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THE AUTHOR IS ABSENT: TOWARD EMERGENT NARRATIVE EVENT ENVIRONMENTS

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THE AUTHOR IS ABSENT:
TOWARD EMERGENT NARRATIVE EVENT ENVIRONMENTS

by

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B.A. Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, 2012

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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TOWARD EMERGENT NARRATIVE EVENT ENVIRONMENTS

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Science

Approved by:

Robert Spahr, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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TITLE: THE AUTHOR IS ABSENT: TOWARD EMERGENT NARRATIVE EVENT ENVIRONMENTS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Robert Spahr

Creating an emergent narrative or one which is not predetermined by the controlling figure of the game designer, but instead frees the audience to guide and control the story has been a major interest in the field game design studies of virtual world storytelling. “The Author Is Absent” is an art project that interprets an emergent narrative problem through the prism of performance arts, and mainly the happenings of Alan Kaprow. The following paper provides a theoretical groundwork and some historical examples of previous attempts in the same tradition. It then goes on to elucidate the formal aspects of the work, its mechanics and the results of several attempts at creating an emergent narrative. It traces the creative process that led to the creation of two events – “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong” and “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”. Both of them were attempts at creating an environment that could serve as a framework in which an emergent narrative can occur in the interaction between performers and audience. It evaluates the end result of these events and proposes further steps that can be taken towards perfecting the form.

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INTRODUCTION

I was first introduced to the concept of emergent narrative in the spring of 2014 and I was immediately fascinated by it. The idea of giving up control appealed to me because it was an interesting and challenging way to get out of my comfort zone as a writer. I did some preliminary research during the course of my work for the Master's Seminar led by Dr. Uche Onyebadi at SIU. At that point I wanted to explore the possibility of blending a narrative with life, using social media. I wanted to prompt interaction profiles of fictional characters and real people. That idea changed drastically after a visit to the Art Institute of Chicago. As I was walking the spacious rooms, I was trying to focus on the art, rather than the rest of the patrons, guards, vendors, children that were sharing the experience with me. Slowly, I realized that I was going about this the wrong way, so my attention shifted on the people and their interactions with the environment and each other. I became conscious of the fact that my experience of the art was not only inseparable from the rest of the people, it was enriched by them. It then became clear that the paintings - the physical objects of art were "dead" for all intents and purposes as far as the experience went. Aside from the purely fetishistic pleasure of having seen the actual object that Picasso or Van Gogh touched, the paintings themselves were not central to my experience. All of these sensations later crystallized into this idea, of turning a gallery into a theatre, and filling it with "art props" and actors who would play the roles of patrons, guards, artists etc. All of this was to be performed for a completely unaware one-person audience. Each piece of art would consist of a physical object (a painting, a sculpture, an installation) with a group of actors attached to it. The actors would have elaborate plots written that they would have to engage the one-person audience. Each group's narrative would be mostly predetermined, but ultimately bound to the choice of the audience. This version of the event quickly began changing and

evolving once I decided I wanted it to be my thesis project. As it evolved it became more and more “open” and less reliant on predetermined structure. The point was to come up with a proper frame that would allow for the audience complete freedom of action. But that meant giving up more and more control, and increasing the risk of failure. However, as the work progressed, it became evident that this was going to be an experiment, or a stepping stone, rather than a finished work. This experiment, like any other ran the risk of failure, and it had to be repeated under different conditions. The original idea went under substantial changes in form and intention. A big shift came after my thesis chair Robert Spahr suggested I should familiarize myself with some theory on the matter, and look at figures like composer John Cage, and his protégé Alan Kaprow, credited as the father of performance art and the “happening”.

Contextualized in that frame of work and theory, my project began to take on new dimensions, which resulted in two events that were quite different from the idea that spawned them, as well as each other. In the following paper, I aim to provide some context into the field of emergent narratives, as they exist in virtual storytelling. I then go on to trace the origins and evolution of theoretical thought concerning the dissolution of the author figure in texts and works of art. Next, I provide a bridge between the questioning of the author figure and the reinvention of the concept of art itself. The theoretical part finishes with analysis of the work and ideology of one of the biggest figures in participatory art –Alan Kaprow. I explore his connection and influence over the current project. In the last part I elucidate the concept and mechanics behind the two events that took place as part of my attempts to create an emergent narrative environment.

NARRATIVE AND EMERGENCE

Narratives have played a huge role in understanding the human condition. Ricœur, (1984) argues that all human communication is a form of storytelling and the way humans perceive their lives and the world is by creating narratives out of them. This is why studying the way narratives are evolving is of extreme importance to understanding ourselves, or as Bruner (1987) puts it:

Any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told. That must surely be as true of the life stories we tell as of any others. In that case, we have come full round to the ancient homily that the only life worth living is the well examined one. But it puts a different meaning on the homily. If we can learn how people put their narratives together when they tell stories from life, considering as well how they might have proceeded, we might then have contributed something new to that great ideal (p. 709).

Examining the way people create stories and extract meaning out of their experiences is an essential tool to understanding ourselves. One of the current project's purposes is to provide us with a tool that makes people conscious of the process of constructing a narrative, rather than just immerse them in one. The emergent narrative is supposed to be created by the active participation of the audience. Making that audience aware of that process is integral to their understanding of themselves. But before we can proceed to examine emergent narrative, we must come up with a clear definition of what a narrative is. This question has been the subject of many debates, but for the purposes of the project, we will take the definition Paul Hazel gives in "Narrative: An Introduction" (2007):

1: Narrative is the primary means of comprehension and expression for our experience of events changing over time. 2: Narrative time is subjective, not objective; elastic, not metronomic. 3: Event selection and event sequencing are two crucial functional elements of narrative construction, and they are reciprocally related to the subjective experience of time described in the narrative. 4: A narrative is re-presentation of reality from a particular perspective: reality reconfigured to express meaning. 5: Oral narratives always have structure. The prototypical six-part structure as described by Labov and Waletzky includes Abstract, Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda. 6: In practice this structure is subject to reconfiguration as meaning is socially situated. 7: Narrative is implicated in the efficient organization and encoding of memory. 8: Narrative is implicated in planning and problem-solving abilities. 9: Following from the two points above, we can locate narrative at the heart of the learning process. (p. 7)

According to this definition, narrative is a tool that introduces structure to our direct experience in order to extract meaning from it. Narratives are innate to our perception of the world, and serve as a framework that enables us to make sense of our existence, learn, and make decisions. However, at the same time, narrative is so ubiquitous and so immersive, it often becomes invisible, and easily confused with reality. By allowing ourselves to think of narratives as constructs, rather than an innate part of reality, we can become more conscious of the ways in which we make meaning. This is why emergent narratives are of particular interest. They raise the question of control. Whoever controls the narrative controls the meaning, and once you put the figure of “creator” in question, the construct behind it ceases being transparent.

Emergent or Interactive narratives have been a subject of discussion among professionals and scholars of game and cinema studies. Perhaps one of the most concise definitions for an

emergent narrative is given by Mateas and Stern (2005): “Emergent narrative is concerned with providing a rich framework within which individual players can construct their own narratives, or groups of players can engage in the shared social construction of narratives”(p.2). However there are many who claim that the term “emergent narrative” is an oxymoron and that a narrative is a fixed construct that cannot be subject to spontaneous change (Costikyan, 2000). One of the leading scholars in the field of Emergent Narratives in Virtual Storytelling Environments, Ruth Aylett (2000) claims that in order for true emergence to occur at the highest level of the story it “may appear to require formidable creative abilities, which are difficult for humans (storytellers, playwrights, novelists, film directors) and wishful thinking in the current state-of-the-art of intelligent agents” (p. 38).

