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Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids," by the LA Art Girls

Donna Conwell

During two days a rectangular structure of ice blocks (measuring about 30 feet long, 10 wide and 8 high) will be built at the Getty Center. The walls will be broken, dismantled and re-purposed. The remains of these activities will be left to melt.¹

On 26 April 2008, as temperatures in Los Angeles soared, members of the all-female art collective the LA Art Girls (LAAG) gathered at the Getty Center's lower terrace sculpture garden and constructed a thirty feet long by ten feet wide and eight feet high rectangular enclosure of ice.² Around the city nine additional ice structures appeared over the course of the day in such diverse locations as Memorial Park, Pasadena; a parking structure at California State University, Los Angeles; Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The mysterious and incongruous appearance of these ephemeral edifices was the result of a partnership between the Getty Research Institute (GRI), the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, which worked together to reinvent one of renowned postwar artist Allan Kaprow's most ambitious happenings, *Fluids*.

First realized in October 1967, *Fluids* was originally commissioned by the Pasadena Art Museum with groups of volunteers led by Kaprow constructing ice structures at locations throughout the Los Angeles area, which were left to melt (fig. 1). The 2008 manifestation was part of a citywide initiative in which Los Angeles-area art schools, academic institutions, arts organizations, museums, and artist-run spaces were invited to reinvent a diverse selection of Kaprow's happenings; these events were held on the occasion of the first international traveling retrospective of Kaprow's work, hosted by the Museum of Contemporary Art, and the publication of *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life*, a volume documenting the artist's life and work.

The reinvention of Allan Kaprow's happenings in 2008 is one of a number of recent exhibitions in which artists have revisited and reconstructed their own or other artists' performance work from the 1960s and 1970s. In London, the Whitechapel Gallery show *A Short History of Performance* (2002, 2003, 2005) included re-presentations of historically significant performances by such iconic artists as Carolee Schneeman, who restaged her work *Meat Joy* (1964); while *A Little Bit of History Repeated* (2001) at the

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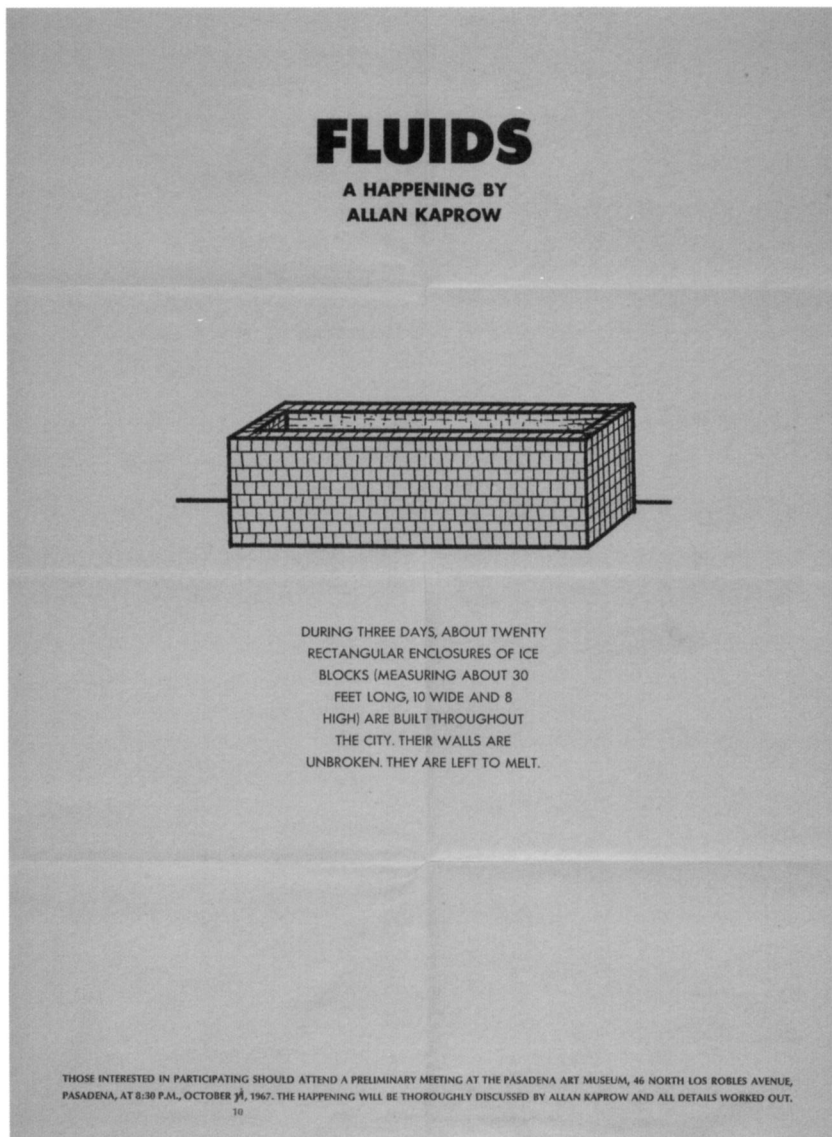


