed, dreams and the past can both be seen as something that has happened once, is stored in memory, and can only be reconstructed afterwards. In Manifesta Journal #3 one can read the line: “...dreams are copies without an original. The original is always already beyond our existence.”¹⁸ I think this also

applies to the ‘present moment’. Whether it is through photography, video, or audio recording, the original, the present, cannot really have a complete copy; the present exists only for a moment. It is constantly disappearing. However, the present moment, rather than the content of the moment, is also unchanging. While the “present” is constantly becoming the “past”, the “future” is also constantly becoming the “present”. If we were to think of our experience in time as a 1 to 30 centimetre ruler, moving slowly from right to left, the present can be seen as an unmoving scale needle, situated in the middle, above the ruler.

If reality is to be understood as the moment that is present, a world that is visible, tangible, and perceptible, one thing that reality and life have in common is that they are both unique and unrepeatable - thus giving rise to the desire of documentation. They are the complexity and the richness threaded by a subjective mind, which itself is impossible to be duplicated and placed into outside of it. In this way, confronting the un-documentable present is like standing

on a cliff from which there is no turning back: when the future and the past are hard to grasp, there is a sense of fearless liberation in facing the present, as experienced in the work of Kaprow and Jung.

Back to the idea of the membrane: on the one hand there is the artwork, on the other hand there is life. Sometimes the membrane in between is obvious, sometimes it is blurred, and sometimes you cannot be sure what state it exists in, and Jung's work is a perfect proof of the latter. For her performance *jung38*, Jung arranged for the jury to receive envelopes from different countries every day for a week without notice, without anyone realising that this was part of her work, part of the performance.¹⁹ In such a work, it is often impossible to tell whether an event is a random part of life or an arrangement with a motive behind it. How do you view such a work when you can no longer be sure where its boundaries lie? If you miss something, will you be able to view the piece in its entirety? If the quality of a work is so close to life itself, what will happen to the state of the viewer?

There, I think, a sense of alertness, pointing to the present, arises. When you do not know what kind of surprises may happen next, when you are uncertain where something is going to appear, you are confronted with the openness and possibilities of the present. You find yourself in need to start observing everything, to start thinking about, speculating on, being alert to all the details: 'Is there someone watching us?' - Such was the question on the mind of the jury during their experience of *jung38*. This kind of observatory alertness demands much more energy than passive reception, as it involves active looking for, and relating to the things around you. This alertness may seem to require only a span

of a moment, but it is, in actuality, a sharp, gazing ability to feel the state of one's own existence and one's surroundings - as a whole. On the other hand, is it not possible for ordinary life to be viewed in this way? When we are doing the laundry at home, when we are on the bus, when we are shopping at the supermarket, how are these moments different from the alertness that Happenings and Jung's work inspire in us? Why wouldn't a kind of plain vigilance also happen in a supermarket? Can you imagine the trolley you are pushing around as a work of art? Can you imagine the crowd inside the supermarket as an audience of a performance work, the entire supermarket building as an art space? Can you be transformed into an engaged spectator immediately, at any point?

Georges Perec once pointed out that our attention is always geared towards something extraordinary, something spectacular, significant and abnormal, rather than the "infra-ordinary", a term he coined to represent the neglected ordinary life.²⁰ As Perec put it, "The daily papers talk of everything except the daily".²¹ Perec, a notable member of the experimental writing collective Oulipo, had a strong interest in and explored ways of writing about space, including the ordinary living habitat. Ordinary life, without being framed, has the status of being a "neglected boredom. This element of boredom is a constant guest to performance art, for the passage of time can be unbearable when being framed by full attention. What John Cage does in *4'33*" requires a discovery of framed nothingness: apart from those who left during its initial performance, the rest of the audience must have found something to concentrate on: the sound of life, the sound of space, a concentration that was not entirely directed at noise, but also at the state of one's mind, as if in meditation.

In Perec's work the monotony and boredom of everyday life are being carefully observed. Through this act, he re-examines every detail of life. Daily life seems to be bound up with the idea of boredom, but what is the motivation of examining this boredom? Might there be beauty in the details that we overlook, or a rediscovery of the profoundness or meaning in the ordinary? Or is boredom itself, as a state, also fighting for its justification and entitlement?

In a well-known quote of John Cage, he refers to a saying of Zen philosophy: "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. if still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting."²² Similarly, in an artist talk, Gregor Schneider states "You look at the wall, you listen to the space, you deal with the same thing over and over again and at some point, something comes of it... you do it once, twice, or months, or longer, and at some point, you can tell everyone about the wall."

In Cage's case, the notion of boredom has to do with a Zen attitude of being in life, in Schneider's, boredom and everydayness are associated with a lingering, hidden absence, something imperceptible but present. In Perec's writing, the discussion about the (infra-)ordinary entails re-viewing the everyday environment one inhabits. An act which deeply affects its inhabitants but remains overlooked by them.

Although their contexts vary, they all provoke and encourage an observational alertness to everyday life. This alertness is a source of discovery, feeling, reflection and realisation. When one

examines and views with fresh eyes all that is “boring”, habitual, common, already defined and neglected, something new can be discovered and new experience can emerge. In fact, I do not agree with the word “boredom” and its devaluation of everyday life. In re-discovering the value of plain-ness, as a state of mind on its own, a creative way of being can be formed: if one constantly refreshes the already defined with new observations, does this not mean that new spaces may be created within “already dead” meanings? And if one opens up to an observation and reflection on all the events of the everyday, does it, in a way, not turn such a perceptive self into a creator?