This however has not stopped a plethora of artist both within the confines of the computer game industry and outside of them to try and create such narratives. The Mass Effect videogame series for example offers the player several different outcomes, based on binary choices dispersed throughout the game’s story. Each of the endings and the choices behind them, however, are predetermined by the game designer. These kinds of game mechanics can be traced back to the 80s fad of “Choose your own adventure” books. Just like in the Mass Effect series, the readers/players of these books have a binary choice at certain points in the story as to how it should continue. These kinds of narratives can be considered an early attempt for emergence, but unfortunately the threads which the narrative can take are limited and predetermined by the writer, rather than the audience. Improvisational comedy troupes are another good example of a structure that allows for emergence and narrative that is shaped in real time, using the conventions of theatre.

In cinema and TV, there have also been attempts at emergence, the best example of which might be work of Sacha Baron Cohen. In his TV shows and movies, the British actor and comedian adopts a fake personality, such as the wannabe rapper Ali G, or the Kazakhstani reporter Borat. Then, in the guise of one of these characters, Cohen confronts real people and instigates certain situations where the outcome is contingent upon the choices of the people he interacts with. One example of this is Borat's performance of a very anti-Semitic song in a small bar in the Midwest. The comedy of the situation depends on the patrons' willingness to sing along the racist lyrics. Unfortunately, just like with any reality TV show, it's impossible to tell whether the choices of the audience in these situations are truly their own, or they have been coached or tampered with through editing.



Figure 1: Cohen performing as Borat. Retrieved from: <http://dvblog.org/?p=1075>

One of the more successful and interesting attempts at emergence in storytelling are the so-called alternate reality games (ARGs), which incorporate virtual and real life experiences in order to create an environment that allows the audience the freedom to participate and shape the story to some extent by creating content on multiple “tiers” and fragmenting it using different channels (Dena, 2008). Although much progress was made through ARGs, all attempts to create true

emergence have been lacking. This has been mainly due to various problems that arise from the clash between the fixed elements of narrative and the fluidity of interaction.

Of course the current project cannot claim to resolve any of these issues, as it is concerned with a narrative that takes place in the real world, rather than a virtual one. It simply takes the concept of emergent narrative as its inspiration and tries to incorporate some of its ideas into the medium of performance and theater. Furthermore, it explores the connection between the concept of emergent narrative connect to Alan Kaprow's ideas of "unart" and the dissolution of performers and audience. In the next section we will see how similar techniques have fared in the world of modern performance art.

THE OPEN WORK IN THEORY

Efforts to create a work of art that remains unfinished and invites external agents to take up some of the author's function have been well-documented throughout the twentieth century. In his book "The Open Work" (1989), the author and philosopher Umberto Eco examines the tendency of several composers (Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luciano Berio, Henri Pousseur) to create composition pieces that leave some autonomy and choice to the performers. He falls back on Pousseur when he says "The poetics of the "open" work tends to encourage "acts of conscious freedom on the part of the performer and place him at the focal point of a network of limitless interrelations" (p.4). The interpretations of the work are limitless, but the possible iterations of the work itself are still very limited. The audience is left out of the equation, and the work is only open to the performer. The audience here is just there to enjoy the work in its many interpretations but never to intervene. In that case nothing is emergent, because the figure of the author is still at the center.

"The work in movement" is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author (Eco, 1989, p.19).

The works Eco describes are designed by the author with gaps that the performers have to fill. The audience function doesn't change. It is there to consume and interpret the work. However, in the framework of the current project the author steps down, to leave the space open for the performers, which then have to guide the audience into the gaps. Whether the gaps are filled or not, and the manner in which that occurs is entirely out of the author's hands. In fact

“author” is not even the proper term here. The artist who engages in the activity is there only to provide the performers and the audience with a very loose framework in which the work can commence. Or in other words, the task at hand is to make the gaps as wide as possible, while still managing not fall in, but rather fill them. Eco describes perfectly the intent of the current project by rejecting it, while analyzing the open works he examines:

All of these examples of “open” works and “works in movement” have this latent characteristic, which guarantees that they will always be seen as “works” and not just a conglomeration of random components, ready to emerge from the chaos in which they previously stood and permitted to assume any form whatsoever (Eco, 1989, p.20).

The main difference between the openness Eco is talking about, and the openness of the current project lies precisely in the fact that the current project runs the risk of remaining a conglomeration of random components. In fact its success lies in that risk, because emergence can only occur naturally, and that means leaving a big part of the success of the work to chance. Just like an experiment can be run numerous times, without producing the desired results, the work can be performed endlessly and still not bare any fruit. In fact it is even more dangerous than an experiment, because while an experiment can almost always be defined either as a success or a failure, whether an emergent narrative has occurred or not remains ambiguous. However, the goal of putting the audience in a position of active engagement with the work, and leaving a space open for them to create meaning through choice, and become conscious of that process of creation has to be the focal point of the project. Whether a narrative emerges is secondary.

In “Death of the Author” (Bishop, 2006) the semiotician and philosopher Roland Barthes argues that “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into

mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader”. Barthes goes a step further than Eco, and posits that whether a work is open or not, it is ultimately its audience that defines it. Everything always starts as a “conglomeration of random components” no matter if it’s open or not, then it’s the reader who puts it together into a finished piece. Eco claims the reader is the ultimate measure of a work of art. The audience is the god that infuses the language with meaning, and gives it purpose and life. While the author creates the text, the reader is ultimately the one who fulfills its function. Barthes concludes that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Bishop, 2006, p.45). But what if instead of playing with this duality we simply decide to disintegrate it. What if instead of killing the author we let the readers assume their position, thus completely merging the two roles into one? Will that liberate them both as creators and audience?

In “The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-garde” (Bishop 2006), Peter Burger argues for the dissolution of the individual as both creator and audience. He finds this idea materialized in Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades – a series of found “sculptures” which are mass-produced objects that the artist appropriates, and then puts in the context of an artistic space. One of Duchamp’s most popular pieces and a staple of his work was a urinal that he signed his name on, and put on display in a gallery.

Duchamp’s provocation not only unmask the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in a bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art. Duchamp’s Readymades are not works of art but manifestations. Not from the form-content totality of the individual object Duchamp signs can one infer meaning, but

only from the contrast of mass-produced object on one hand, and signature and art exhibit on the other (Burger, 2006, p. 50).



Figure 2: Marcel Duchamp's Urinal in a museum. Retrieved from:

<http://old.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Did-Marcel-Duchamp-steal-Elsas-urinal/36155>

The questioning of the individual's role in the creation and reception of a work of art is one of Duchamp's greatest contributions and inspirations for the current project. The openness of his work lies not so much in the process of creation, but in the concept, on which it rests, and the questions it posits. However, the Urinal is still a work of a solitary creator, and even as a provocation it only goes so far, before it becomes part of what it rebels against:

Once the signed bottle drier has been accepted as an object that deserves a place in a museum, the provocation no longer provokes; it turns into its opposite. If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist does not denounce the art market but adapts to it... Since now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as institution is

accepted as art, the gesture of the protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic (Burger, 2006, p. 50).

The problem with art, especially art within capitalism, is that it accepts and integrates rebellions within itself quite quickly, and once something is accepted as art, its function of questioning the nature of art, and the nature of life becomes diminished. For Burger, this deadlock is solved by the artists who integrate art into “the praxis of life”.

In “Art after Philosophy” (1969) the conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth elucidates the difference between art and aesthetics. He pays special attention to Duchamp’s work.