Fig. 1. Allan Kaprow (American, 1927–2006). Poster for *Fluids* (with score), 1967. The Getty Research Institute (9800063)

Kunst-Werke Berlin featured the reexamination of classic performances by a younger generation of international artists. Most recently, as part of Pacific Standard Time (2011–12), a citywide curatorial initiative focused on the diverse contributions of Los Angeles artists to the postwar art scene, artists employed a range of approaches to revisit historically significant performance and public art works from the region during a week-long festival.³

Allan Kaprow has played a vital role in framing ongoing debates about the theoretical implications of restaging performance art. While Kaprow understood that archival documentation alone could never convey the experiential and transitory nature of his

happenings in the same way as live performance, he also believed that “the past can only be created (not recreated).”⁴ Kaprow dismissed the idea that his happenings could be precisely reconstructed and reenacted in the present; instead he claimed that his work should be “reinvented.” Each reinvention would retain the core metaphor of his original work but would unfold in an unpredictable fashion in the present where a new context and a distinct group of participants would generate fresh meanings and associations.⁵

Fluids had been reinvented a number of times prior to April 2008, but this was the first time that the happening was performed in its original location.⁶ Los Angeles afforded unique opportunities—*Fluids* organizers were able to collaborate with the Union Ice Company, the business that provided ice for Kaprow’s original 1967 performance, as well as access extensive project documentation in the archive of the artist’s papers held by the Getty Research Institute—but it also presented challenges. Would restaging *Fluids* in its original location prompt organizers to closely mimic archival documentation? Would attempts at verisimilitude overshadow the interpretive impulses of those involved and subvert Kaprow’s directive to reinvent his work?

Overflow, LAAG’s contribution to the 2008 reinvention of *Fluids*, unfolded over a two-day period. On day one, Art Girls worked with Union Ice Company workers to construct an ice structure, and on day two they collaborated with volunteers to repurpose ice around the Getty campus and produce over forty planned and impromptu performances.⁷ LAAG took on the concept of reinvention in its broadest sense by creating a project that was both a historical homage to Kaprow’s happening as well as a new work that playfully and critically interrogated key themes raised by the original performance and its re-creation. These themes include the relationship between documentation and live performance; the institutionalization of Kaprow’s happenings in the museum; Kaprow’s importance in the field of participatory art practice; and the role of context in shifting the meaning of historical performance works.

LAAG began their project by following Kaprow’s directive to “look at the documentation and reinvent the piece.”⁸ After scrutinizing archival holdings on *Fluids* in the Allan Kaprow papers at the GRI, LAAG realized that although almost all published photographic documentation of *Fluids* depict Kaprow and burly men lifting heavy blocks of ice, women also actively participated in the construction of the ice structure. **The reinvention of *Fluids* by an all-female collective** became a way to disrupt a dominant narrative perpetuated by the selective dissemination and distribution of documentation that had erased women’s contributions to the original happening. LAAG continued to critically examine the ideologies behind the omission of the role of women in *Fluids* in their reinvention as they cleverly debunked the idea that women are too frail to carry heavy blocks of ice by participating in rigorous training sessions in preparation for the event.⁹