The difference between insignificant moments, familiar scenes of everyday life and works of art, those which are involved with the borders to the former may lie in the fact that the artists provide a frame in which these forms of everyday life are framed, for us to be felt and experienced as objects. The implication here is brutally simple: if we follow Beuys’ statement that everyone is an artist, can we also assume that all the details or moments of life around us are potential artworks? Forms and things that exist in the world are worthy of our concentrated attention, to be framed within a porous membrane in our minds, to be regarded in and out of their original context, or their whole context itself to be considered a complete expression. It is as if we, as viewers, can radiate a membrane from ourselves, in addition to be moving in and out of the membrane of artwork and everyday life, feeling its fluctuations. What if the membrane was not a personal boundary, but a potential capacity of the viewer?

If the viewer connects to their own present moment, where attention, focus and alertness arise, then reality can be turned upside down. Everything that happens around us, every act we do, everywhere we look, every time we think, may be attributed a potential meaning. The things touched by the membrane radiate from ourselves while we move. Feelings, understandings, experiences and interpretations can be activated however ordinary and negligible. The artist creates a work of art and presents it to the public, an act that marks them as creators. Perhaps as viewers, we can now consider ourselves as well in an active role, or even, consider the state of viewing, similarly, as a state of creating. Such an awareness may allow us to experience the “real” in a more nuanced, refined way. “Real” is the authentic awareness generated by being fully connected to the present surroundings through the subjective mind. If there is a boundary between life and art, now it appears fully blurred, mere subject to one’s own perception.

18 Viktor Mazin, “Dreaming Museum” in: *Exhibition as a Dream*, p.242.

19 Florence Jung, *about_what_I_do*, p.12.

20 Georges Perec, *Species of spaces and Other Pieces* (London: penguin books, 2008), p209.

21 Ibid.

22 John Cage, *Silence* (Hanover: Wesleyan university press, 1973), p93.

Con clus ion

A particular, strange thought struck B: B feels like being present in every sentence of this whole body of text at the same time. Every time the letter “B” appears in a word, B seems to wake up.

B tells A about this thought.

A says, “I heard that ‘Focusing on one point is concentration’ and ‘Focusing on all points at the same time is meditation’.²³ You know, both everywhere and nowhere is the point of focus, the mind is in all places at once.”

It is a bit hard for B to imagine, but it seems similar to the feeling B has. “Wouldn’t that be tiring?”

A shrugs, “You tell me.”

B thinks about the feeling a little more carefully.

A says, “I don’t think it would be an exhausting state.”

At this point B loses all grasp, as if this feeling had just been a sudden inspiration. “There seems to be a distance between ‘knowing’ and ‘experiencing’. Although I ‘know it can be like that’, it’s another thing to ‘feel it that way’.”

A asks, “What about now? Don’t these ‘B’s keep coming up as the text continues? “

Then suddenly, A has an idea: “Ah, let’s play a game, shall we? Let me tell you a story. From now on, each time ‘B’ appears, you have to imagine a continuous, focused yet unfocused presence of yourself.”

For a second B doesn’t really understand what that sentence means, but A continues regardless, without waiting for B to respond.

“Here we go:

One morning I wake up from **bed**.

I lift the quilt and the sunlight outside the window is a little harsh.

I reach for my phone on the side and my not-yet-awake face is reflected on the screen.

I swipe the screen open while vaguely recalling my dream.

I get up from the **bed**, walk to the sink and pick up a cup, squeeze toothpaste on my tooth**b**rush and start **b**rushing my teeth.

The cold toothpaste quickly turns into foam in my mouth.

I rinse the foam from my mouth with water and spit it out, milky white, then start to wash my face.

I open the window, the moisture on my face touches the air, it feels refreshing.

I take a deep **b**reath in.

The air has a faint smell of grass that travels through my nose into my lungs.

When I exhale, a different kind of air spreads out from my nose.

There is still a very light taste of toothpaste in my mouth.

I walk over to the mirror and look at my face, pondering inside my **sub**conscious **ab**out what I am going to wear today.

I reach up and run my hand through my hair.

Suddenly, there is a gust of wind outside the window and the window frame hits the wall with a **b**ang.

My feet move, I walk over to the window to pull it **b**ack, just when I see a small, dried orange-ish leaf drifting in and I **b**end down to pick it up and **b**low it gently out of the window.

It falls downwards quickly, spinning as it does so, till the wind returns and takes it off the ground once more.

It disappears.

I was looking at the little leaf like I looked at my tooth**b**rush, like when I was lying on my **b**ed, walking on my feet, looking at myself in the mirror.

I notice, I seem to look a little different today than I did yesterday, **but** surely, I can't really **be** different, right?

I am constantly walking, passing by, looking at things, like in this very moment. It's like **breathing**. Even if I'm not aware, I'm **breathing**. Even when I'm sleeping, I'm **breathing**. When I'm **biking**, I'm **breathing**. **But** I don't need to know that I'm **breathing**, which sounds kind of strange, as there is no point in thinking that.

You know what? A lot of times I also have inexplic**able** thoughts without much context or reason. For example, I'm walking down the street and suddenly I imagine there's someone rolling on the ground in front of me, or, the sound of opening a can lid echoing on the wall with a purple trace.

Usually, they are neutral things, sometimes funny things, sometimes scary, occasionally erotic. **But** I soon forget them, I always do, I have forgotten too many things, similar to those thousands of random dreams that I will never recall ever again

23 B.K.S.Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), p37-38.

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