The “value” of particular artists after Duchamp can be weighed according to how much they questioned the nature of art; which is another way of saying “what they added to the conception of art” or what wasn’t there before they started. Artists question the nature of art by presenting new propositions as to art’s nature. And to do this one cannot concern oneself with the handed-down “language” of traditional art, as this activity is based on the assumption that there is only one way of framing art propositions. But the very stuff of art is indeed greatly related to “creating” new propositions (Kosuth, 1991, p. 18).

Viewed like this, art can only be created if it undermines what was previously thought as acceptable art. An artist that paints a painting is not adding anything to the concept of art, instead they are just creating a physical object that can please the senses aesthetically, and have some intellectual value, but ultimately the act of painting does not constitute creating something new, but rather reaffirming the old. Viewed like this, the creation of new art becomes very similar to the creation of an emergent narrative. Both activities have at their core a certain paradox.

Creating “art” becomes the act of removing what is thought of as art from the activity and hoping that the end result is still art, and seeking emergence in narrative means removing the structure of

narrative and hoping one emerges nevertheless. Both of these endeavors seem to be destined to fail at first glance. And yet we see that even if it is for a very brief period of time, before a newly formed artistic activity becomes integrated into the realm of art, it is still possible to break free of the established structure even if it is for a brief moment. These are the short breaths that the organism of art takes between long periods of calm and stagnation. One of the artists who has supplied art's organism with a good breath of fresh air, and maybe unintentionally has created one of the first attempts at a real emergent narrative is the father of the Happening – Alan Kaprow.

KAPROW AND THE HAPPENING

Kaprow was a pioneer whose work was one of the first to transcend the confines of art and get rid of the distinction between performer and audience. Kaprow is extremely relevant to the project at hand not only because of the open nature of his work, but also because of the participatory aspect of it. He is often credited as the father of the happening – the novel art form that invites the audience to become an integral part of the performance. Here is his definition of what a happening is from his book “Some Recent Happenings”:

A Happening is an assemblage of events performed or perceived in more than one time and place. Its material environments may be constructed, taken over directly from what is available or altered slightly; just as its activities may be invented or commonplace. A Happening, unlike a stage play, may occur at a supermarket, driving along a highway, under a pile of rags, and in a friend’s kitchen, either at once or sequentially. If sequentially, time may extend to more than a year. The Happening is performed according to plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. It is art but seems closer to life. (Kaprow, 1966, p. 5)

However, Kaprow’s happenings still rely on what he calls “scores”. They are written instructions for the people who are taking part in the happening. These instructions are sometimes loose, but the event hinges on them being performed. There is of course space left open for the audience/performers to improvise, but the happenings mostly follow a predetermined structure. Below, we can see the score for one of Kaprow’s signature happenings:

Birds (For participants only. Commissioned by the University of Southern Illinois, Carbondale, performed February 16, 1964.) Setting: A patch of woods near a lake on the

campus. A road leading to a small wooden bridge over a dry brook filled with rocks. On the bridge, a patio table loaded with packages of cheap white bread and strawberry jam, a bright beach umbrella opened over this. Women in trees are widely separated and some can only hear each other. Below each woman is a mass of old furniture hung on ropes.

Events: 1 Tree women swing hanging furniture, and bang trees with sticks. Wall men build wall of rocks on edge of bridge. Bread man hawks bread and jam, "Bread! Bread! Bread!" etc., blows toy pipe whistle. 2 Bread man silent. Wall workers go to tree women, taunt them, bang with sticks and rocks on trees. Tree women drop furniture. Wall workers carry furniture to pile under edge of bridge. Tree women blow police whistles. Wall workers bomb furniture with rocks from wall. Bread man resumes hawking. 4 Wall workers leave quietly one by one when finished. Bread man continues hawking. Tree women silent after first wall worker leaves. 5 Bread man slowly bombs rubble with bits of bread, leaves when finished. Tree women rhythmically yell in unison "Yah! Yah! Yah!" like crows, as Bread man does this, and when he leaves they are silent. (Kaprow, 1966, p.6)



Figure 3: A picture of one of Kaprow's happenings. Retrieved from:

<http://hudashafique.blogspot.com/2011/05/allan-kaprow.html>

All of the actions of the performers are more or less contingent on Kaprow's writing, so here we have participation, but without authorship. The audience/performers are part of the work, but they are still following Kaprow's instructions. In practice his happenings are very different than the current project, Kaprow's philosophy and conception of them was a major influence, so even though we cannot take his work as basis, his theory and ideas can be of immense help.

Kaprow elucidates his ideology in large part in the three parts of his essay "Education of the Unartist" In it, he posits several different ways in which art has tried to subvert itself and its nature, and he calls them "passwords". The first is what he calls non-art. Non-art is "whatever has not yet been accepted as art, but has caught the artist's attention with that possibility in mind" (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 98). In his view, the mechanical clothes conveyors in dry-

cleaning shops fall into this category. The minute they are noticed by an artist, and appreciated as art, they become nonart. Here, much like creating a narrative out of experience, the artist's gaze is the framework that turns ordinary life into nonart. The work of Kosuth, who we mentioned earlier, according to Kaprow belongs to this password. However sooner or later, these nonartists see their work being absorbed into the structures, against which they position themselves. What emerged as spontaneous and free the act of creation by mere observation quickly becomes fixed and bound to the very definitions and dogmas it was trying to avoid. The next password for Kaprow is antiart. Here he puts Duchamp, Warhol, as well the Dadaist movement and its brethren. The Dada movement sought to remove what they saw as the bourgeois rationality or aesthetics from art that according to Dadaists led to a senseless war. They put themselves in concrete opposition to the norms. The German painter Hans Richter called Dada "antiart". According to Kaprow "if nonart is almost impossible, then antiart is virtually inconceivable" (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 100). All of the Duchamp pieces were made by an artist, and put in the art context of a gallery. Those two characteristics automatically make them art, no matter how they struggle with the definition. Even though they were trying to go against having any meaning or narrative, their context provided them with one, before they had even started. Kaprow's third password is art, which is what is conventionally known as art. Here he puts works by people who are recognized by the art community and are not trying to fight the label. He admits that art can have shades of nonart and antiart, and he finds these in his mentor, the composer John Cage's later work. Art has failed, because the consciousness of an individual now allows for people to appreciate life, the way they did art. In the same time art has become an issue of a closed community of artists and scholars, who all play games with each other, while no one else is watching. For Kaprow there is only one way to escape this morbid situation:

Seeing the situation as low comedy is a way out of the bind. I would propose that the first practical step towards laughter is to unart ourselves, avoid all esthetic roles; give up all references to being artists of any kind whatever. In becoming un-artists (password four) we may exist only fleetingly as nonartists for when the profession of art is discarded, the art category is meaningless, or at least antique. Instead of the serious tone that has usually accompanied the search for innocence and truth, un-arting will probably emerge as humor (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 103).

The subversive nature of comedy is driving force behind Kaprow's program for un-arting the individual to remove him from culture. Humor not only serves to undermine the foundations of established structures, but it also gives perspective and new points of view. It is perhaps no coincidence that if the narrative that emerged as an end result of this project had to be put into a specific genre category, parody would probably fit it best. Kaprow belief that humor can be a liberating tool that sets us free of the established convention, if taken as true, holds another threat. A joke can only be funny once. Repeating the same joke twice destroys its effect, because if the audience knows the punchline, there is no surprise and no subversion. Duchamp's statement about the nature of art and the individual's role in it through his Readymades can only be done once, before they are integrated into the entity, which they aim to undermine. In the same way a joke that everybody gets is not funny at all. From this standpoint it is easy to see how even Karpow's happenings that are carefully designed to avoid anything to do with art and culture, repeated enough times, eventually become culture. The fact that this paper references Karpow as an authority in the world of art is already evidence that merely following his example is not going to yield the same effect it did when he did it. Following Kaprow today is actually

contrary to his entire philosophy. The point is to make something new, not to repeat something that was once new.