The Los Angeles iteration of *Fluids* unfolded on the grounds of a number of local arts institutions; as such it ran the risk of being perceived as an uncritical celebration of the institutionalization of Kaprow’s happenings, and performance art more broadly, and of belying the spontaneity and radical nature of the original work. A self-described

“un artist,” Kaprow had a critical yet complicated attitude toward the museum. In “What is a Museum?” (1967), a dialogue between the artist and Robert Smithson, Kaprow states “the museum tends to exclude any kind of life-forcing position [...] Life in the museum is like making love in a cemetery.”¹⁰ Kaprow sought to break away from the predominately object-based art of the museum and instead produce participatory situations in spaces not traditionally associated with art making; spaces where art and life might become indistinguishable.¹¹ Day one of *Overflow* unfolded at the Getty Center’s lower terrace sculpture garden, a picturesque location overlooking Los Angeles, which is populated with such canonical permanent sculptures as George Rickey’s kinetic *Three Squares Gyrotory* (1972) and Mark di Suvero’s *Gandydancer’s Dream* (1988). This location, although not LAAG’s first choice as a site for their reinvention, provided an ideal context in which to construct a parodic aestheticization of *Fluids* and critique the institutionalization of Kaprow’s art—a key element of the collective’s original proposal.¹² While Union Ice Company workers and LAAG built the structure, Getty conservators and curators convened to assess the risk to nearby sculptures, wrapping works in blankets to protect them from falling ice, and Getty security staff patrolled the area, barring members of the public from entering the construction zone (fig. 2). These institutionally sanctioned practices combined with the impermanent beauty of the structure-as-object served to parody the careful reconstruction of *Fluids* as historic aesthetic artifact.

Fig. 2. Audience and LA Art Girls watching ice structure melt. LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow’s “Fluids,”* 26 April 2008





Fig. 3. An LA Art Girl stands on ice and impersonates Allan Kaprow. LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids,"* 26 April 2008

LAAG actively lampooned the institutionalization of Kaprow's happenings and the practice of revisiting historic performance more broadly through a number of smaller-scale performances they developed as part of their reinvention. An LAAG member, dressed as Allan Kaprow, posed with ice blocks and transported blocks of ice down to the Getty's lower parking area (fig. 3), while other LAAG participants gave away souvenir cups of ice to Getty visitors.

With *Overflow*, LAAG also sought to highlight and celebrate the participation and conviviality of the original *Fluids* (1967), during which volunteers not only collaborated on the construction of ice structures but also enacted impromptu performances, placing flowers between melting ice blocks and **throwing flares into enclosures that emitted a coral-colored glow**. Through his happenings Kaprow sought to eliminate the passive presence of an audience—a theatrical convention—and instead promote the active involvement of “willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do.”¹³

On day one of *Overflow*, LAAG members and Union Ice workers were responsible for building the structure, while the event audience observed from the sidelines and were not permitted to participate (see fig. 2). While this separation humorously exaggerates the aestheticization of *Fluids* in the museum context, it also reflects the complicated realities of producing a happening in a rule-bound institution vulnerable to litigious complaints. While Kaprow was able to construct ice structures around Los Angeles for *Fluids* (1967) with relative ease, LAAG had to deal with lawyers and risk managers to negotiate complex contracts, agreements, and releases of liability—factors that precluded the possibility of involving audience members in an ad hoc way in the construction of the ice structure.

On day two of *Overflow*, LAAG collaborated with recruited participants and the general public on a series of micro-performances that emphasized Kaprow's importance in the field of participatory art practice.¹⁴ Two Art Girls invited visitors to join them in placing a piece of ice between a part of their bodies—hands, feet, or legs—and letting it melt, recalling Kaprow's later, more intimate “activities” performances such as *Time Pieces* (1973) and *Warm Ups* (1975) (fig. 4). Art Girls calling themselves members of the Glacial Risk Management Institute collected samples and conducted analysis of melting ice from different sites, sharing their findings with interested passersby. Other performances comically explored the difficulties of reanimating the participatory qualities of Kaprow's original happening in a museum setting. A member of LAAG created a play area from ice covered in plastic where youngsters could construct structures out of translucent building blocks, humorously underscoring and subverting Getty risk managers' dictum that children on campus should not touch ice. Another Art Girl provided members of the public with a simulated opportunity to join in and document their participation by having their photograph taken holding an imitation ice block in front of a backdrop of a partially built ice structure (fig. 5).

