

Blank Slate
Toronto, ON

Life=Art=Life

by Daniel Baird

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In a prophetic essay from 1958 entitled “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” Allan Kaprow wrote “Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists.” He then continued, “Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents.” Though Jackson Pollock was a consummate painter, his explosive, experimental approach to making art was liberating to artists and theorists like Kaprow because it shifted painting away from the pure, composed pictorial field toward a zone of contingent incidents, ignoring the classical boundaries of the canvas and blurring the relationship between art and artist. Kaprow put his finger on a powerful tendency in some of the most fearless art being made in the ruinous wake of the Second World War, in places as disparate as New York, Dusseldorf, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and Vienna. Under the influence of Pollock, Marcel Duchamp, and Dada artists like Kurt Schwitters, these artists sought to undermine the historically freighted and inert concept of the “art object,” the idea of art as something to be passively contemplated, and pushed outward toward what Kaprow termed “non art” – the gestures and debris of everyday human life.

What does the paradoxical formula “Life=Art=Life,” chosen by Toronto based artist and recent Governor General’s Award recipient Istvan Kantor as the title of a late Winter weekend of performances and discussions, actually mean? Do we know what “life” or “everyday life” refers to at this point, much less “art”? The dizzying acceleration of the development of both technology and consumer capitalism in the decade following the Second World War resulted in the final destruction of anything resembling traditional cultures in industrialized countries, and in an unprecedented alienation from the objects and actions which constitute our daily lives. For the first time in history people lived and worked among things made by people they did not know, in places they were unfamiliar with, and often functioned according to principles they did not understand; they relied for their survival on an increasingly elaborate infrastructure of transportation, communication, and finance governed by institutions they had little knowledge of and no access to: people’s basic reality became, in a way, alien to them. And this situation has only become more extreme with the advent of the digital information age. In this context, the

concept of “life” or “everyday life” became problematic and politically charged, which is why Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre wrote a multi-volume work entitled *The Critique of Everyday Life*, and Situationist theorist Raoul Vaneigem wrote book called *The Revolution in Everyday Life*. When Robert Filliou claimed that “Art is what makes life more interesting than art,” and Joseph Beuys proclaimed that “everybody is an artist,” meaning that every human activity can become a work of art, they meant among other things that alienated everyday reality needs to be transformed, reenacted by the imagination. The formula “Life=Art=Life” demands that its very terms be subject to constant scrutiny.

Upon entering the Karen Schreiber Gallery on the evening of February 20, guests still getting glasses of wine, casually chatting and settling in, painter and performance artist Louise Lilifeldt sat bolt upright at a table, gazing out as though in a trance as she rhythmically stabbed the point of a long kitchen knife between her fingers. Born in South Africa to a family of mixed ethnicity, Lilifeldt’s work often explores the complexities of race, gender, and identity. Her performance for *Life=Art=Life* was unsettling in part because of its intense privacy. Dead silent, her body motionless except for her arm, her gaze blind and inward, she seemed enclosed inside her own space. Yet the sharp ticking of the knife on the wooden table brought the performance back into the present of the room and the viewer became conscious of it as both a game and a dare: one waited for the blade to slice into one of her fingers. The knife traced the outline of her hand, defining its shape, and, as Lilifeldt pointed out in the discussion, the act of stabbing between her fingers is a kind of discipline of the self and body, requiring both concentration and trust. If Lilifeldt’s performance was an assertion of private boundaries, of the self as violently circumscribed by its division from what is outside it, then Quebec City performance artist, editor and curator Richard Martel’s work addresses the politics of public boundaries. Martel’s performance style is grand, mocking, and ambiguous. He stretched lengths of tape onto the floor, filling and emptying glasses of water as he went. As he shifted and reshifted the pieces of tape, random snatches of pop must burst from a ghetto blaster. In discussion, the slyly elusive Martel pointedly refused to interpret his own work, preferring to allow viewers to follow their own chains of association. Nonetheless, in the current global political climate, it is impossible not to think of Martel’s performance as alluding to the sinister boundaries of power: between states, between the wealthy and the poor, between the powerful and the helpless. These lines are at once arbitrary and continuously shifting.

Opening night discussions continued on late into the night at the wonderfully seedy Polish Hall around the corner from the Karen Schreiber Gallery. Dancer Marlee Cargill performed an intense, erotic duet with that archaic piece of bureaucratic technology, the filing cabinet, and Ulysses Castellano, decked out as a kind of queer gaucho, performed a mocking, provocative stand-up act. And the revelries were accompanied throughout by DJ Short Attention Span’s pulsating, rapid-fire beats, and the convulsive visions of Istvan Kantor’s Machine Sex Action Group’s videos.

The idea behind all of the Blank Slate events at the Karen Schreiber Gallery was to promote – even provoke – open, democratic discussion of art and culture to a diverse audience. At this moment of what might be thought of as a cultural and historical crisis, it is crucial to keep in mind that the issues raised by art are not only relevant to an elite few, but are central to culture and politics as a whole. With that in mind, for the second night of *Life=Art=Life*, performance

art legend Tehching Hsieh and artist, art historian, and activist Kristine Stiles presented their work and ideas for what proved an evening of passionate conversation.