In “Education of the Un-artist Part II” (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993), Kaprow makes another very revealing statement about Duchamp’s work. According to him, once a common object has been introduced to an art environment as a Readymade, it brings into the consciousness of its observers the awareness that any other commonplace object is also art, even if it’s not necessarily in an art environment. Here we have closed circle of art imitating life and life imitating art. So if art imitates life and life imitates art, then any artistic activity can also be seen as mundane. If a shovel in a department store is also a Readymade, then the activity of painting can be seen in the same light as digging a hole – mundane and practical, as well as artistic and meaningful. So if the art world can contaminate our everyday mundane reality to the point where everything becomes art, then the opposite must also be true. The activities associated with the art world are no more than mundane tasks, people do automatically and without much thought. This double meaning that every activity and object takes in the real world and the art sphere makes it possible to see how activities and pieces can be looked upon as objects of everyday life:

But when it is clear that the most modern of the arts are engaged in imitations of a world continuously imitating itself, art can be taken as no more than an instance of the greater scheme, not as a primary source. The obsolescence of that instance doesn’t discredit the mimetic impulse but spotlights art’s historic role as an isolating discipline at moment when participation is called for. Leaving the arts is not enough to overcome this obstacle; the task, for oneself and for others, is to restore participation in the natural design through conscious emulation of its nonartistic features (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 112).

In his happenings, Kaprow decided to remove himself from anything that even remotely resembles culture. But by doing so he immediately brought culture along with him, just like Duchamp brought art into a department store. But now, more than half a century after the practice of happenings emerged along with its ideas, it can hardly serve the same purposes. But how can a new practice emerge that allows us to go beyond the confines of culture through mimesis, if Kaprow has taken us to the very end?

Playing is a human activity that incorporates elements of imitation, ritual, and even humor. Play is light, and “free of care for moral and practical utility” (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 113). This makes it “a dirty word”. So, the sacred rituals of art can be subverted through play. Kaprow believed that the imitational aspect of life has been lost due to the alienation by “competition, money and other sobering considerations”, and the way out is to forget all that and retreat into a position of pure childlike play, that has no purpose other than itself. The only way to banish “work” out of an activity is to examine it and remove all of its characteristics. Even art in a capitalist society means work in Kaprow’s view (Kaprow & Kelley, 1993, p. 118).

How do we go about un-arting ourselves today, when Kaprow stands in schools and museums, and people write papers about him, and work arduously to create their own play. Where can we escape culture, and life-as-art, and life-as-art? Where do we find that space and activity that can liberate us from work, and make us engage in imitation without the boundaries of work? Let’s look what worked for Kaprow half a decade ago. In “Some Recent Happenings” (1966) he gives a definition of a happening, where he states “The Happening is performed according to plan but without rehearsal, audience, or repetition. It is art but seems closer to life.” What the current project does is it takes this postulate and reverses it, so it becomes life but seems closer to art.

In his lecture “How to Make a Happening” Kaprow instructs us to “make something new. Something that doesn’t even remotely remind you of culture” (Kaprow, 2009, p.1). We should make sure that even we’re not sure whether what is happening is real life or art. We should be disoriented and confused. The situations in a happening should arise from real life, and should take advantage of real life events, the space in which a happening is performed should be broken up. The events in a happening should also be broken up and be arranged in no particular order. A happening should follow the rules of real life, and instead of imitating what it can’t produce, it should abandon it, and start something new. Rehearsals are absolutely contrary to the philosophy of a happening, as well as repetition of the same happening. Both of these make the happenings too similar to a theatre play. And finally:

Give up the whole idea of putting on a show for audiences. A happening is not a show.

Leave the shows to the theatre people and discotheques. A happening is a game with a high, a ritual that no church would want because there’s no religion for sale. A happening is for those who happen in this world, for those who don’t want to stand off and just look. If you happen, you can’t be outside peeking in. You’ve got to be involved physically (Kaprow, 2009, p. 4).

Taking all of Kaprow’s advice on how to make a happening and following it to the T so many years after the fact might prove to be fruitless, at least in regard to the goals he set for himself. It is a fact that happenings have become part of culture. They are held in the same regard as any other theater piece, painting, or a musical composition. In order to make something that opens itself up to the audience and at the same time confuses, and “unarts” them sufficiently to bring on the type of awareness Kaprow was seeking, I needed to break this rules in many

creative ways that would allow for my event to serve the same purposes, but with a different strategy.

THE EVENT

Concept

The goal of the project is twofold. First, it aims to be an experiment in creating a framework in which an emergent narrative can arise. It is implied in the name itself that an emergent narrative cannot be “conceived” or “created”. It has to emerge, which is to be understood as arising organically out of interaction. One can only create the right conditions and hope for the best results. This means providing a proper framework and putting the right agents in it at the right time. The framework’s function is to provide the agents with the option of non-binary choice, and giving them the freedom to guide the story. However, the players cannot be the sole creators of the narrative either. The narrative should emerge out of the interactions of the agents with each other and with their environment. For example, in the context of a video game, putting the player in front of two doors and giving them the option to open one of them is not a proper framework for an emergent narrative. This is so, because even though the player is confronted with a choice, this choice is only binary, and all of the outcomes have been predetermined by the game designer. The player is only given the illusion of choice. No matter what door they choose, the end result has already been calculated, and will lead to an ending that has first been conceived by the designer. Even if there are ten possible outcomes arising from the player’s choice, or a hundred, or a million, all of them have been created by the designer, and the player is just an explorer of the narrative, rather than a free agent. However, if the player could choose to completely walk away from the doors, and go have coffee with another player, the end result of their interaction would hopefully result in the organic emergence of narrative. Notice, in this case, neither of the players is the proper creator, nor is the creator of the game. The narrative

has emerged thanks to the free interaction between players in the environment, provided by the game designer.

The second goal of the project, that arose as I was doing research into previous attempts in the field, was to create an event, similar to Kaprow's happenings that aims to "unart" its subjects and put them in a situation that would allow for them to experience themselves and the world around them in new and profound ways. However, Kaprow decided the way to escape art was through finding sublime meaning in acts that are completely removed from the common notion of what art is, even going so far as to say a proper unartist should abandon the art world (Kaprow & Kelley 1993), my events did exactly the opposite. They were aiming at parodying conventions and activities, associated strictly with the world of art, and in that way depriving them of their meaning. Now let's look at Kaprow's principles for un-artisting ourselves and his instructions on how to create a happening, and see if it's possible for us to accomplish what Kaprow was aiming for several decades earlier. The first of Kaprow's prescriptions was that we should strive to completely get out of culture, before we can start doing meaningful work. But now that this prescription has been written down, the strife to get out of culture has itself become culture. So, the only way to get out of culture becomes to go back in, but make the culture meaningless, using playfulness and humor. Instead of going out of art and culture, we will go back in it, but deprive it of its meaning by parodying it. This deprivation will create the gap, that the audience will have to fill in, thus fulfilling the primary goal of creating an emergent narrative.