Fig. 4. An LA Art Girl and a member of the public melt a piece of ice using the warmth of their bodies. LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids,"* 27 April 2008

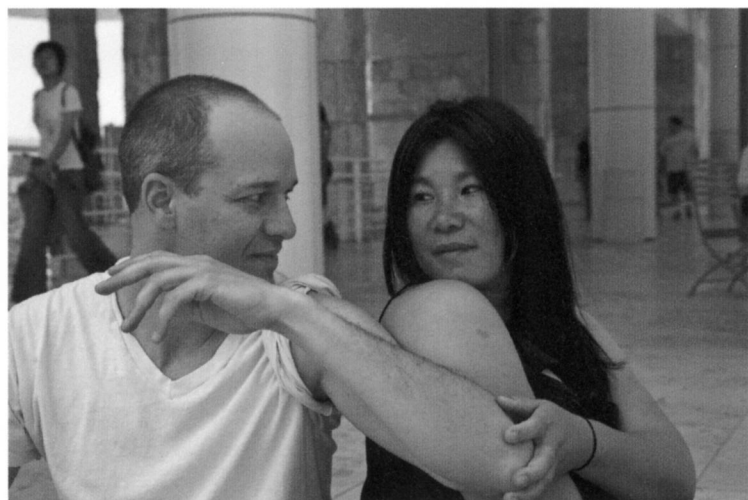




Fig. 5. An LA Art Girl dressed as a penguin poses with an imitation ice block in front of a fake backdrop of a partially built ice structure. LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids,"* 27 April 2008

In revealing the challenges of producing a participatory artwork like *Fluids* in the museum context in 2008, LAAG demonstrated how historical performance art can never be reenacted with precise verisimilitude since changes in context transform the meaning of the original work. LAAG further explored how new locations, time frames, and institutional directives can shift and reinvent the significance of original performance work by examining the environmental implications of constructing a large structure made of ice in a drought-prone region like Southern California. In 1967 the modern US environmental movement was in its infancy; by 2008, however, the potential catastrophic effects of global climate change and the importance of conserving precious natural resources had become widely acknowledged in California and beyond. Many LAAG performances addressed environmental sustainability as Art Girls redistributed melting ice around the Getty campus, placing blocks in flower beds, fountains, and the Central Garden stream. They also employed humor as a strategy for resistance and transgression. One LAAG, dressed as a penguin, carried an ice cooler around the campus, while another Art Girl pushed a stroller with a diaper-clad block of ice around the Getty grounds.

It was perhaps external events, however, that mostly clearly demonstrated the important role of context in reinventing Kaprow's work. Built during one of Los Angeles's hottest days on record, the completed *Fluids* ice structure lasted little more than half an hour before collapsing in spectacular fashion as blocks of ice spilled out over the lower terrace sculpture garden, narrowly missing members of LAAG, Union Ice Company



Fig. 6. Close-up view of collapsing ice structure. LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids,"* 26 April 2008

workers, and the adjacent sculptures (fig. 6). Originally, LAAG had intended to dismantle and repurpose ice directly from the structure itself, but it melted much more quickly than expected and LAAG had to request a second delivery of ice blocks from the Union Ice Company. These unpredictable events made it clear that Kaprow's happening would always retain its radical quality of contingency wherever it was reinvented. Kaprow's simple task-based score for *Fluids* meant that changes in context, personnel, location, and historical moment would always produce a happening, even in the rule-bound confines of the arts institution. Happenings would always be "events that, put simply happen."¹⁵

Overflow demonstrates that Kaprow's concept of reinvention is a productive and vital model for revisiting historically significant performance art work—a model that artists will continue to draw inspiration from as they explore their relationship to their own and other artists' ephemeral legacies.