I suggested that the “Life=Art=Life” formula assumes both a radical questioning of the concept of “art” and of “life,” and that this questioning is by nature a political one. No one has pursued these questions with greater purity and intensity than Tehching Hsieh. Shortly after moving from Taiwan to New York as an illegal immigrant. Hsieh began his legendary series of five one year performances, all carried out between 1978 and 1986, which were remarkable for their discipline, their rigor, and their strange poetry; thereafter Hsieh ceremoniously repudiated art. A small, compact, reserved man, his English all but unintelligible, Hsieh’s presentation of his work had the quiet yet sublime ferocity of his performances.

In Hsieh’s first one year performance (1978-1979), he confined himself in a cage in his loft in downtown Manhattan, sequestering himself from human contact or diversion: without reading material, without music, without conversation, he silently marked off the days on the wall, photographing himself each day in a blank style reminiscent of passport or police photos. This first performance involved an intense confrontation with solitude and sustained introspection in a society governed by distraction. For his second one year performance (1980-1981), Hsieh punched a time card hourly twenty-four hours a day, documenting each time he punched the card with a single shot from a movie camera mounted in the corner of the room. Hsieh had each day’s card confirmed by an independent observer, and all his failures were meticulously tabulated – when he was five minutes late, when he slept through the hour. Hsieh’s performance was a grueling and literal exploration of the mechanized concept of time in a society obsessed with the economically productive use of time: it is telling, and ironical, that the film of the entire year lasts only six minutes. Hsieh’s most affecting performance, I believe, took place between 1981 and 1982, when he spent an entire year without entering a building. Hsieh slept at various locations along the East River and in Central Park, documenting the year with photographs as well as detailed maps of his movements. Taken as a whole – his 1983-1984 was a collaboration with Linda Montana called “Art/Life” in which he remained tied to Montana by an eight foot rope, and in 1985-1986 he spent the year not making art – Hsieh’s performances investigate central concepts of life: solitude, time, home and homelessness, human relationships. According to Hsieh, the one year format was meant to mirror the natural cycle of life and the seasons. The directness and simplicity of these makes them both uncanny and brutal: they seem to reveal what human life at bottom is.

“Today it seems to us that performance art, as a rebellious and revolutionary force, has completed its mandate by infiltrating every aspect of life,” Istvan Kantor writes in his brief introduction to *Life=Art=Life*. “If it is true that performance art, as a social engine of change, has accomplished its mission,” he continues, “then what is its place in current artistic activities and everyday life?” A professor of art history at Duke University, Kristine Stiles has researched some of the most radical and iconoclastic art of the past fifty years. Stiles is principally interested in the relationship between trauma and art as an expressive, cathartic, and transformative force, and her presentation intertwined her own complex and sometimes troubled personal history with her work as an artist and as an art historian and theorist. A lot of socially radical work, whether in performance art or other genres, has also been graphically violent and destructive: one thinks immediately of the Gutai artists in post-war Japan, the Vienna Actionists,

and for that matter much of the work of Istvan Kantor. Violence and destructiveness in art has typically been defended as necessary in order to unmask the violence perpetrated by the state, and also as a means to purge the traumas of history and to clear a space for more positive forms of freedom. The argument Stiles sketched in her talk, however, suggested that violence exhibited in art, rather than being cathartic, actually perpetuates trauma, transmits the wounds of history. For Stiles, if art is to be a generator of change, it needs to critically address society without replicating society's traumas.

Stiles' discussion, however, left us with the question Kantor posed to begin with: what is the place of performance art in current artistic activities and everyday life? Hsieh's answer is characteristically uncompromising and absolute: that art should dissolve into life without remainder. For Hsieh's final non-performance, between 1986 and 1999, he announced that quite simply he had remained alive. This is indeed a much more radical view than that expressed, say, in the later writings of Allan Kaprow, where everyday activities like shaving or eating are transformed into art by an act of heightened attention: art and life, art and non-art are very close here, but the distinction still exists. Nonetheless, Hsieh's point of view, like his work itself, is highly personal and is not meant to be prescriptive. Some light was shed on this issue in roundtable discussions with the young Regina based performance collective One Night Only (Adam Budd, Felipe Diaz, Blair Fornwald, Tanis Keiner, Tammy McGrath, and Anna Scott), whose performance and installation "Home Repair," hosted by Fado, had just taken place in Toronto. Perhaps, these artists suggested, the task of art today is more modest and lyrical – to illuminate things in everyday life that are otherwise overlooked. Perhaps the vaulting, revolutionary visions of an earlier generation of performance artists are not appropriate to our moment; perhaps those ambitions were, as Kristine Stiles implied, misguided and even dangerous to begin with. Istvan Kantor, however, persisted in connecting the aims of performance with the tradition of anti-authoritarian radicalism associated with Situationism and the barricades of May 1968 in France, and there was a sense that the point of view of One Night Only was passive and conservative. What is the point of art if its ambitions are not extreme, rebellious, revolutionary, transformative, crazy?

It is, I think, appropriate that the core question posed by *Life=Art=Life* is essentially unanswerable, that an entire weekend of intense conversation ended with a question mark, a group of spent participants, and a lot of empty wine bottles. The concepts of "life" and "art" are in dialogue with one another, and they change as reality changes. And today, reality changes fast. The conversation is by nature infinite, though we of course are not.