Parody in the simplest terms is a humorously exaggerated imitation. So we are incorporating the elements of humor and playfulness into the work of art once again. This immediately begs the question is parodying art is it still art, or is it just parody? The answer is

unclear and that is precisely what Kaprow's second prescription dictates; confusion is full both for creator, performers, and audience. If a happening should follow the rules of real life, then a happening that is parodying the processes and inner-workings of art should still follow the rules of art, but do it self-consciously, and make all the participants confused in regards to what their activity actually is.

The project also follows the next rule Kaprow proposes – it has not been rehearsed, and the same situation has not been repeated. The final rule Kaprow posits –the “no audience” is also subverted. By making the audience the centerpiece of the event, as well as the driving power behind it, it is essentially annihilated as such. The piece has no audience. The artist is absent, because the audience has taken their function in performing the piece.

Mechanics

Two separate experiments were conducted. Both were very different in their formal aspects, but the goal of both was the same: Create an environment, in which an unwitting audience member was involved in steering the narrative of the event through conscious choices. The audience in both events was not initially made aware that the activity they were participating in was actually a parody, in order to keep their actions natural, and to ensure they do not try to act. However, in both cases, there were many clues for the audience that what they were experiencing wasn't quite straightforward, and there was some game going on underneath the surface.

A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong

The first experiment took as its basis the mechanics of film production. Seven people were asked to participate. Six of them were the “cast” and “crew” of the movie. The cast and crew were aware that the activity that was being performed was not actually a movie, but a

performance of one. The seventh person was there to fill the role of protagonist, while simultaneously and unwittingly being the audience for the event. Equipment was brought in on set, to serve as props. Lights were set up. One of the six performers assumed the role of cameraman, although he only pretended to shoot. Another became the sound recorder and boomer, but she only pretended to record. A third person from the crew assumed the position of camera assistant, and was given the slate. I assumed the role of director. On the night of the performance the six members of the crew and I got on set an hour prior to the arrival of the protagonist. None of us knew her, and the only thing she had been told was that she was about to assume the role of a protagonist in an improvised movie. The “cast” and “crew” were instructed to create conflict for the protagonist to solve, and that was their only direction.



Figure 4: A fragment of “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong”

When the protagonist arrived, I quickly instructed her on what to do. She was supposed to improvise a scene with the other three “actors” of a drug deal gone wrong. The idea was to have a nested narrative. The inner narrative was the “movie” we were shooting within the performance, which was to be improvised. The outer narrative was that of the performance itself,

which was also supposed to also be improvised. The only direction the six performers were given was to push for the protagonist to steer the outer and inner narrative. While the protagonist was aware of the inner narrative, she was completely unaware of the outer one. Shooting commenced as planned. Conflict soon arose between me, the actors and the crew. We were constantly nudging our protagonist to resolve it, which she was mostly reluctant to do. However, she did make some important decisions, as to the outcome of the story, among which whether or not to dismiss one of the actors. Several plot points emerged that were solely the result of the protagonist's decisions and actions. The person behind the camera decided to announce that he was getting paid, so the protagonist asked to be paid too. This iteration of the project was however largely unsuccessful. One of the reasons for this was my presence on set. Emergence was made impossible by the fact that the figure of the author was there to control things. This mistake was corrected in the second iteration of the experiment.



Figure 5: Screenshot from the recording of the wrap up discussion after the end of “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong”

The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has To Offer

The second iteration of the project took a gallery as the setting for its proceedings. The gallery was selected as a space first of all because it makes a very clear distinction between audience and creator, and as such provides a very good platform to subvert that difference and dissolve it. Within the physical space of the gallery, there is sufficient ambiguity as to where an artwork begins and ends, so it becomes easy to place performers inside without having broken any rules. Anything and everything in a gallery context can be considered art, including the audience.

A Facebook event was created titled “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”. The challenging title was chosen so that it would elicit an emotional reaction from actual artists that would see it and be prompted to come. I received many angry messages, and was confronted personally by several artists, that took offense that they weren’t included in the show, simply because of its name. The provocation worked, and a lot of people came forward with the notion that they were in fact “the best” artists at the school. Once they realized the joke however, most of them took it in stride.

That Weird Foreign Guy
PROUDLY PRESENTS:
THE BEST GODDAMN ART
SIU HAS TO OFFER
 An Exhibition of Extraordinary
 Talent and Ambition
 7PM, Monday, March 21st @STUDIO A, MASSCOM

Figure 6: The Poster for “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

Several galleries in Carbondale were approached with the proposition to hold a performance there. Two of them sent me a positive response. However, upon exchanging further communication, in which I elucidated that the performance included a “fake exhibition” all of the galleries declined. Their response was that a performance did not require preliminary work, whereas an exhibition most probably did. I did my best to reassure them that was not the case, but they wouldn’t hear me. Furthermore, once the curator of one of the galleries heard the word “exhibition”, she politely asked that I should pay a fee. It is important to note, that a fee was never mentioned when I asked to do a performance. Again I tried to explain that the exhibition was not real, and it would not require much preliminary work or any setting up that lasted more than half an hour, but that didn’t matter. Real or fake, the exhibition required a fee, whereas a performance did not.

After much strife and a lot of problems with the galleries, the performance had to be held in a television studio, which I did my best to disguise a “gallery”. I chose that particular studio, because I had been at another exhibition that was held there by students. I decided that if students can use it as a gallery for a real exhibition, so could I. Three easels were made with the help of an actual artist to hold three paintings. The rest of the work was set on folding tables around the large television studio. Ten days prior to the event, 10 artists had received instructions, which prompted them to bring a piece of “fake art”. There wasn’t much further deliberation on what the meant exactly, other than it wasn’t supposed to be made as “art”, and that it had to serve as a prop for their performance. On the night of the performance/exhibition each of them received one single prompt: “Try to keep the attention of the audience on your piece of art by any means necessary.” Each “artist” was given a small piece of paper with a conceptual description of their

work and their artistic goals. The descriptions were written by me, without knowing what the pieces I was describing were. Each artist put these descriptions in front of their piece. One person brought a photograph he found in the trash. Another brought his cat bed and filled it with cornflakes. Another piece consisted of a sword, a loaf of bread, and a working toaster. The audience was prompted to butter the bread with a sword. Another piece was a portable television/transistor with a broken guitar frame set up on top. Each of these received names like “Equinox” or “The Highlander Series”, put on them blindly by me. The descriptions varied from “The artist’s work grapples with the anxiety of creation” next to a broken toaster with pieces of a picture stuck in the bread holes to “his interest lies in the spontaneity of unframed communication between artist and performer” next to a small digital painting of the Disney character Belle from “Beauty and the Beast”.



Figure 7: A Screenshot from the recording of the proceedings of “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

The big risk of this performance was that if the audience members became too much for the artists to engage, they might have gone inside never knowing that they were part of something that is not a real exhibition. This is why a part of the mechanics that was hidden from the artists

was that whenever the audience was about to exceed the number of artists (10), new audience members received a small piece of paper with “a score”. The scores were distributed randomly. Each member of the audience who was handed one in front of the exhibition space, and was told to read it inside, and not show it or talk about it to anyone. There were several variations of the scores as follows: “Don’t talk to the artists”, “Choose a piece of art and stare at it intently. Don’t talk to anyone.”, “Choose a piece of art and laugh at it”, “Try to steal some of the art”.



Figure 8: A Picture of me with one of the “artists” and his piece titled “Industrial Light and Chaos”

Some of the audience members complied with their scores. Some did not. Some of them made the “artists” really uncomfortable. Some just talked to the artists. Some made friends with them. Of course I can’t give a first-hand account of what happened during the exhibition, because the lesson I learned during “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong” and never went in.

However, based on audience and artists testimonials I was able to gather up some impression of what transpired inside that studio.