Donna Conwell is associate curator at Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California. She was project specialist in the Department of Architecture and Contemporary Art at the Getty Research Institute from 2008 to 2011, where she cocurated *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow's "Fluids,"* by the LA Art Girls.

Notes I would like to thank LA Art Girl Karen Dunbar and editors of the *Getty Research Journal* for their perceptive and constructive feedback in revising this essay.

1. LA Art Girls, Score for *Overflow*, Getty Research Institute, public event recordings, 2002–2011 (1A40002). This score is a reinterpretation of Kaprow's score for *Fluids* (1967), which states "During

three days, about twenty rectangular enclosures of ice blocks (measuring about 30 feet long, 10 feet wide and 8 high) are built throughout the city. Their walls are unbroken. They are left to melt.” Allan Kaprow, Poster for *Fluids* (with score), 1967, Getty Research Institute, Allan Kaprow papers (9800063).

2. LAAG comprises over thirty members and evolved from informal gatherings and studio visits, which started in 2004, as a means of encouraging substantive discourse on contemporary art. LA Art Girls seek to provide inspiration, support, dialogue, and feedback to one another. The group strives to be a voluntary and nonhierarchical gathering of practices. LAAG has produced several collaborative projects together and members participate in projects on a self-selecting basis. The Art Girls involved in *Overflow* include Stephanie Allespach, Tricia Lawless (formerly Tricia Avant), Krista Chael, Sydney Croskery, Jackie Dunbar, Karen Dunbar, Angela Ellsworth, Phyllis Green, Micol Hebron, Parichard Holm, Leigh McCarthy, Nancy Popp, Sarah Riley, Felis Stella, Ten Terrell, and Marjan K. Vayghan.

3. Pacific Standard Time is an initiative developed by the Getty Research Institute and the Getty Foundation in partnership with multiple institutions in Southern California, which culminated in over forty exhibitions celebrating the diverse contributions of Los Angeles artists to the postwar art scene. A Pacific Standard Time performance and public art festival took place in Los Angeles in January 2012.

4. Allan Kaprow, “Creating 1957,” unpublished statement, 1990, Getty Research Institute, Allan Kaprow papers (9800063).

5. In the late 1980s, local and international arts organizations and individuals began to invite Kaprow to revisit his past work. Seeking to avoid the ossification of this practice in the museum and recognizing that he would not be able to oversee future restagings of his work after his death, Kaprow chose the term *reinvention* as a way his work could be sustained in his absence. Kaprow’s approach differs from that of other performance artists such as Marina Abramović, who argues that it is possible to preserve historical performance works by carefully re-creating them in the museum context. See Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010).

6. In 2005 participants from the University of Art and Design HGK Basel, Basel University, and Hauser & Wirth Zurich London generated three ice structures in front of the Basel exhibition center, on the roof of a parking structure, and inside the Kunstmuseum Basel; in 2007 students from the Cooper Union School of Art, New York, built an ice enclosure in front of the Foundation Building as part of the performance festival Performa 07; and in 2008 performing arts students from Goldsmiths, University of London, constructed a similar structure at Tate Modern’s river entrance.

7. The title *Overflow* evolved from LAAG’s interest in exploring ideas about excess and fluidity in relation to their reinvention of Kaprow’s *Fluids*. It was serendipitous that the original location the group selected for the ice structure was “overflow” parking for the Getty. Art Girl Karen Dunbar suggests that the title also relates to LAAG’s consideration of “Kaprow’s experimentation with and forays into mediated events, including live television broadcasts of happenings, and the ability to transmit the unique qualities and atmosphere of a creative and social event through a mediated form.” LA Art Girls, *Overflow: A Reinvention of Allan Kaprow’s “Fluids,”* Project Proposal, December 2007, Getty Research Institute, public event recordings, 2002–2011 (IA40002), 4. Further references to this document will be cited as *Overflow* proposal, followed by page number. LAAG’s project included a live video feed broadcast from the Getty website. Dunbar states that for “*Overflow* there was a desire for an excess of activities happening over time (beyond what any one audience member might typically be able to experience) and an expansion of potential audience via the webcam live feed” (e-mail correspondence between author and Karen Dunbar, 23 April 2011). For Dunbar, this aspect of the project responds to the highly mediated environment we live in today—surrounded by an excess of information—in contrast to 1967 when *Fluids* was first realized (e-mail, 23 April 2011).