Between the artist improvising explanations for their “fake art”, the audience reading my “descriptions” of the work, and coming up with their own interpretation of it, the narrative emerged in the meaning constructed between these three factors. The “fake art” pieces acted as a conductor for meaning that passed through artist, audience, and description. The meaning was contingent upon all three factors, but it was defined by none of them. Some of the audience at some point understood that maybe they weren’t in an exhibition but decided to play along. Some of the artists shared that they had listened to the interpretations of the audience and started to believe them, even though they knew it was constructed right there on the spot. People knew they were part of an elaborate joke, and yet they stayed. They examined the pieces, thought about them, and talked to the artists. Everybody knew it didn’t mean anything, and yet somehow there was meaning. The end result was an experience that everybody agreed was invigorating and refreshing. Everyone agreed that a narrative had indeed emerged.

The exhibition/performance was recorded with the camera purely for the purposes of documentation for the current graduate thesis project. The documentation is there as proof the event indeed happened, and nothing else. Had it not been done as part of my graduate production project, it would not have been documented in any way. Ultimately, the “fake art” in the “fake gallery” with the “fake artists” was made real by the audience. This happened for the short time when the exhibition was taking place. The art was in the experience of the people that were in that space for that particular time. All of the attributes of a real exhibition were there, except for meaning, and that’s the gap the audience filled. Through their interaction with the artists, and the

art, the audience created their own experience, and that experience was ultimately the emergent narrative

CONCLUSION

. Creating an environment where an emergent narrative can occur is ultimately the task of framing. Firstly, framing the audience in a context where the lines between reality and imitation are sufficiently blurred to allow the freedom of play within the right limits. Secondly, putting them in the right frame of mind to allow them to play rather than think or work. The biggest challenge in this endeavor lies in the audience as much as the author, because as hard as it is for the author to remove himself, it is twice as hard for the audience to take the author's place. The two experiments that occurred in the spring of 2016 are no more than stepping stones towards the possibility of a new form of interaction that enables freedom to create, and letting a structure emerge out of the chaos. One where the lines between author and audience, as well as real life and mimesis are erased so that each of the agents can experience themselves neither as author, nor audience, but something new. It is the superposition of consciousness, where people become aware of the inauthenticity and the construct of the project, but still decide to support and maintain it, infusing it with their own meaning. The collapse of "fake art" into real art is the result of this. That collapse was an experience that was available to the people that were present at the time and place of the exhibition. This is where art happened.

Narrative, conceived as a structure that brings meaning to experiences, that are otherwise chaotic and meaningless, is essentially the driving force behind culture. In order to evolve as artists and individuals we must constantly be made aware and reminded of the structures that support our civilization. By superpositioning two completely contradictory states (narrative and emergence, art and unart), we can achieve a synthesis that allows for the participants to look at the seams that hold our reality together, and instead of ripping them apart, to put effort into

mending them and covering them up. The goal is to achieve authenticity through fakeness, and a meaning to emerge from meaninglessness,

Further efforts in the area can be made by providing the audience with more gaps to fill. Taking away more coordinates by which they can be guided can result in an even clearer emergence, but there some kind of framework must always remain. The question now becomes how can we take away as much of the familiar as possible, without completely alienating the unsuspecting audience. The next possible event will still have to retain some characteristics of an artistic process, but it should remove more of its attributes. The ultimate lesson of the project is that emergence and meaning can only occur where there is a space left empty. The task at hand is to leave gaps at the right places, and give reasons for people to want to fill them.

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APPENDIX



FIGURE 9: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“ACID STRIP” by Abbie Warhus

Description: “The actress, turned painter is mostly interested by the breakage of form and content, brought on by altered states of mind. Her drawings reflect a desire for a space of reflection in the unconscious, and put the serenity of the inner-peace in opposition to the chaos of civilizational structures.”



FIGURE 10: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“THE DISCARDED SERIES” by Andy Holliday

Description: “The artist focuses on the experiences of self-rejection and alienation during the process of creation. His pieces hint at a deep relentless drive at the sublime that can only be reached through the trenches of disappointment. He is currently getting his MFA from SIU.”



FIGURE 11: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“A CONSTRUCT OF MEMORY” by Ben Giles (presented by Mark Young)

Description: “The artist explores the tension between the falsehoods of memory retained in the mind versus the physical traces of the time gone by.”

Note: Several different performers had to switch places in presenting this piece, but neither of them was the author that was listed in the description. The first of them, depicted in the picture above is Mark Young. Ben Giles - original “artist” that was listed as the author came to the exhibition too late after it started, so he had to serve the purpose of an audience member. He was instructed to steal some of the art, and did very well.



FIGURE 12: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“A CONSTRUCT OF MEMORY” by Ben Giles (presented by Kelechi Agwuncha and Kenny Joseph)

Mark Young had to leave in the middle of the exhibition so we asked for two other members of the audience to take his place.



FIGURE 13: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“LEARNING TO FIGHT” by Kiron Blackwood

Description: “Kiron is a performer, and an artist. His interest lies in the spontaneity of unframed communication between audience and artist. His work manages to preserve the child-like wonder of creativity, while hinting at the deep abyss that fuels the artist.”



FIGURE 14: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“THE HIGHLANDER SERIES” by Peter Wilkerson



FIGURE 15: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“PREGNANT WOMAN I FOUND IN THE WOODS” by Sam Thompson

Description: “Sam Thompson is a storyteller that uses techniques from the avant-garde found-object era, as well as the new media tools to create art that explores the mechanisms behind modern civilization’s tendency to annihilate meaning through the repetition of its signifiers.”



FIGURE 16: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“EQUINOX” by Tommy MacMeekin

Description: “Tommy MacMeekin’s work grapples with the anxiety of creation. His primary occupation as a chemist and brewer hasn’t stopped him from creating some of the most challenging art in Carbondale in the last decade. His work communicates the desire to find profound truths in everyday objects.”



FIGURE 17: Fragment from "The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer"

This is a Piece of paper with instructions for an audience member. Half the audience members were handed papers with instructions in front of the exhibition space and told to read them once they are inside and not talk about them to anyone.



FIGURE 18: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

Part of “The Highlander Series” by Peter Wilkerson sits in the middle of the room, as around it audience and artists perform with each other.

That Weird Foreign Guy PRESENTS:

ART

SIU HAS TO OFFER
An Exhibition*

7PM, Monday, March 21st @STUDIO A, MASSCOM

*there will be no free food

FIGURE 19: The second poster design for “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

This replaced the original poster on the page of the Facebook event several days before the date of the exhibition.



FIGURE 20: An Audience Member contemplating whether to try some cornflakes out of the cat bed during The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer.



FIGURE 21: Kiron Blackwood explaining his art to an audience member during “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”



FIGURE 22: Fragment from “The Highlander Series” by Peter Wilkerson, part of “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”. Members of the audience were invited to try and butter some toast, prepared during the exhibition with the artist’s old family sword.



FIGURE 23: Fragment from “The Highlander Series” by Peter Wilkerson, part of “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”.



FIGURE 24: Fragment from “The Highlander Series” by Peter Wilkerson, part of “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”.



FIGURE 25: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

An Audience Member interacts with Jeff Haney’s piece “Industrial Light and Trauma”

Description: “Jeff Haney is a multimedia artist, based in Carbondale. He is currently getting his BA at SIU. His sculptures are set on the border between nature and technology, between art and labor. His use of apparatuses, as well as half-formed bodies is employed to explore the state of the modern art world.”