8. Kaprow passed on these instructions to curators Stephanie Rosenthal and Eva Meyer-Hermann, who developed the curatorial concept for the traveling exhibition *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* in

close collaboration with the artist. For more information on how the curators developed the concept of the exhibition in collaboration with Kaprow, see Stephanie Rosenthal, "Agency for Action," in Eva Meyer-Hermann, Andrew Perchuk, and Stephanie Rosenthal, eds., *Allan Kaprow—Art as Life* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008).

9. During the reinvention one Art Girl dressed as a female bodybuilder and another carried a dumbbell with large blocks of ice instead of weights. LAAG's original project proposal states: "In response to the machismo of the most-frequently reproduced photos of *Fluids* depicting bare-chested young men heaving ice blocks in the hot sun, the LA Art Girls will create and document a physical and mental training regime for all confirmed participants in *Overflow*, including LAAG and volunteers. We will strive to develop our core strength, upper body strength, and leg strength for the placement of ice blocks" (*Overflow* proposal, 3).

10. Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson, "What is a Museum? A Dialogue between Allan Kaprow and Robert Smithson" (1967), in Jack D. Fam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 44.

11. Later in life Kaprow came to appreciate the important role of the museum in preserving his legacy, and prior to his death in 2006 he agreed to a retrospective of his work, which would travel internationally.

12. LAAG originally proposed constructing four ninety-degree ice corners, each eight feet tall, at different sites around the Getty Campus. These ice corners would be visible to members of the public at various vantage points. As stated in LAAG's original proposal, "the parenthetical corners [would] function as ruins and artifacts that visually frame the Getty as a site of historical incorporation of Kaprow's work, while simultaneously acknowledging that within the institution, his work is literally incomplete" (*Overflow* proposal, 4). LAAG planned to recruit Union Ice Company workers to construct the corners since they wanted to treat the structures as cultural artifacts within a museum that require careful care and handling. In addition to the ice corners, LAAG proposed building the entire rectangular structure described by Kaprow's score for *Fluids* at the Leo Baeck Temple parking lot—a space used by the Getty Center for overflow parking. The parking lot would also "be a site to explore the social aspects of Kaprow's practice" (*Overflow* proposal, 5) through a series of activities including food, live music, dancing, and play. The contrast between the impromptu and spontaneous activities at the Leo Baeck Temple parking lot and the formally exhibited ice corners would highlight and challenge the institutionalization of Kaprow's happening in the museum. LAAG and the Getty agreed to move *Overflow* to the Getty Center campus after discovering that the Leo Baeck Temple parking lot would not be accessible on the planned dates, and that the installation of the four corners would be prohibitively expensive and logistically complicated. The final sites where *Overflow* unfolded were determined after lengthy negotiations between LAAG and Getty representatives. LAAG originally requested the GRI lawn and the south promontory as sites to build the *Fluids* ice structure. These sites were deemed off-limits due to Getty security and fire regulations. Getty representatives eventually provided the Getty Center's lower terrace sculpture garden for the realization of the ice structure. Likewise, sites for the repurposing of ice, methods of transport, and repurposing activities on day two of the reinvention had to be approved by Getty risk managers and lawyers.

13. Allan Kaprow, "Notes on the Elimination of the Audience" (1966), in Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 102–4. Passersby might have stumbled across groups constructing ice structures in and around Los Angeles during *Fluids* (1967), but the primary audience for the piece was still the participants—audience and participants were one and the same.

14. *Fluids* (1967), and Kaprow's oeuvre more broadly, is regarded as an important precursor to the participatory art practices of the 1990s and 2000s. See Claire Bishop, *Participation*, 102–4.

15. Allan Kaprow, "Happenings in the New York Scene" (1961), in Jeff Kelley, ed., *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1993), 16.