FIGURE 26: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

PREGNANT WOMAN I FOUND IN THE WOODS by Sam Thompson

Description: “Sam Thompson is a storyteller that uses techniques from the avant-garde found-object era, as well as the new media tools to create art that explores the mechanisms behind modern civilization’s tendency to annihilate meaning through the repetition of its signifiers.”

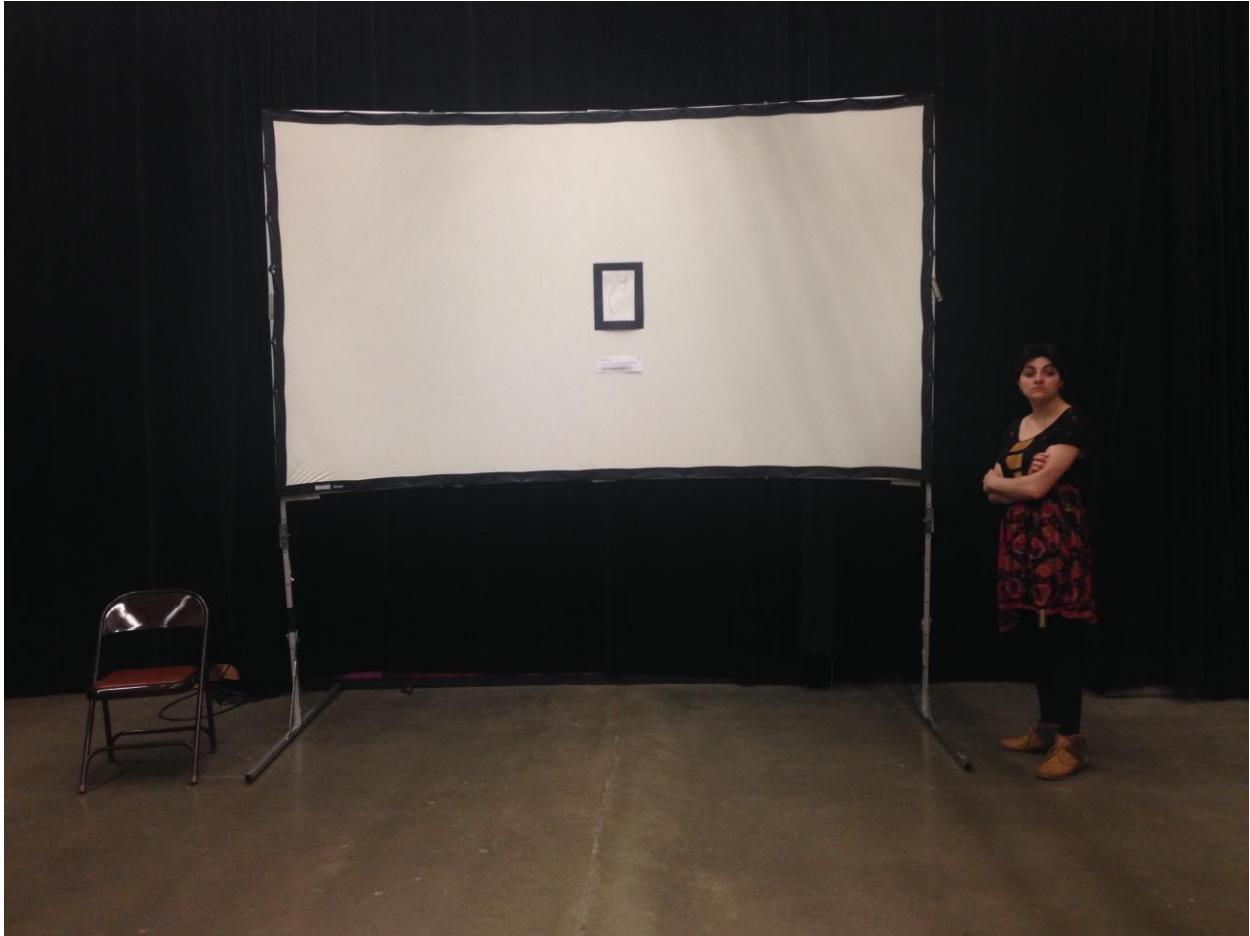


FIGURE 27: Abbie Warhus awaiting the audience during “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”



FIGURE 28: Fragment from “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

“KANYE WESTxCREATIONxTHE BIG BANG” by Tom Kendall

Description: “Tom Kendall’s video installations question the relationship between man and nature, the fragility of life, and the endless possibilities of rebirth and transfiguration of matter. This object is a comment on the current state of pop-spirituality and society’s obsession with belief.”

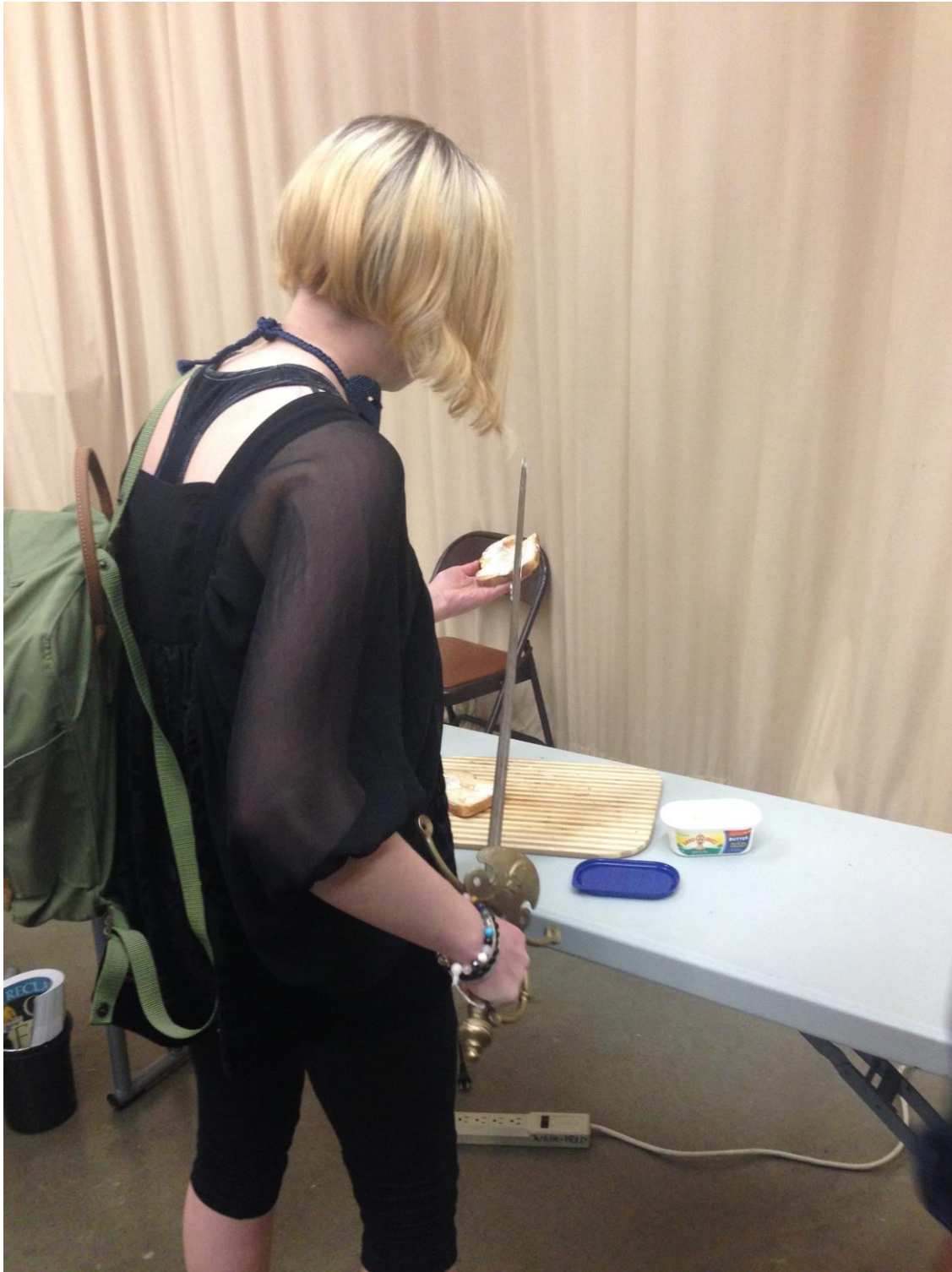


FIGURE 29: An audience member interacts with the “art” during “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”



FIGURE 30: Fragment from “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong”



FIGURE 31: Fragment from “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong”



FIGURE 32: Fragment from “A Scene about a Drug Deal Gone Wrong”

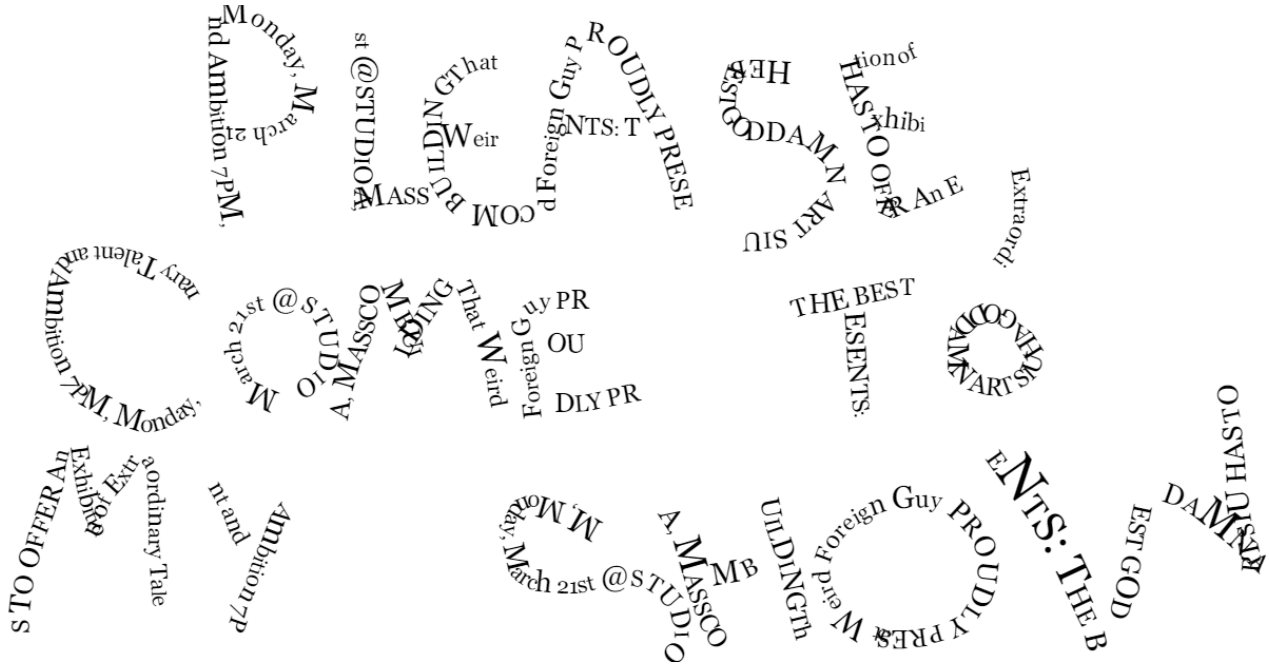


FIGURE 33: Design for the promotional flyer for “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”

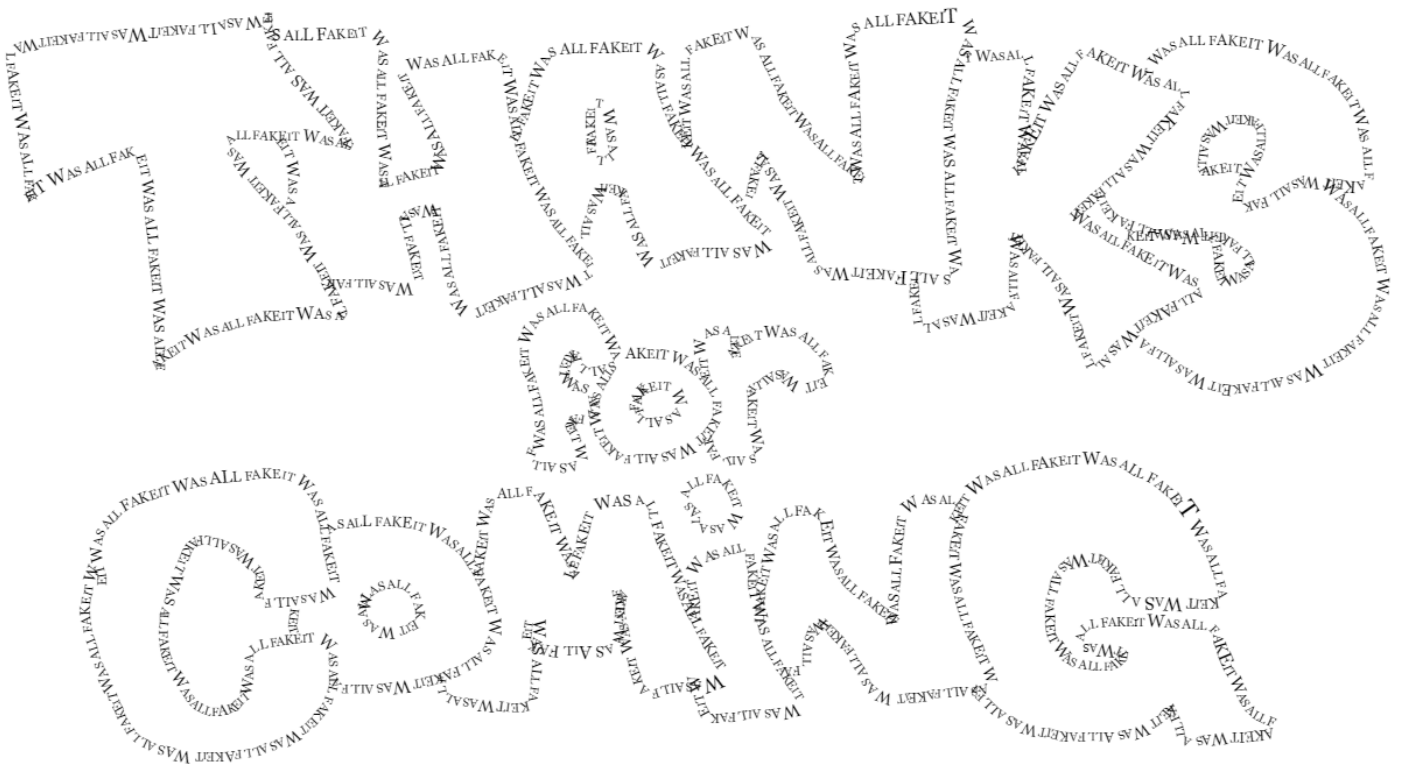


FIGURE 34: Design for the post-exhibition banner for the Facebook event page of “The Best Goddamn Art SIU Has to Offer”. The small words that make up the big ones read “It Was All Fake”

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